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'Allowed Deviations': Co-Governance and Patron–Client Relationships in Chinese Prisons

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How is social order maintained in Chinese prisons? Drawing on 53 semi-structured interviews, this article investigates co-governance mechanisms in Chinese prisons by examining the role of patron–client relationships in prison management. Co-governance is manifested in three types of 'allowed deviation': the intensive involvement of elite inmates (squadron leaders) in daily prison management, the existence of an informal market where inmates exchange services for basic necessities, and the prevalence of inmate cliques. Taking advantage of patron–client relationships with prison officers, squadron leaders acquire extensive discretionary power, which leads to favouritism and inequality. This research provides a case study of non-Western prison order, enriching criminology literature on prison order and management.

KEY WORDS: prison social order, allowed deviations, co-governance, patron–client relationships, Chinese prisons

INTRODUCTION

Prisons, as correctional institutions, are often viewed as places of extreme brutality holding violent and dangerous individuals with nothing to lose (Sparks *et al.* 1996). Rule-breaking and misconduct in correctional institutions disrupt daily operations and jeopardize the safety of inmates and prison staff (Goetting and Howsen 1986). To maintain security, prison managers control the prison population in various ways, such as increasing the ratio of guards to inmates and establishing clear rules and regulations (Steiner 2009). The maintenance of social order within prisons is influenced by several factors, including the extent of inmates' willingness to conform to institutional rules (Goetting and Howsen 1986), the relationships between staff and prisoners, and the arrangement of daily routines (Bottoms 1999; Crewe 2011).

Existing studies have examined aspects of prison management and social order, including the influence of staff–prisoner relationships on the legitimacy of power and order in the prison

system (Bottoms 1999; Liebling 2000; Crewe 2011), and strategies for controlling prison violence and disorder (Carrabine 2005; Steiner 2009). Criminologists and political economists have also investigated governance mechanisms, such as self-governance developed by inmates and co-governance developed through collaboration between prison staff and prisoners (Skarbek 2020). Scholars have argued that the social order of prisons and daily interactions between prison officers and inmates are heavily influenced not only by formal rules and surveillance but also by informal practices developed through a bottom-up approach (Clemmer 1940; Skyes 1958). Researchers have also discussed the power negotiations that occur between inmates and prison administrative staff, which are embedded in relations marked by power imbalances (Sparks *et al.* 1996; Symkovych 2018).

Apart from the work of Cheng and colleagues (Cheng 2019; Cheng and Lapto 2021), few studies have focused on the social order of Chinese prisons. This article aims to enrich the existing literature by examining how co-governance mechanisms, facilitated by patron–client relationships, contribute to social order in Chinese prisons. Drawing on first-hand empirical data, this study suggests that co-governance mechanisms are evident in 'allowed deviations',[1] a range of practices that deviate from formal rules and regulations but contribute to effective prison management. Each category of allowed deviation involves two levels of daily interaction between patrons and clients: between prison officers and elite inmates and between elite inmates and other inmates. Patron–client relationships are a double-edged sword in Chinese prisons: they increase the efficiency of prison management, address the shortage of prison staff and satisfy prisoners' daily needs, but they create a hierarchical inmate society that gives elite inmates extensive power that can be used for personal gain.

DIVERSIFIED GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS IN PRISONER SOCIETY

Criminals are commonly characterized as individuals with low self-control, perceived as 'insensitive, impulsive and risk-taking' (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 90). The regulation of these individuals' behaviour during incarceration is thus an essential research topic. The existing literature focuses on how prison officers and management regulations govern prisoners' social lives and examines the role of elite inmates in prison governance (Skarbek 2014, 2020). According to Skarbek (2020), in addition to 'official governance', which relies on the formal administrative system for prison management, there are two types of informal governance regimes: self-governance and co-governance. These either substitute for or complement the formal prison administrative system.

According to Skarbek (2020: 18), 'self-governance regimes exist when prisoners create important governance institutions that are distinct and autonomous from official institutions'. For instance, prison gangs are typical self-governance organizations regulating various aspects of daily prison life (Skarbek 2014, 2020). Inmates in these gangs establish a chain of command, and their interactions are regulated by a set of convict codes (Lyman 1989: 48). 'Co-governance institutions' are collaborative arrangements in which prison officers and prisoners work together to govern the facility (Skarbek 2020: 18; see also Darke 2018), resolving disputes (Crouch and Marquart 1989), maintaining safety and providing services. Existing studies argue that tolerating such informal arrangements does not necessarily challenge official rules in prison; rather,

1 The concept of 'allowed deviations' speaks to Christie's (2004) book titled *A Suitable Amount of Crime*, demonstrating that crime and punishment are socially and culturally constructed. Politics, economics and cultural norms cause significant variations between countries regarding which acts are considered criminal and punished. Governing prisoners through allowed deviations in the Chinese context shows that Chinese prisons' tolerance of certain deviant acts promotes efficient prison management. This is related to Simon's (2007) book *Governing Through Crime*, which illustrates how the reconceptualization of social problems as crimes and the war on crime create a culture of fear, leading to communities and workplaces being governed through crime. The prevalence of allowed deviations in Chinese prisons raises the question of the legitimacy of imprisonment (see Carlen 2002).

co-governance alleviates the hardships of imprisonment and leads to the perpetuation of power through power-sharing mechanisms (Candaliza-Gutierrez 2012).

Existing research into co-governance mechanism in prisons, particularly in the underdeveloped economies of the Global South, suggests that prison order is largely negotiated between inmates and staff (Darke 2018). Inmates who have power to maintain prison social order can use their influence to negotiate with prison officers. For example, in Nicaraguan prisons, inmates provoke confrontation to compel the staff to address their needs (Weegels 2020). Due to poor prison conditions and staff shortages, prison authorities in many underdeveloped countries tolerate the participation of prison gangs in prison management. For instance, the Philippine prison system allows inmate leaders, all of whom are members of a prison gang named 'pangkat', to act as informal co-governors (Candaliza-Gutierrez 2012).

The existing literature on self-governance and co-governance in prisons offers valuable insights and prompts several research questions: Are there any self-governance and co-governance mechanisms in Chinese prisons, and if so, how do they function? And, most importantly, how do Chinese prison staff perceive and respond to these informal governance mechanisms? To understand how social interactions between prison officers and inmates are regulated, it seems necessary to review the literature on how patron–client relationships operate in Chinese society, as co-governance in Chinese prisons is largely facilitated by these relationships.

