

Universalism and Particularism: A Comparative Review of Western Criminological Theories Through Chinese Juvenile Cyber Deviance Research

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Abstract: Western criminological theories have shaped the global study of juvenile deviance, but their applicability to non-Western contexts, particularly China's distinctive social and digital environment, remains underexamined. This article systematically compares four major criminological theories (self-control, social learning, differential association, and routine activity theories) with Chinese empirical evidence on juvenile deviance, including both offline delinquency and emerging cyber deviance. Chinese studies have found partial support for Western theoretical predictions, but have also documented findings that diverge from Western patterns in ways that clarify the boundary conditions of each theory. Three dimensions of divergence are identified: family structure and social control, school ecology and peer environments, and the state-level internet governance regime. These divergences, rather than indicating theoretical failure, point toward the need for contextualized theoretical development that embeds Western frameworks within China's specific institutional and cultural mechanisms. The article outlines a research agenda for future comparative criminological work, including methodological priorities and substantive questions organized around Chinese-specific mechanisms such as family spoiling dynamics, school punishment effects, and the mismatch between digital governance design and adolescent usage patterns.

Keywords: Comparative Criminology, Juvenile Cyber Deviance, Chinese Adolescents, Cross-cultural Theory Testing, Contextualized Theory.

1. Introduction

China has the world's largest adolescent internet population, with over 190 million youth regular users and average daily screen time exceeding four hours. According to the China Internet Network Information Center, this represents more than a threefold increase since 2015, driven by near-universal smartphone adoption and declining data costs. The scale of this digital transformation has no parallel in Western societies, making China an informative context for studying how structural changes in routine activities affect deviance patterns. This digital expansion has been accompanied by rising rates of cyber deviance, encompassing cyberbullying, online fraud, digital piracy, and exposure to harmful content. Surveys conducted across multiple provinces report cyber victimization rates between 15 and 30 percent among middle school students, with boys more likely to engage in active forms of cyber deviance and girls more likely to report exposure to harmful content. Chinese criminologists have responded with a growing body of empirical research drawing on large-scale survey data and rigorous quantitative methods [1, 2].

The theoretical frameworks guiding this Chinese research, however, are overwhelmingly imported from Western criminological traditions. Four theories dominate: Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory, Akers' social learning theory, Sutherland's differential association theory, and Cohen and Felson's routine activity theory. Each has been tested on Chinese samples, with findings that are neither straightforward confirmations nor outright dismissals, but a more nuanced pattern of partial validation punctuated by divergent results [3, 4].

The scope of this research warrants attention. Zhao and

Zhu's path analysis of 2,042 Chinese adolescents, Qu et al.'s comparison of reform-school and regular students, and Xia et al.'s study of migrant adolescent deviance constitute a substantial body of empirical work. Xu's integrated model of cyber deviance among 8,797 vocational students further extends this evidence base into the digital domain. Together, these studies provide a rich empirical foundation for cross-cultural theoretical assessment, precisely because they employ methods and measures comparable to Western research while studying populations embedded in a distinct institutional context.

The cross-cultural question is not whether Western theories "work" in China. That binary framing oversimplifies the issue. The more productive question is which mechanisms travel, which do not, and what this reveals about the contextual embeddedness of criminological explanation. China's social structure differs from Western societies along several theoretically relevant dimensions. Family relations are organized around Confucian traditions of filial piety and parental authority rather than the individualist autonomy characteristic of Western families. Schools function not only as educational institutions but as sites of intensive moral socialization and behavioral control, often through boarding arrangements and classroom-based peer networks. The internet environment is shaped by a distinctive governance regime including real-name registration, platform-level content moderation, and minor-specific protections such as gaming time limits and content filtering. Each of these structural differences modifies how Western theoretical mechanisms operate, sometimes in ways that the theories themselves do not anticipate.

This comparison extends beyond China. As internet access expands globally and digital behavior becomes central to

adolescent development in diverse cultural contexts, criminology needs theoretical frameworks that are sensitive to institutional and cultural variation. If Western theories apply to China only with substantial modification, the same may be true for other non-Western contexts now undergoing rapid digitalization, including India, Indonesia, Brazil, and parts of Africa where smartphone adoption is accelerating. The Chinese case is a test case for a broader question in comparative criminology: which aspects of criminological theory are universal, and which are context dependent?