GUANXI, PATRON–CLIENT NETWORKS AND INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

Chinese people are strongly influenced by Confucianism, the Chinese philosophy that focuses on the importance of personal ethics, morality and the maintenance of beneficial relationships with others. Popular Confucianism encourages the use of informal practices (*guanxi*, the Chinese version of interpersonal relationships) to 'obtain goods and services in short supply and to circumvent formal procedures' (Ledeneva 2008: 118; see also Barbalet 2021). Unlike people living in democratic regimes, which emphasize legal–rational institutions and individualism in decision-making and social interaction, Chinese people value interpersonal harmony maintained by the norm of reciprocity (Hwang 1987; Fei *et al.* 1992; Qi 2017).

During the Mao era (1949–76), with its scarce resources and extreme political repression, people used guanxi to obtain basic necessities and avoid repression (Yang 1994; Ledeneva 2008). Consequently, guanxi practices were widely considered socially acceptable by Chinese people. In the reform era, guanxi practices decline in traditional areas of obtaining basic necessities and avoiding repression, but they flourish in new areas such as business, commerce and exchanges between private entrepreneurs and state officials (Yang 2002).

In post-Mao China, guanxi plays three key roles in its influence over formal institutions (e.g. formal rules, regulations and laws). First, guanxi *substitutes* for formal institutions when 'formal rules are not routinely enforced' and the formal legal system fails to define and protect private property rights (Wang 2017). This was particularly true in the early stages of reform (1980s and 1990s) and still holds true in many areas[2] today.

Second, guanxi *complements* formal legal institutions, such as government regulations and the codified law system, when formal institutions are well-established and can effectively address individual needs. Guanxi will not be completely replaced by formal institutions in the foreseeable future because it is a custom and cultural tradition and because formal institutions cannot cost-effectively regulate all social and economic activities.

2 These areas include informal and illegal economies where the state, far from offering protection and enforcement to participants, actively represses participants in these economies.

Finally, guanxi *undermines* formal institutions by 'circumventing formal constraints' and distorting socialist values (e.g. equality, justice and integrity; see Michailova and Worm 2003; Ledeneva 2008: 126). Specifically, the use of guanxi facilitates corrupt transactions by providing a secret channel for information transmission and providing norms and rules to regulate exchanges (Li 2011; Zhan 2012).

The concept of guanxi offers a powerful analytical framework for explaining informal practices and individual behaviour in both the private and the public sectors. However, it is a broad concept, encompassing both horizontal and vertical interpersonal relationships. This article therefore uses the concept of patron–client relations, which can be considered a subcategory of guanxi. 'Patron–client ties' commonly refers to relationships that are reciprocal, 'asymmetrical, multifaceted, and long-term' (Platteau 1995: 767), and researchers have used this concept to examine the Chinese political system and the actions of local cadres (Hillman 2010; Wang and Yan 2020; Ruan and Wang 2023).

Patron–client relationships become indispensable when resources and opportunities are scarce. The reciprocal exchange between patrons and clients gives rise to a 'cooperative equilibrium' wherein both parties reach agreement on goals and principles (Jiang 2018: 985; see also Weingrod 1968). Patrons, who have higher political or socioeconomic status, provide protection or other benefits to lower-status individuals (clients), and clients offer assistance or loyalty in return (Weingrod 1968; Scott 1972; Wolf 2013). These reciprocal interactions give rise to the development of mutual expectations that shape and maintain the informal rules of patron–client networks (Ostrom 2009).

Patron–client networks are a double-edged sword, however. On the one hand, these relationships distort formal institutions. Government officials use their patron–client relationships to 'exploit loopholes in the regulatory mechanisms' (Paik and Baum 2014: 675) and pursue their own interests, such as promotion (Lollar and Hamilton 2010) and monetary benefits (Ruan and Wang 2023). On the other hand, patron–client networks complement formal governance institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). For instance, local cadres use patronage networks to promote local economic growth by mobilizing resources for development in China, where the bureaucratic system is still fragmented and inefficient (Jiang 2018; Wang and Yan 2020).

Drawing on the literature discussed above, this article investigates how patron–client relationships facilitate co-governance mechanisms in Chinese prisons. It argues that patron–client networks complement formal prison management by addressing the issue of staff shortages, prompting prisoners to comply with prison officers' instructions and prison policies, increasing productivity, and providing an alternative mechanism for inmates to access basic necessities and services. It also acknowledges the negative aspects of patron–client relationships, such as favouritism and inequality.

DATA AND METHODS

This article is based on a total of 53 interviews[3] with 10 prison officers and 41 male former prisoners from six prisons located in different cities in X province, China. Of the former prisoners, 20 were elite inmates who served as cell leaders and/or production group leaders, helping prison officers maintain order and enhance productivity. We designed different interview questions for each group of interviewees. The questions for prison officers focused on why they tolerated certain types of deviation and how they maintained relationships with inmates to secure prison social order. The questions for elite inmates concentrated on their role in assisting officers with

3 We interviewed two participants twice, so the total number of interviews is larger than the number of interviewees.

maintaining prison social order and regulating production activities as well as their daily interactions with prison officers and other inmates. Non-elite inmates were asked how they accessed the resources provided by prisons, how they interacted with others, and how they perceived the involvement of elite inmates in prison governance.

X province, the first author's hometown, was chosen as the research site because interviewees could be recruited through personal social networks. The first author's family members, who work in prisons or other criminal justice agencies facilitated access to prison officers and former inmates. Family members thus not only became gatekeepers who ensured access to participants but also shared inside information about prison management. Compared with our interviewees, these gatekeepers were very honest about the positive and negative aspects of prison management. They also expressed concerns about the sensitivity of the topic and suggested what types of information should not be disclosed in the article. As researchers, we tried to balance neutrality and sensitivity. We maintained a value-neutral stance during our fieldwork and writing processes, and we avoided discussing the most sensitive information to prevent any potential trouble for ourselves and our family members. Further connections were made through student contacts: both authors are law school graduates and many of their classmates now work in the criminal justice system, including prisons.

All prisoner interviewees had served their sentences and been released. We decided to interview former prisoners rather than currently incarcerated prisoners because we thought they would be more willing to reflect on their experience. All participants had served a minimum of 2 years in prison because those who served less time may lack sufficient experience to provide valuable insights into inmates' prison lives.

Carrying out fieldwork during COVID-19 lockdowns was extremely challenging. Most interviews had to be conducted online, and WeChat, a widely used messaging and social media platform in China, allowed us to conduct real-time interviews through video calls or phone calls. Although phone interviews have certain limitations, such as limited non-verbal cues and challenges in building rapport, they also offer advantages. First, imprisonment is considered shameful in Chinese culture; online interviews can provide former prisoners with a sense of anonymity. Only intermediaries knew participants' real names; we knew them only by their WeChat nicknames, and each interviewee was informed that the intermediaries had not disclosed their identity to us. Second, the online mode allows informants to schedule interviews at their convenience, in a comfortable and relatively stress-free environment. This encouraged them to engage in self-disclosure.

The research project was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. All data-gathering processes adhered to the ethical standards established by the university, and confidentiality was scrupulously maintained. Prior to each online interview, we provided a consent form and read it clearly to the interviewees. The interviewees then provided oral consent. All transcripts and notes were coded and thematically analysed using NVIVO software as follows: first, we removed any personally identifiable information, and only clean transcripts were imported into NVIVO. We used an open coding scheme to create a system of nodes and then synthesized the data into diverse categories (e.g. three types of allowed deviation). Finally, we used the coded data to construct narratives.

OFFICIAL PRISON MANAGEMENT SYSTEM AND ITS LIMITATIONS IN CHINA

This section begins with a brief history of Chinese prisons during and after Mao. It then discusses the challenges prison officers face when managing prisoners, including low staff-to-prisoner ratios and insufficient social welfare.

Combining education and labour: Chinese prisons since 1949

When establishing and developing China's prison system, Chairman Mao married the Soviet Union's collectivist philosophies with traditional Chinese philosophy. Soviet collectivism shaped China's penal system from the 1950s onward (Dikötter 2018; Piacentini and Slade 2024). Marxist socialism is anti-individualistic, as it emphasizes collective interest, public ownership and the significance of the collective (Riha 1994: 67). Marx interpreted social conflict in capitalist society as a class struggle between the proletariat (the property-less class who sell their labour) and the bourgeoisie (the property-owning class who control the means of production). Drawing on the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union established a collective system for detaining prisoners. The social order of the Soviet Union's prison system combined three elements: collective working and living arrangements, the allocation of responsibility for maintaining social order to prisoners, and 'mutual and intrusive surveillance' (Piacentini and Slade 2024: 528; see also Piacentini and Slade 2015). In the Soviet Union, punishment was used as 'a means of production for the economy, a source of deterrence from crime as well as ideological indoctrination of wayward citizens' (Slade 2018: 3). Following the Soviet model of labour camps, Mao made a 'systematic distinction between the people and enemies of the people' and used labour reform camps, in which up to six million prisoners were held, to suppress 'offenders who committed serious crimes' and particularly 'class enemies' and 'anti-socialist elements' (Wu and Vander Beken 2018: 707). Communist China adopted carceral collectivism and emphasized the relationship between punishment and education (Dikötter 2018).

Mao's labour reform system was also inspired by the traditional Chinese philosophy of 'the supremacy of morality (*de*) and the subservience of penalty (*xing*)' (Wu and Vander Beken 2018: 715). Confucian thought stressed the supremacy of *de* by stating that humans can be educated to be good and should strive for self-perfection through the internalization of *li* (a set of ethical norms). Punishment was considered a last resort, to be used only when education and persuasion failed. Mao believed that 'remoulding every aspect of a prisoner's morals, ideas and habits, ultimately leading to the birth of a new man' should be the core of penal practice in China (Dikötter 2018: 299). Influenced by both carceral collectivism and traditional Chinese philosophy, the Chinese penal system under Mao emphasized 'the remoulding of prisoners' and 'the use of heavy labour', practices that continued into this century (ibid: 300).

Mao's China organized labour reform camps along military lines. As Wu (1992: 10) noted, prisoners were divided into squadrons of 10–15 prisoners, companies of 10–15 squadrons, battalions of 8–12 companies, detachments and general brigades. A detachment was an independent work unit that 'managed its own financing, production, sales, and cost accounting' (ibid: 10). An informal system of self-governance and co-governance was developed in Mao's labour reform camps, foreshadowing patron–client networks in prison management. Specifically, in each squadron, two prisoners (clients) were appointed by police officers (patrons) as squadron leaders: one was put in charge of production, the other of political education and thought reform. Each company of 100 to 225 prisoners had at most five police officers supervising prisoners' factory work and thought reform, but they received assistance from squadron leaders. In each battalion, a commander, a political commissar and a few disciplinary officers and administrative personnel governed over 1,000 prisoners. The key to effective management was the use of elite inmates (squadron leaders) to regulate prisoners' daily lives. In other words, Mao's labour reform camps adopted the Soviet penal order of collective working and living arrangements, delegation of responsibility for maintaining order to prisoners, and mutual monitoring among prisoner peers (see Piacentini and Slade 2015; Slade 2018).

Post-Mao China has retained elements of Mao's labour reform system and follows 'the principle of combining punishment with reform and combining education with labour' to transform

prisoners into law-abiding citizens (Wu and Vander Beken 2018: 712). As Wu (1992: 1) stated, 'the labour reform policy established in Mao's era (…) has remained essentially unchanged' in the reform era. Chinese prisons may use different names to refer to units at different levels, and the organizational structure has been simplified. For example, a prison is equivalent to a detachment that is individually responsible for costs and profits. Each prison has a number of sections or battalions, each of two to four hundred prisoners, which are further divided into production teams or squadrons. Companies that existed in the Mao era are mostly non-existent in the reform era. Our empirical data suggest that prisons today still rely heavily on informal self-governance and co-governance to maintain security, ensure efficient manufacturing and provide adequate social welfare for inmates.

Low officer-to-inmate ratio

Despite recruiting more prison officers compared to the Mao era, Chinese prisons still face low officer-to-inmate ratios. A 2012 report on prison management revealed that China had 300,000 prison officers to manage a population of 1.64 million prisoners in 681 prisons (National People's Congress 2012). The staff-to-inmate ratio thus exceeded the 18 per cent requirement set by the Chinese judicial system. However, our interview data revealed that the staff-to-inmate ratio was as low as 6.7 per cent in one large prison where we conducted our fieldwork.[4] One prison officer, sometimes two, is responsible for supervising the manufacturing work of around 30 prisoners.[5] News sources reveal that the true staff-to-inmate ratio is even lower than five per cent (Initium Media 2017). The Prison Law of the People's Republic of China (1994) states that prison officers are the only legitimate regulators of daily prison life; governance institutions developed by inmates are prohibited.