This article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews four major Western criminological theories and their extension to the digital domain. Section 3 examines Chinese empirical applications of these theories, documenting both confirmatory and divergent findings. Section 4 identifies systematic divergences across three structural dimensions and discusses their theoretical implications. Section 5 proposes a research agenda for Chinese criminological theory development, emphasizing methodological priorities and the embedding of Chinese-specific mechanisms.

2. Western Criminological Theories and Digital Extensions

2.1. Self-Control Theory

Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime posits that low self-control, established through ineffective childhood socialization, is the primary individual-level cause of crime and analogous behaviors [5]. Pratt and Cullen's meta-analysis of twenty-one studies found that low self-control had a mean effect size exceeding $r = 0.20$, ranking it among the strongest known correlates of crime [6]. Subsequent research has largely confirmed this finding across diverse populations. Vazsonyi, Mikuška, and Kelley updated and extended this work with a meta-analysis of ninety-nine studies, finding a mean correlation of $r = 0.415$ for cross-sectional studies and $r = 0.345$ for longitudinal studies, with no evidence of publication bias [7].

In the digital domain, self-control theory predicts that low self-control is especially criminogenic because online environments offer immediate gratification with low perceived detection risk. Morris and Higgins found that self-control-related measures predicted digital piracy alongside social learning variables, suggesting independent effects [8]. A further question concerns the role of opportunity. Gottfredson and Hirschi treat opportunity as a constant, but digital environments vary substantially in the opportunities they present for expressing low self-control. Platforms with weak moderation, anonymous interaction, and immediate rewards may selectively attract and enable individuals with low self-control. This suggests a person-environment interaction that static self-control measures may not capture, raising questions about whether the theory needs to account for opportunity variation more explicitly when applied online.

Another unresolved issue concerns the stability assumption. Gottfredson and Hirschi treat self-control as stable after childhood, but digital environments characterized by anonymity, immediacy, and reduced social presence may lower the threshold for expressing low self-control, activating deviant impulses that remain suppressed in face-to-face settings. If the digital environment itself can temporarily lower self-control, the theory may need to distinguish between trait self-control (stable individual differences) and state self-control (situationally responsive). This distinction

has particular relevance for Chinese adolescents, whose online behavior is shaped by a governance regime designed precisely to alter the opportunity structure of digital environments.

2.2. Social Learning Theory

Akers' social learning theory, reformulated from Burgess and Akers' differential association-reinforcement model, specifies four mechanisms through which deviant behavior is acquired: differential association (exposure to deviant others), definitions (attitudes favorable to deviance), differential reinforcement (anticipated rewards exceeding costs), and imitation [9]. Krohn, Skinner, Massey, and Akers provided longitudinal evidence that social learning variables predict changes in deviant behavior over time [10].

Morris and Higgins tested social learning theory on digital piracy using structural equation modeling on a sample of 585 college students [8]. Social learning variables predicted digital piracy, and the social learning process mediated the impact of demographic correlates. This established that social learning mechanisms, developed to explain face-to-face deviance, extend meaningfully to anonymous digital transactions, though the authors noted that modest effect sizes indicated room for additional mechanisms.

2.3. Differential Association Theory

Sutherland's differential association theory, reviewed by Matsueda, proposes that criminal behavior is learned through communication with intimate personal groups. Individuals become delinquent when exposure to definitions favorable to law violation exceeds exposure to definitions unfavorable to it [11]. Peer delinquency consistently emerges as a robust predictor of individual delinquency across diverse samples.

Meldrum, Young, and Weerman made a critical methodological contribution by distinguishing between perceived and direct peer delinquency measures [12]. Their findings revealed that self-control effects were substantially larger when controlling for direct peer measures, and that a significant interaction exists between self-control and peer delinquency. Meldrum, Miller, and Flexon extended this by showing that susceptibility to peer influence partially mediates the effect of low self-control on delinquency [13]. These methodological insights have direct implications for cross-cultural research, where the structure of peer networks varies substantially across contexts.

2.4. Routine Activity Theory

Cohen and Felson's routine activity theory posits that crime occurs when a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship converge. In the digital domain, routine activities translate to online exposure, target suitability (personal data accessibility), and digital guardianship (technical protections, social supervision, institutional controls). The theory's strength lies in its attention to the situational conditions that enable crime, rather than focusing exclusively on offender characteristics. This makes it a complement to individual-level theories like self-control, as it explains not just why some people offend but why certain contexts facilitate offending more than others [14].