Staff-to-inmate ratios in Western prisons are considerably higher. For example, from 2016 to 2021, the ratio of correctional officers to prisoners in the United States fluctuated between 24 and 33 per cent (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2022). In the European Union, the average number of inmates per prison staff member from 2010 to 2017 was approximately two, indicating a staff-to-inmate ratio of around 50 per cent (Eurostat 2024).

Yet despite the low staff-to-inmate ratio in Chinese prisons, the Ministry of Justice demanded in 2018 that Chinese prisons must be the safest in the world with 'zero escapes'. In response, some prisons created a new risk control and management mechanism, the 'one-minute response' (Zhang and Wang 2021: 96). This requires that all prison officers must arrive at the scene and effectively address any disturbances within the first minute after the alarm has been raised. Failure to do so may result in disciplinary action or even dismissal. Given the unreasonably low staff-to-inmate ratio, the question arises of how Chinese prisons manage to implement the 'one-minute response' mechanism.

Prison officers are responsible for supervising factory production. Inmates work in industries such as electronics, textiles and apparel, toys, agriculture, and food processing. As the interview data showed, prisons rely on the revenue generated by inmates' labour.[6] Although official reports do not disclose the amount prisons earn from their factories, this income constitutes a significant proportion of daily operational costs. As a result, most prison officers are assigned to supervise inmates' labour (Cheng 2019). This raises doubts about how Chinese prisons manage to regulate inmates' daily labour without sufficient staff.

4 Interview data, police officer N50, 2023.
5 Interview data, former prisoner N25, 2023.
6 Interview data, former prisoner N31, 2023; police officer N45, 2023.

Inadequate welfare provision for prisoners

Chinese prisons can provide inmates' basic necessities, such as meals, clothing and accommodation. However, inmates still need to purchase items such as cigarettes, hygiene products and instant foods such as noodles and sausages. Inmates rely on financial support from family members to augment their earnings from prison work; earnings are usually less than a hundred Chinese yuan per month (approximately 14 USD). Inmates who have serious family problems or come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often do not receive sufficient financial support from their families.

Prisoners are granted consumption quotas (money to buy basic necessities) ranging from 100 to 500 yuan per month (approximately 14–70 USD); the amount is determined by their degree of compliance with prison rules and their work performance.[7] Chinese prisons have established a performance-based incentive system (or the score-based rewards and punishment system, known as the *Jifen kaohe* system). This system uses scores to evaluate inmates' compliance with regulations and their performance at work (Zhang 2020). The system is also used to distribute rewards—such as score increases, which can be applied toward sentence reduction and parole—and punishments, such as reducing consumption quotas and preventing inmates from earning a reduced sentence. This creates a problem within inmate society: many prisoners[8] are granted high consumption quotas but lack the money to use them, while others do have money but are not granted high-enough quotas.

There is a clear mismatch between the ambitious goals set up by prison managers, such as absolute security and reliance on prison factories to generate revenue, and low staff-to-inmate ratios. Chinese prisons also need to address the problem of insufficient welfare for prisoners, which can be a significant source of conflict in prisons. To increase the efficiency of prison management, Chinese prisons continue to use informal self-governance and co-governance in their daily management. Our empirical data reveal that although only prison officers are granted legitimate governing power, elite inmates and informal social networks, such as patron–client relationships, frequently form part of the daily management of prisons. To be specific, patron–client relationships facilitate 'allowed deviations', daily practices that conflict with prison regulations and laws but are widely tolerated in prison management.

PATRON–CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS AND ALLOWED DEVIATIONS IN CHINESE PRISONS

Our empirical data show that, to achieve institutional objectives such as ensuring security, facilitating production and managing inmates despite a low staff-to-inmate ratio, Chinese prison officers form patron–client relationships with elite inmates. These can be divided into three types: executive elites (squadron leaders who take charge of prisoners' production and non-production activities), economic elites (prisoners who possess more economic resources than their peers) and social elites (leaders of inmate cliques). These three categories are not mutually exclusive, and this will be discussed later in this article. Prison officers choose to tolerate three categories of allowed deviation. The first category permits the participation of elite inmates in the daily management of prison life and production. Although the involvement of elite inmates in prison management occurred in both the Mao and reform eras, this practice contravenes the 1994 Chinese Prison Law. This law stipulates that prison officers have exclusive authority and responsibility to govern prisons.

7 Interview data, police officer N47, 2023.

8 These prisoners are given high consumption quotas because they perform well in their manufacturing work and actively follow prison regulations. However, they lack the money to use these quotas due to insufficient support from their families.

The second category involves exchanges among prisoners of basic necessities and services. Economically disadvantaged prisoners sell their services to buy basic necessities from wealthier prisoners, referred to as economic elites in this article. The third category involves the formation of cliques or gangs based on place of birth. Clique leaders, known as social elites in inmate society, offer protection, resolve disputes and provide emotional support to their followers; clique members refer to each other as 'brothers'. All three categories clearly violate prison regulations, and perpetrators can be punished according to prison regulations.

In each allowed deviation, participants can be categorized into two groups, resulting in two types of reciprocal relationships: between prison officers (patrons) and elite inmates (clients) and between elite inmates (patrons) and other inmates (clients). Although patron–client relationships increase the efficiency of prison management and production, they can harm the interests of economically and politically disadvantaged prisoners, who constitute the majority. This is because the reciprocal relationships encourage officers to grant enormous discretionary power to elite inmates, particularly squadron leaders, who often abuse this power to exploit other inmates. In Chinese inmate society, squadron leaders often become both economic elites and clique leaders, leading to a concentration of power and resources among a limited number of inmates and reduced well-being among the rest of the prisoner population.