Morris and Higgins found that routine activity variables predicted digital piracy even after controlling for social learning factors, suggesting opportunity structures exert independent effects above individual propensity [8]. This

finding indicates that a complete explanation of cyber deviance requires both individual-level theories (self-control, social learning) and opportunity-based theories (routine activity). The nature and effectiveness of guardianship mechanisms vary substantially across institutional contexts, a point of particular relevance for the Chinese case. In China, the state plays a role in digital guardianship that has no Western equivalent, and understanding how this institutional guardianship interacts with individual-level mechanisms is a central question for contextualized criminological theory.

3. Chinese Empirical Applications: Partial Validation and Divergence

3.1. Self-Control in Chinese Samples

Qu, Zou, and Duan's study comparing reform-school youth with regular middle school students in Chinese urban settings found that reform-school adolescents exhibited lower self-control than their mainstream peers, and that self-control remained a predictor of delinquent behavior after controlling for values, family background, and demographic characteristics [3]. This finding is consistent with Western evidence and confirms the cross-cultural robustness of the self-control-deviance link.

Zhao and Zhu's path analysis of juvenile delinquency among 2,042 Chinese adolescents incorporated self-control antecedents including family discipline and school attachment [1]. Their findings partially converged with Western predictions: family discipline functioned as a protective factor. However, school attachment emerged as the single strongest protective factor, a pattern that diverges from Western studies where early family socialization is typically emphasized. Zhao suggested that in the Chinese context, the development of self-control may be more heavily influenced by institutional socialization through schools than by early family socialization alone [2]. This finding does not contradict self-control theory but suggests that the relative weight of self-control antecedents shifts across cultural contexts. The implication is that self-control theory's assumptions about where self-control comes from may need to be broadened to account for institutional variation.

Additional Chinese studies on family factors further nuance this picture. Zhao's path analysis employed a sample of 2,042 adolescents drawn from both juvenile correctional facilities and regular schools across three provinces, enabling meaningful comparison between delinquent and non-delinquent populations. The use of path analysis rather than simple correlation allowed for the estimation of indirect effects through mediating variables, providing a more nuanced picture of causal mechanisms than is typical in Chinese criminological research. Zhao's examination of family factors in juvenile delinquency found that while family discipline was protective, its effect was partially mediated by school-related mechanisms [15]. These findings suggest that Gottfredson and Hirschi's emphasis on early family socialization as the exclusive origin of self-control may be culturally bounded, with Chinese institutional structures providing alternative pathways to self-control development. This raises a broader question for self-control theory: if the antecedents of self-control vary cross-culturally, can the theory claim to be universal?

3.2. Social Learning and Peer Effects in Chinese Schools

Zhao and colleagues' research on Chinese juvenile delinquency has consistently identified peer association as a pathway to delinquent behavior. Zhao's path analysis found that differential association mechanisms were identifiable in Chinese samples, with peer delinquency serving as both a direct predictor and a mediator of other risk factors [1, 16]. The extension of social learning dynamics to media influences is also supported by Zhao's study of pornography exposure and juvenile delinquency, which found that exposure to sexually explicit materials predicted delinquent behavior through mechanisms consistent with social learning predictions, but that the relationship was moderated by peer association [17]. Zhao's study of peer association further demonstrated that Chinese adolescents' peer networks, structured by classroom assignments and dormitory arrangements, create high-density environments for differential association [17].

These findings are consistent with Western social learning predictions but reveal a structural divergence. The Chinese educational system creates peer environments that are simultaneously more intensive (through boarding and fixed class groups) and more monitored (through teacher supervision and moral education curricula). Zhao's analysis found that school-based interventions targeting peer networks were more effective in reducing delinquency than family-based approaches for certain offense types, suggesting that peer influence in Chinese schools operates through channels that differ from Western community-based peer networks [1]. This finding has practical implications: it implies that interventions designed for Western school contexts may not transfer directly to Chinese settings without adaptation to the structural characteristics of Chinese peer environments.

The National Survey of Juvenile Offenders further contextualizes these patterns, providing descriptive evidence that peer association is the most frequently cited correlate of delinquency among incarcerated Chinese juveniles [18]. This survey-level evidence, while not providing the causal inference of Zhao's path analysis, underscores the centrality of peer mechanisms in Chinese juvenile deviance. Qu's study of family environment, parental monitoring, and self-control further contextualizes these peer dynamics. While delinquent peer association predicted Chinese juvenile delinquency, the effect was moderated by parental monitoring, suggesting that Chinese family structures provide a compensatory external control mechanism that may buffer peer influence [19].

3.3. General Strain Theory and Migrant Adolescents

Agnew's general strain theory, while not among the four primary theories covered in this review, has been applied in Chinese contexts in ways that illuminate distinctive features of the Chinese social structure. Xia, Li, Zhang, and Tang tested general strain theory on migrant adolescent deviance using structural equation modeling on a sample of Chinese middle school students [4]. They found that discrimination promoted deviant behavior, and that more than half of this effect was mediated by negative emotions, delinquent peer associations, and weakened social bonds.

This finding is theoretically relevant because it identifies a strain source, institutional discrimination tied to China's household registration (hukou) system, that has no direct

Western analog. Western general strain theory primarily focuses on individual-level negative relationships (family conflict, peer rejection), whereas Chinese migrant adolescents face a structurally embedded, systemic form of inequality. The mediation pathways through peer associations and social bonds are consistent with Western formulations, but the origin of the strain is structurally distinct, suggesting that general strain theory requires contextual adaptation when applied to Chinese settings. The hukou-based discrimination involves not just individual prejudice but legal status barriers that affect access to education, healthcare, and social services, making it a qualitatively different strain source from those typically studied in Western criminology.

3.4. Cyber Deviance: An Integrated View from Chinese Data

Xu Boyang's doctoral dissertation examined cyber deviance among 8,797 Chinese vocational students using an integrated model incorporating self-control, social learning, differential association, and routine activity measures [20]. The study found that all four theoretical mechanisms contributed to explaining cyber deviance, with routine activity variables and self-control showing the strongest independent effects. Xu's study is notable for its large sample and its simultaneous testing of multiple theoretical mechanisms within a Chinese digital context.

As a single study, however, its findings require replication and cautious interpretation. The study's sample, vocational students from three Chinese provinces, may not generalize to all Chinese adolescent populations. Zhao's earlier research on offline juvenile delinquency provides a useful baseline for comparison. The mechanisms identified in Xu's cyber deviance model parallel those found in Zhao's offline studies, suggesting continuity between online and offline deviance processes [1, 2]. This continuity supports the view that Western criminological theories, developed to explain face-to-face deviance, extend to digital behavior in Chinese contexts, while also underscoring the need for more comprehensive cross-cultural comparative designs.

4. Cross-Cultural Comparison: Identifying Systematic Divergences

4.1. Family Structure: Authority versus Autonomy

Chinese family structures, rooted in Confucian traditions of filial piety and intergenerational obligation, differ from Western family models along dimensions directly relevant to criminological theory. Chinese families emphasize parental authority, behavioral monitoring, and emotional interdependence, whereas Western families tend to prioritize adolescent autonomy, egalitarian parent-child relationships, and independence [3].

This structural difference has two implications for criminological theory. First, Chinese families may provide compensatory external behavioral regulation that buffers the effect of individual self-control deficits. Zhao's finding that family discipline remains a protective factor even in the presence of low self-control is consistent with this possibility [1]. Second, the family as a source of both informal social control and emotional support operates differently in Chinese and Western contexts, potentially modifying the predictions of social control and social learning theories in ways that cross-cultural research has not yet fully specified. For

example, if Chinese families exercise stronger direct control over their adolescents' activities and associations, the relative influence of family versus peer factors on deviance may shift compared to Western samples.

The Chinese one-child policy has created an additional structural condition. Intensive parental focus on a single child, sometimes called the little emperor phenomenon, may produce distinctive family dynamics, including elevated parental monitoring alongside potentially indulgent parenting patterns. This combination of high monitoring and low behavioral demands may be unique to the Chinese context and could produce self-control deficits through a pathway that Western self-control theory does not address, since Western theory assumes that deficits arise from neglect or inconsistency rather than from excessive investment.