Case study one: Involvement of elite inmates in prison governance

Our empirical data suggest that elite inmates (clients) are commonly appointed by prison officers (patrons) to be cell and production group leaders, assisting in the regulation of prisoners' daily lives and work. In Chinese prisons, each cell accommodates around 12 or 13 inmates, and cell leaders have the authority to control the activities of their fellow inmates. As depicted in Figure 1, cell leaders provide a range of services to prison officers, including enforcing prison

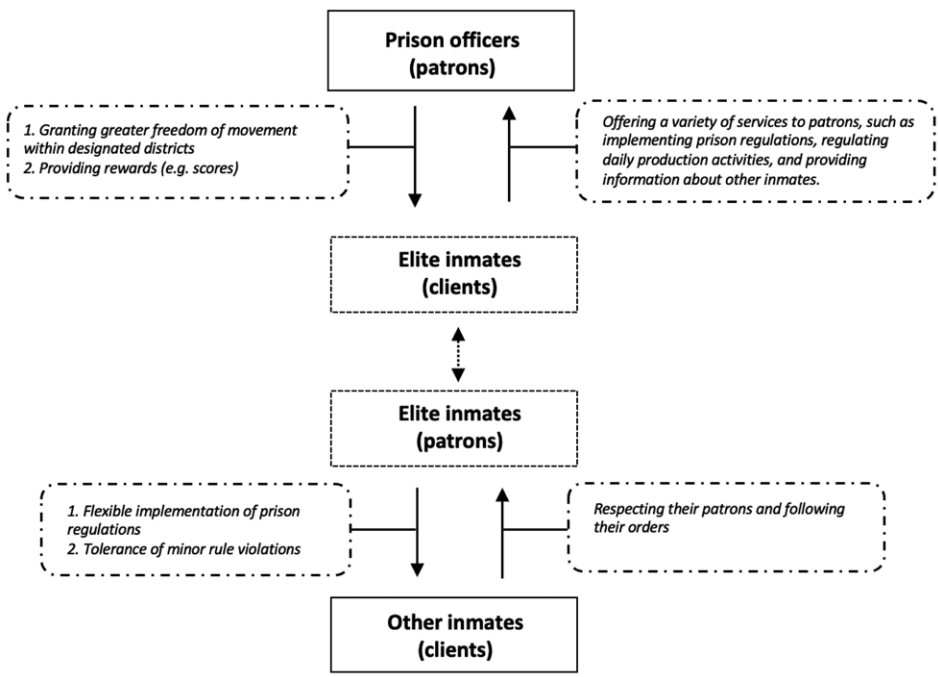

Fig. 1 Patron–client networks and co-governance mechanisms in Chinese prisons

regulations and gathering information about fellow inmates. For instance, cell leaders assign inmates to nightly patrols within the cell to prevent potential incidents.[9] Additionally, cell leaders act as informants, reporting on other inmates' deviant behaviour, interactions among specific inmates, possession of prohibited items (such as sharp objects that could harm others), and emotional issues or suicidal ideation.[10] Prison officers reward these cell leaders by reducing or waiving their workload and granting them privileges in terms of sentence reduction and parole eligibility.[11]

In many Chinese prisons, cell leaders are also production group leaders (squadron leaders) who are responsible for daily production activities. Above squadron leaders, there are chief squadron leaders.[12] In many cases, inmates become cell leaders and squadron leaders because they or their families bribe prison officers.[13] However, an inmate becomes a chief squadron leader due to exceptional management skills rather than bribery. They stand out also because of their strict adherence to prison regulations, close relationships with prison officers, active participation in production activities, and long-term commitment to prison management (e.g. their sentences are longer than those of most other inmates).[14] The appointment of chief squadron leaders follows the principle of meritocracy, as production efficiency affects the evaluation of prison officers' work and determines their bonuses.[15]

Prison officers are stationed in two surveillance rooms: one located at the entrance to the manufacturing workshop and the other positioned at the far end of the workshop. Officers assign production tasks to chief squadron leaders and monitor production activities through CCTV. They also occasionally patrol the prison factory.[16] Several hundred inmates work in the factory, where one or two chief squadron leaders oversee inmates' work.[17] Each production process involves 15 to 30 inmates working as a group; four to five groups work together to produce the final product.[18] Each squadron leader takes charge of one production process. The production line is complex, requiring efficiency and cooperation from every group member. To achieve this cooperation, squadron leaders must form mutually beneficial relationships with all group members. Group members need to show respect for the squadron leader and strictly follow their orders; in return, the squadron leader applies prison regulations in a flexible manner. The squadron leader tolerates minor rule violations by group members, such as chatting during the production process or sharing food during breaks, as well as manufacturing waste caused by inefficiencies in the manufacturing process.[19]

As Figure 2 shows, squadron leaders (patrons) assign less physically demanding jobs to group members (clients) with whom they have established close relationships.[20] These jobs include distributing raw materials to other inmates, storing finished products, assessing product quality and cleaning.[21] Inmates assigned to these jobs enjoy extra freedom of movement within the

9 Interview data, former prisoner N28, 2023.
10 Interview data, former prisoners N18, 2022 and N43, 2023.
11 Interview data, former prisoners N16, 2021 and N30, 2023.
12 Interview data, former prisoner N25, 2023.
13 Petty corruption was common before the launch of the nationwide anti-corruption campaign in 2012. It still exists but has become less frequent. It is the frontline prison officers who receive bribes, often in the form of a red envelope containing a few hundred yuan or two cartons of cigarettes from prisoners or prisoners' families. This information is from interviews with former prisoners (N26 and N27) conducted in 2023.
14 Interview data, former prisoner N10, 2021; police officer N42, 2023.
15 Interview data, former prisoner N7, 2021.
16 Interview data, former prisoner N34, 2023; police officer N48, 2023.
17 Interview data, former prisoner N21, 2021.
18 Interview data, former prisoner N32, 2023.
19 Interview data, former prisoners N23, 2023 and N36, 2023; police officer N47, 2023.
20 Interview data, former prisoner N19, 2022.
21 Interview data, former prisoner N40, 2023.

factory. In return, they demonstrate loyalty to and proactively obey the orders of their squadron leaders.

Elite inmates (squadron leaders) seem to be more effective than prison officers in managing daily production and inmates' lives. One reason for this is that there are simply more of them. Additionally, the obvious power imbalance between prison officers and inmates makes inmates reluctant to reveal their needs and concerns to officers. Elite inmates, on the other hand, can communicate efficiently with their peers and earn the trust of their fellow inmates.[22] As an elite inmate told us:

> We're all fellow inmates here, striving for an early release from prison (…) when I engage with them in a friendly manner and persuade them to align our goals toward making our time here more comfortable and achieving early release, rather than being in conflict with each other, most of the other prisoners choose to cooperate with me and abide by the rules.[23]

Elite inmates are motivated to tolerate their peers' minor infractions. Fellow inmates reciprocate by obeying prison management. This reciprocity among inmates helps sustain the smooth functioning of Chinese prisons.