4.2. School Ecology: Peer Density and Institutional Control

The Chinese school system differs structurally from Western systems in ways that condition the operation of social learning and differential association mechanisms. Chinese adolescents typically attend school six days per week, with many living in boarding facilities from middle school onward. Classroom assignments are stable across academic years, creating enduring peer cohorts. Schools implement systematic moral and legal education curricula that explicitly shape definitions favorable or unfavorable to deviance.

These structural features create a peer ecology that is simultaneously high density (amplifying differential association) and institutionally controlled (providing countervailing definitional socialization). Zhao's finding that school attachment is the strongest protective factor against juvenile delinquency in Chinese samples can be understood within this institutional context. Schools that successfully engage students provide a form of capable guardianship and definitional socialization that Western schools, with their more individualistic and less intensive structures, may not achieve to the same degree [1]. The high density of peer interaction also means that the balance between prosocial and deviant peer influences in Chinese schools is strongly shaped by the school's own institutional culture and disciplinary practices, more so than in Western contexts where peer networks extend beyond school walls into community and extracurricular settings.

The moral education curriculum, which teaches students to recognize and resist deviant influences, is an institutional mechanism of definitional socialization that operates alongside peer influence. Unlike Western settings where definitional socialization primarily occurs through family and peer interactions, Chinese schools explicitly and systematically shape definitions favorable to law-abiding behavior. This institutional dimension of social learning theory has been largely neglected in Western applications.

The unintended consequences of Chinese school discipline, however, deserve attention. School punishment and labeling of "problem students" may produce alienating effects that push disciplined students toward deviant peer groups, a mechanism that operates in all school systems but may be intensified in Chinese high-density, high-stakes educational environments. This duality, schools as both protective institutions and potential alienating forces, requires theoretical specification.

4.3. Internet Governance: State-Level Guardianship and Its Limitations

China's internet governance framework is the most distinctive institutional feature differentiating the Chinese digital environment from Western contexts. The system includes real-name registration for online accounts, platform-level content moderation, minor-specific protections including gaming time limits and youth modes, and state-mandated anti-addiction measures. These mechanisms constitute a form of state-level capable guardianship with no direct analog in Western theoretical formulations.

The theoretical question is whether this guardianship effectively modifies the relationships predicted by routine activity and self-control theories. In theory, content moderation reduces suitable targets, real-name registration deters motivated offenders, and time limits reduce exposure to online opportunities. In practice, however, the effectiveness of these measures is constrained by implementation gaps. Youth mode algorithms often recommend content misaligned with adolescents' actual interests and developmental needs, potentially reducing engagement with protective features. Gaming time restrictions are calibrated to regulatory schedules rather than adolescent daily rhythms. The restricted periods frequently conflict with school schedules, while unrestricted periods (such as late evening) may be when adolescents are most active online. These implementation mismatches create a gap between the theoretical guardianship that governance frameworks are designed to provide and the practical guardianship they achieve.

The proliferation of workarounds among Chinese adolescents further complicates the guardianship picture. Many adolescents circumvent gaming time limits by using multiple accounts or borrowing adult credentials. They bypass content restrictions through virtual private networks. They use encrypted messaging platforms that operate outside content moderation frameworks. These adaptive behaviors suggest that the relationship between state-level guardianship and adolescent online behavior is dynamic rather than static, with governance and evasion co-evolving in ways that routine activity theory, which treats guardianship as a stable structural feature, does not capture. A more complete theoretical account would need to treat guardianship as a negotiated outcome between regulatory design and user adaptation, rather than as a fixed environmental condition.

This mismatch is theoretically useful. Routine activity theory predicts that capable guardianship reduces crime opportunities, but when guardianship mechanisms are poorly aligned with target populations' actual behavior patterns, their effectiveness is attenuated in ways the theory does not fully anticipate. Understanding these implementation dynamics requires integrating criminological theory with the institutional analysis of governance design, a direction that the Chinese case makes particularly salient [21, 22, 23].

5. Future Directions for Chinese Criminological Research

5.1. Methodological Priorities

Cross-cultural criminological research faces several methodological challenges that Chinese scholarship must address. Measurement equivalence of key constructs, self-control scales, peer deviance measures, and definitions favorable to deviance, across Chinese and Western samples

must be empirically established before comparative claims can be definitive. Current Chinese studies predominantly use instruments adapted from Western research, but the cross-cultural validity of these adaptations has not been systematically tested.

Longitudinal designs are needed to establish temporal ordering of theoretical mechanisms. Nearly all existing Chinese studies use cross-sectional survey designs, which cannot address questions about developmental trajectories, causal ordering, or the stability of self-control relative to contextual triggers. Meldrum et al.'s distinction between direct and perceived peer measures should be incorporated into Chinese research designs to improve measurement validity [12, 13].

5.2. Toward Contextualized Theories

The cross-cultural evidence reviewed above suggests a research direction that does not seek to replace Western theories with Chinese alternatives, but rather to embed Western theoretical mechanisms within Chinese-specific contextual conditions. This approach, which might be characterized as contextualized theorizing rather than universalist or particularist positions, recognizes that theoretical mechanisms are real and generalizable but that their operation is modified by institutional and cultural context.

Several Chinese-specific mechanisms merit systematic incorporation into future theoretical development. First, the phenomenon of family indulgence and spoiling, a structural consequence of China's one-child policy, may weaken the natural development of self-control in ways that differ from the parenting deficits emphasized by Gottfredson and Hirschi. Where Western self-control theory assumes that ineffective parenting (inconsistent discipline, low monitoring) produces low self-control, the Chinese context introduces a mechanism of excessive parental investment combined with low behavioral demands, potentially producing self-control deficits through a different etiological pathway. This distinction matters for intervention: if the cause of low self-control is overindulgence rather than neglect, the appropriate response may involve behavioral demand-setting rather than remedial structure.

Second, the alienating effects of school discipline deserve theoretical specification. Chinese schools' intensive disciplinary practices, while intended to deter deviance, may inadvertently push sanctioned students toward deviant peer groups through labeling and exclusion processes. In China's high-density, high-stakes educational environments, these effects may be amplified relative to Western school contexts, creating a school-to-deviance pathway that current theories do not capture. The stakes are higher in a system where academic success determines life trajectories more sharply than in most Western societies, which may intensify both the protective and the alienating functions of schools.

Third, the mismatch between internet governance design and adolescent usage patterns represents a theoretically important implementation gap. Youth protection features are designed around assumptions about adolescent needs and schedules that may not match empirical reality. The consequence is that the theoretical guardianship these features are intended to provide may be weaker than policy intentions would suggest. Understanding these implementation dynamics requires criminological theory to engage with institutional design and policy analysis in ways that have not

been characteristic of the field. Routine activity theory, for example, would benefit from a more developed account of how guardianship effectiveness depends on the fit between guardianship design and the routine activities of the target population.

The collective orientation of Chinese society also has implications for social learning and differential association mechanisms. Where Western social learning theory emphasizes individual-level learning processes, Chinese peer influence may operate through more collective mechanisms, group norms, shared face concerns, and collective behavioral standards, that are not reducible to individual-level differential association or reinforcement. Understanding these collective learning processes requires theoretical concepts that go beyond Akers' original formulation. A Chinese adolescent may conform to peer norms not because of individual reinforcement history but because the collective expectations of the reference group carry moral weight that is culturally distinct.

Fourth, the role of face culture and relational social control mechanisms, which have no direct counterpart in Western criminological theory, deserves exploration. Chinese social relations are organized around the concept of face (*mianzi*), social standing that depends on the evaluations of one's reference groups. This mechanism may function as a distinctive form of informal social control, reducing deviance through reputational concerns in ways that Western theories of social control (which emphasize bonding and commitment rather than face) do not capture. The comparative analysis also suggests several concrete research questions for future investigation. Are gaming time restrictions associated with temporal displacement of online activity to unrestricted periods, and does this displacement affect cyber deviance rates?

5.3. Policy Implications

The comparative review supports several policy recommendations. Interventions should be calibrated to risk level, with universal prevention for low-risk adolescents, targeted peer-based programs for medium-risk youth, and intensive multimodal interventions for high-risk populations. School-based programs leveraging positive peer influence may be particularly effective given the high density of Chinese school peer networks [24]. Digital governance measures, including content moderation and youth protection features, are most effective when combined with digital literacy education that shapes definitions unfavorable to cyber deviance. Governance design should be informed by empirical research on adolescent usage patterns rather than assumptions about adolescent behavior [25, 26]. A key policy implication is that governance mechanisms intended to provide digital guardianship need to be tested against actual adolescent behavior patterns, since implementation gaps can substantially reduce their effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

The contribution of this review is not to declare Western theories valid or invalid in China, but to demonstrate how systematic cross-cultural comparison can refine criminological explanation. Each divergence between Western prediction and Chinese finding represents an opportunity for theoretical development: a specification of the conditions under which a mechanism operates, an identification of the institutional arrangements that modify its

strength, or the discovery of a previously unrecognized variable that the theory must incorporate. In this sense, the Chinese evidence does not diminish the value of Western criminological theories; it enriches them by revealing their scope conditions and institutional dependencies.