Case study two: Informal markets in Chinese prisons

Although Chinese prisons provide some basic necessities (e.g. uniforms and meals), prisoners still need to obtain many other items, such as instant foods or personal care items. Inmates have different levels of financial power because they come from different social classes, and this variation is what prompts inmates to exchange services for basic necessities. Our empirical data revealed the existence of informal markets (shown in Figure 3) in which economically disadvantaged inmates (clients) trade their services with economically advantaged inmates (patrons) for

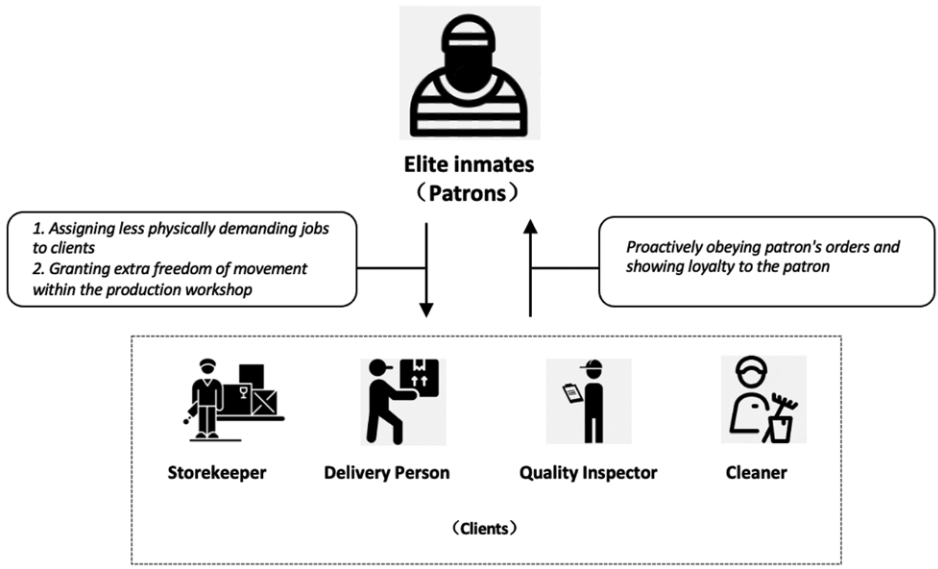

Fig. 2 Patron–client networks in the prison factory

22 Interview data, former prisoner N35, 2023.
23 Interview data, former prisoner N37, 2023.

essential goods. Certain basic necessities are in high demand in Chinese prisons, from instant noodles and sausages to personal hygiene products and cigarettes.

Economically disadvantaged inmates have strong incentives to build exchange relationships with economically advantaged ones.[24] The advantaged are also interested in exchanging with the disadvantaged because services (such as doing laundry, washing dishes, making beds and taking on night patrol responsibilities) provided by clients allow patrons to have more time for relaxation. Clients prefer to provide services to multiple patrons, as this enables them to afford a wide range of basic necessities. However, some highly resourceful inmates choose to purchase services from specific inmates, known as 'mazai' (younger brothers or little horses), who are hardworking and loyal to their patrons.[25] These mazai assist their patrons during non-work hours by serving tea or water, cleaning, and giving massages. The patron–client relationship in this context is limited to the exchange of services for basic necessities, and patrons do not have to offer protection to their clients. For instance, if their clients have conflicts with other inmates, the patrons often act as mediators rather than participating in fights on behalf of their clients. As one former inmate revealed:

> In prison, inmates must take care of themselves. Some inmates offer services, such as doing laundry for their patrons. Patrons never get involved in fights on behalf of their clients when conflicts arise with others. The assistance patrons can provide is limited to offering their clients basic necessities; there's nothing else beyond this.[26]

When clients cause excessive trouble or are unable to provide high-quality services, patrons can dismiss these clients and choose new ones.[27] There are no written rules governing exchanges

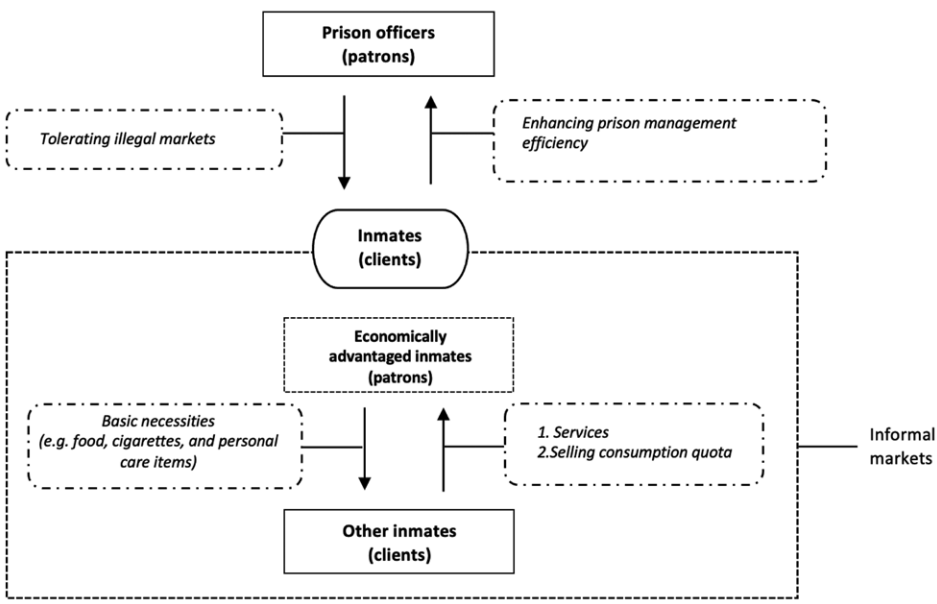

Fig. 3 Patron–client relationships and informal markets in Chinese prisons

24 Interview data, former prisoner N3, 2021.
25 Interview data, former prisoner N20, 2022.
26 Interview data, former prisoner N17, 2022.
27 Interview data, former prisoner N1, 2021.

between patrons and clients; they mainly rely on oral agreements. For example, a one-off laundry service might be rewarded with one bag of instant noodles or two sausages, while taking on a patron's night patrol responsibilities might be compensated with a pack of cigarettes. However, deceptive or dishonest behaviour, such as patrons failing to reward clients' service with the promised items, are rare, because dishonesty severely damages a patron's reputation within the prison, negatively affecting their relationships with peers and hindering their ability to engage in future exchanges.