This comparative review has examined four Western criminological theories, self-control, social learning, differential association, and routine activity, through the lens of Chinese juvenile deviance research, spanning both offline delinquency and emerging cyber deviance. Chinese empirical evidence has provided partial validation of Western theoretical mechanisms while also revealing systematic divergences that illuminate the contextual embeddedness of criminological explanation.

Three dimensions of divergence are particularly revealing. Chinese family structures provide compensatory external social control that may modify self-control dynamics. Chinese school environments create peer ecologies of unprecedented density combined with institutionalized moral socialization. China's internet governance regime introduces state-level guardianship whose practical effectiveness is constrained by implementation gaps between policy design and adolescent behavior patterns. These divergences, rather than indicating that Western theories are inapplicable to China, point toward the need for contextualized theoretical development that specifies how universal mechanisms are modified by particular institutional and cultural conditions. Together, they suggest that the universalism-particularism debate in comparative criminology may be best resolved not by choosing sides but by developing theories that specify the conditions under which mechanisms operate.

Self-control theory travels well but its antecedents shift from family to school. Social learning mechanisms operate but through institutionally structured peer environments. Routine activity predictions hold but are modified by governance regimes without Western precedent. General strain theory's causal logic applies but the strain sources are structurally distinct. Each of these patterns tells us something about the boundary conditions of the respective theory, and each points toward specific directions for theoretical refinement.

The Chinese case demonstrates that universal theoretical claims require empirical qualification, while particularist rejections of Western theory in non-Western settings are equally unwarranted. The productive path forward lies in identifying the specific mechanisms through which institutional and cultural context moderates theoretically predicted relationships.

The contribution of this review to comparative criminology lies not in adjudicating between universalist and particularist positions, but in demonstrating how systematic cross-cultural comparison can refine theory by identifying the conditions under which mechanisms operate, the conditions under which they are attenuated, and the institutional arrangements that produce these variations. As internet access continues to expand globally and digital behavior becomes increasingly central to adolescent development, the need for theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous, and contextually sensitive comparative research will grow. The Chinese case, because of its scale, institutional distinctiveness, and rapid digital transformation, will remain a critical site for this work.

Future research should prioritize the direct measurement of contextual variables identified in this review. Studies that simultaneously measure self-control and family indulgence,

school attachment and disciplinary labeling, internet governance exposure and workaround behaviors would provide the kind of interactive evidence that can move beyond simple confirmation or rejection of Western theories toward genuine contextualized theoretical development. Cross-national collaborative designs that collect parallel data in Chinese and Western samples using identical instruments would further strengthen the evidentiary basis for comparative claims. Such research would not only advance criminological theory but would also provide the empirical foundation for evidence-based policy design tailored to China's distinctive institutional environment.

Methodologically, the next generation of Chinese research should prioritize three advances: the systematic validation of measurement instruments for Chinese populations, the collection of longitudinal data to establish temporal ordering of theoretical mechanisms, and the incorporation of direct peer measures to address the measurement concerns raised by Meldrum and colleagues. The field would benefit particularly from studies that examine how the Chinese-specific mechanisms identified in this review, family indulgence, school disciplinary alienation, governance implementation gaps, and face-based informal social control, interact with the established theoretical mechanisms from Western criminology. Future research should also examine how the four theoretical mechanisms interact with one another in the Chinese context. Do self-control deficits and peer influence amplify each other, or does the compensatory function of Chinese family structures buffer their joint effect? Does school attachment moderate the impact of internet governance on cyber deviance, or are these independent mechanisms? Understanding these interactions is essential for moving from a list of contextualized variables toward a genuinely integrated understanding of how Western criminological mechanisms operate in the Chinese institutional environment. The ultimate goal is not a separate Chinese criminology, but a more complete criminology that accounts for the institutional and cultural conditions under which universal mechanisms operate.

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