As noted above, inmates are given monthly consumption quotas; however, inmates who lack financial support from their families might not use their entire consumption quota because they do not have sufficient funds. These inmates can sell their quota to other inmates.[28] Those who purchase others' consumption quotas usually ask their families to transfer money to the cards held by their exchange partners in prison. Their exchange partners can then use the cards for purchasing basic necessities, on condition that they give a part of the basic necessities purchased with the cards to the cardholders. However, since inmates often find it difficult to maintain good communication with their families, exchanging consumption quotas for basic necessities is considered less desirable than exchanging services for necessities within the prison.[29]

Prison officers are aware of the informal market and choose to tolerate its existence, as it does not pose any risk to the safety, productivity or daily management of the prison. As a former prisoner told us:

> Prison officers are primarily concerned with prison escapes and the death or injury of inmates, while other issues that do not threaten the safety of the prison are not their concern.[30]

Another former prisoner concurred:

> Prison officers do not care much about inmates' activities during non-work hours. As long as inmates fulfil their obligations and daily work quotas, prison officers are not likely to intervene in inmates' lives during their spare time.[31]

Prison officers' tolerance of the informal market offers opportunities for inmates who cannot afford basic necessities to sell services to other inmates, a system that contributes to the well-being of inmates and the stability of the prison. In addition, exchanging services for basic necessities during non-work hours leaves inmates with less time and energy to organize against prison officers, which reduces potential risks to prison management.[32]

Case study three: Clique of fellows

The term 'clique of fellows' in Chinese prisons refers to a group of prisoners who form a close-knit association based on the shared social background of coming from the same place. These cliques play a significant role in providing emotional support for clique members, solving disputes among inmates, and maintaining prison security and order (see Figure 4). It is common for inmates from the same province or city to develop strong emotional bonds, as they speak the same dialect and share many similar experiences.

Unlike Western prisons, where gang members often use violence and threats against fellow inmates and even prison officers (Griffin and Hepburn 2006; Santos 2007), cliques of fellows in

28 Interview data, former prisoners N9, 2021 and N18, 2021.
29 Interview data, former prisoner N15, 2021.
30 Interview data, former prisoner N18, 2022.
31 Interview data, former prisoner, N33, 2023.
32 Interview data, former prisoner N37, 2023; police officer N49, 2023.

Chinese prisons are non-violent. This is because inmates' behaviour can be closely monitored by prison officers, who can monitor every corner of the prison via CCTV.[33] Violence can be punished by score reduction, which is extremely damaging to inmates seeking early release. As a result, violence among inmates is rare in Chinese prisons, which partly explains why prison officers tolerate the existence of cliques of fellows. A former prisoner told us:

> We are closely associated with each other to seek comfort and support in our daily lives. However, you cannot expect others to assist you in group fights or bullying others, as it is almost impossible. Physical conflicts with others lead to punishments, such as losing the opportunity of early release.[34]

Inmates within the same clique feel a strong obligation to help each other. Within these cliques, inmates who do not lack basic necessities or have a high reputation or social status among members become patrons, offering goods or dispute resolution services to fellow inmates in need. Inmates who have an abundance of basic necessities often share cigarettes, food and other daily items with others who are in urgent need or struggling to afford these essentials.[35] Inmates who

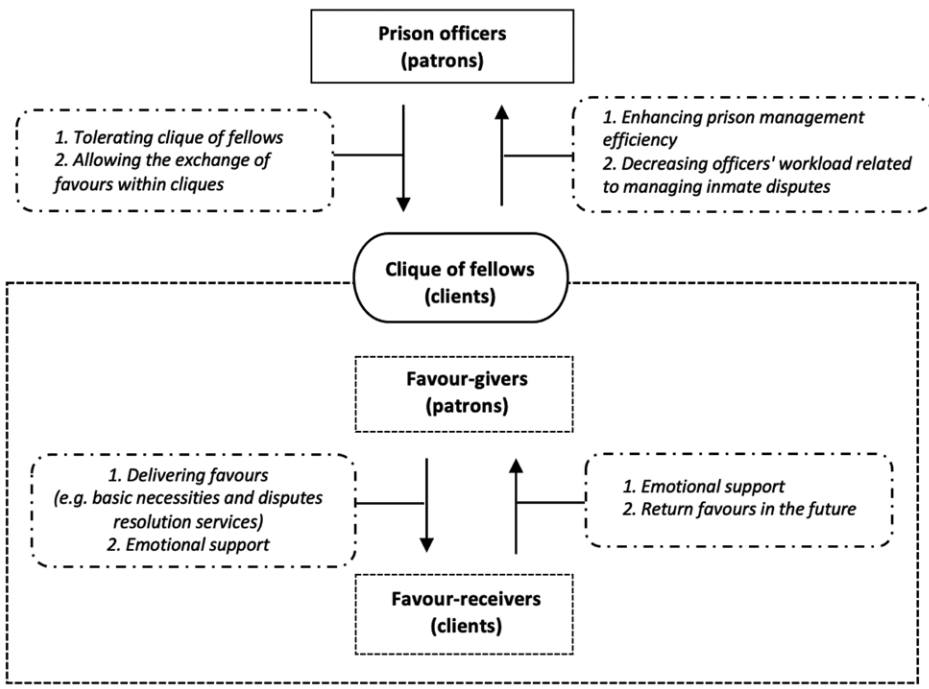

Fig. 4 Patron–client networks and inmate cliques

33 From the 1950s to the 1990s, brotherhood and loyalty to cliques were prominent social rules regulating prisoners' daily lives. Loyalty to the group prevented prisoners from betraying their clique members and from supplying information to prison officers. Such loyalty also encouraged them to get involved in violence to safeguard the interests of the clique and its members. This paralleled the 'thieves-in-law' culture in Soviet prison camps (Slade 2018). However, the situation is now very different. Brotherhood and loyalty still exist among clique members, but they avoid using violence to resolve conflicts and are more cooperative when interacting with prison officers. Clique members care about the material benefits they derive from the clique and the increased chance of early release. This information was given by former prisoner N23 in 2023.

34 Interview data, former prisoner N30, 2023.

35 Interview data, former prisoners N12, 2021; N13, 2021; and N28, 2023.

serve as food distributors during meals often give extra food to peers in the same clique.[36] Those who receive these benefits express great appreciation to the favour-givers and are expected to return the favour when the favour-givers need assistance.

Cliques also play an essential role in resolving conflicts with inmates outside the clique. Inmates who have established their reputation, hold influence within the clique, or are skilled at persuasion and negotiation often serve as mediators.[37] They encourage inmates in disputes to compromise and prevent conflict from escalating into violence. As mediators, they are excellent listeners and possess a wealth of local knowledge, such as the needs of the inmates involved in a conflict and the best way to communicate with them.[38] This knowledge enables them to manage disputes, which reduces the incidence of violent conflicts.

Inmates often experience a range of negative emotions, such as loneliness, helplessness, frustration, depression and anxiety. Emotional support from cliques of fellow inmates becomes essential to alleviate these negative emotions. Members of the same clique offer each other comfort and encouragement. The close emotional bonds formed in this way often extend beyond their time in prison, with former inmates gathering to help one another reintegrate into society. As a former prisoner explained:

> When someone in our clique is about to be released, we gather, have snacks, and chat to celebrate. On the release day, those who have already been released wait outside the prison to pick them up. These relationships within our clique truly mean a lot to us.[39]

Prison officers tolerate the widespread existence of cliques and the exchange of favours among inmates, as they contribute to effective prison management: they foster a sense of belonging among fellow inmates, enabling inmates to quickly adapt to prison life.[40] In addition, the dispute resolution service cliques offer to inmates reduces both the need for prison officers to intervene in inmates' conflicts and the likelihood that disputes will escalate into violence.[41]

Inequality and favouritism: The dark side of patron–client relationships

These cases indicate that patron–client relationships and three types of allowed deviation promote efficient prison management. Our empirical data, however, show that the negative impact of patron–client relationships on prison life in China should not be ignored. Reciprocal relationships between prison officers and squadron leaders make officers overly reliant on squadron leaders to manage prison factory production, which gives squadron leaders enormous discretionary power, especially with task allocation. As a former prisoner noted:

> Some production tasks are simple, while others are more difficult. If we want to do simple tasks, we can complete the tasks ahead of schedule; if the task is difficult, it will be hard for us to complete it with guaranteed quality and quantity… all tasks are assigned by our squadron leader.[42]

Whether inmates are assigned easy or challenging tasks depends on whether they have established close ties with squadron leaders. Power is closely linked to 'the stigma of corruption' (Wang and Sun 2016: 77). Keen to receive privileged treatment, such as being assigned easy

36 Interview data, former prisoner N26, 2023.
37 Interview data, former prisoner N14, 2021.
38 Interview data, police officer N41, 2023.
39 Interview data, former prisoner N7, 2021.
40 Interview data, police officer N46, 2023.
41 Interview data, police officer N44, 2023.
42 Interview data, former prisoner N7, 2021.

tasks and low daily work quotas, inmates have strong incentives to deliver favours such as free services and gifts to squadron leaders. As an interviewee explained,

> We have to give gifts to the squadron leader; when I want to do easy tasks and when I fail to fulfil my daily work quota, I will give two packs of cigarettes to him, and he will take care of me.[43]

Another interviewee noted:

> Inmates vied to help squadron leaders wash clothes, not just in exchange for food and drink. They did this also because chief squadron leaders and squadron leaders are in charge of the production process. Sometimes, when we produced defective products, they would help us 'muddle through', so helping to wash clothes [and offering free services] could be considered a fair exchange.[44]

Chief squadron leaders and squadron leaders can easily use this power to become both economically and socially powerful, thus becoming the dominant economic and social elite in inmate society. The position of squadron leader is clearly desirable, but any inmate seeking to become a squadron leader must establish close relationships with the powerful (prison officers and chief squadron leaders), and giving gifts (e.g. red envelopes and cigarettes) to the powerful is crucial.[45] This means that only economically advantaged inmates have the money to invest in becoming squadron leaders, and they can easily recoup their investment by abusing their power once in post. This makes Chinese inmate society highly hierarchical and causes deep inequality among inmates.

CONCLUSION

This article examines how social order in Chinese prisons is maintained through informal governance mechanisms. Specifically, it focuses on the role of patron–client relationships and three types of allowed deviation: the involvement of elite inmates in daily governance; informal markets, where services are exchanged for basic necessities; and inmate cliques. The daily functioning of these allowed deviations is sustained by patron–client relationships. These relationships regulate two levels of daily interaction: between prison officers and elite inmates, and between elite inmates and other inmates. Although all these allowed deviations clearly breach prison laws and regulations, prison officers tolerate them because their existence alleviates staff shortages, increases production efficiency, and fulfils inmates' daily needs that are not met by the official prison management system.

This empirical examination of allowed deviations in Chinese prisons enriches the existing literature on prison governance, particularly self- and co-governance. However, the limitations are also evident: this research focuses on the social order of men's prisons in China and does not consider informal governance mechanisms in women's prisons. While the authors have already collected empirical data from women's prisons, a comparison between men's and women's prisons regarding their informal governance strategies and interactions between prison officers and inmates is beyond the scope of this article. Such comparisons could serve as a focus for future research. We hope that our research findings will reshape the perception that Chinese prisons

43 Interview data, former prisoner N3, 2021.
44 Interview data, former prisoner N51, 2024.
45 Interview data, former prisoners N15, 2021; N25, N28, 2023; N51, 2024.

are effectively governed solely through military and paramilitary models, and we aim to spark research interest in comparing prison social order in Western countries with that in China.

Another limitation of this article is that, although it includes discussions about the negative aspects of patron–client relationships, such as favouritism and inequality, these discussions are brief. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, we were unable to gather sufficient interview data on the matter. Further research should aim to develop more effective strategies to gather detailed and reliable interview data on this crucial issue, which would enable researchers to provide a comprehensive understanding of patron–client ties in Chinese prisons and contribute further to the literature on prison studies and patron–client relations.

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This research obtained ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Hong Kong (HREC number: EA200198 & EA230171).

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