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Abstract: *This article examines the relationship between the organization of ownership and workplace theft in China. The authors argue that China offers a particularly useful context for studying this topic because it is one of the few countries in the world where multiple forms of ownership have become common following recent economic reforms. The authors consider two basic forms of ownership: public and private. Using data from a sample of inmates in the Chinese city of Tianjin, the authors assess the effect of these different forms of ownership on perceived levels of theft in the inmates' organizations prior to incarceration. The results indicate that, contrary to what might be expected on the basis of Western theory and research, public ownership is associated with higher levels of workplace theft than private ownership. The authors suggest that public ownership in China has led to a diffusion of responsibility and an organizational culture that is conducive to workplace theft.*

Workplace theft is a major problem throughout the world (Chalidze, 1977; Hollinger, 1991; Hollinger, Slora, & Terris, 1992; Li, 1995; Los, 1988; Pomorski, 1977; Tucker, 1989; Walder, 1986; Xu, 1994). Yet, much of what we know about the phenomenon comes from studies done in Western societies that are highly developed. Significant changes are occurring in many societies that have not typically been the focus of studies of workplace theft, which make these nations potentially fruitful arenas to increase our understanding of this phenomenon.

China is a particularly intriguing context in which to study workplace theft because of its economic and political history and the recent changes in its economic structure. Specifically, the reliance on public or state controlled ownership of organizations that both provide services and produce capital goods has lessened. Recent reforms in China have given rise to considerable private ownership in diverse forms. These changes have resulted in China becoming one of the few

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countries in the world where multiple forms of ownership have become common. Thus, it provides an interesting, yet largely unexplored, natural laboratory in which to examine the effects of the organization of ownership on the rate of workplace theft.

This study examines how the type of ownership affects the rate of workplace theft. By using data from China, we take advantage of the differences in types of ownership that have been generated by the Chinese reforms. We begin our examination with a brief review of the literature on workplace theft.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

To explain workplace theft, theories generally focus on either characteristics of the offender or the organization of the workplace. Offender theories assume that some employees are theft prone and explain organizational rates of theft with reference to what type of employees work at the establishment. If a company employs too many of the theft-prone individuals, it experiences high rates of theft. Studies of this genre attempt to identify personality characteristics and their social causes (Aster, 1972; Lipman, 1973; Terris & Jones, 1982; Willis, 1986).

Worksite theories, in contrast, point to features of the organization of work; some examine equity. Employee theft is viewed as a response to perceived inequities in the workplace (Ditton, 1977; Hollinger, 1986; Hollinger & Clark, 1982; Magione & Quinn, 1974; Quinney, 1977; Zeitlin, 1971). Other worksite theories examine integration or marginality in the workplace. Tucker (1989), for example, argues that marginal employees are more likely to steal from the company as a way of handling grievances. He reports that low status, temporary, and socially isolated employees are most likely to engage in theft. Thus, to the extent that the workplace marginalizes employees, the rate of employee theft is likely to be high.

Other researchers focus on both employee and workplace characteristics. For example, Robin (1969) argues that organizational sanctions do not uniformly deter theft, but that their effect depends on employee tenure and age. Hollinger and Clark (1983) also report that the effect of sanctions depends on employee age. Hollinger (1989) reports that workplace deviance depends on both the characteristics of the employee and those of the workplace, such as the normative integration of the work unit. Similarly, Hollinger et al. (1992) report that age, tenure of employment, and perceived employer unfairness all affect theft.

A common theme in worksite theories of employee theft is the degree to which characteristics of the worksite integrate the worker into that organization. The organization of ownership is one characteristic of the worksite that has been deemed important because it affects the social relationships among employees and their employers. Two major forms of ownership exist in the world: private (the workplace is owned by a small number people who are not necessarily employed there) and public (the workplace is owned by the state, that is, by everyone in the larger political unit).

Private ownership is generally thought to produce conflictual relationships between the owners (employers) and employees—in traditional Marxian terms between the capitalists and the proletarians. Because employees tend to be socially isolated by salary, competition, and position in a hierarchy (Hawkins, 1984; Terris & Jones, 1982), they frequently feel exploited and cheated (Henry, 1978) and sometimes view theft “as a morally justified addition to wages . . . as an entitlement due from an exploiting employer” (Mars, 1974, p. 214). In contrast, public ownership is thought to moderate conflictual relations between employers and employees. Because employees experience less inequality, stratification of authority, and competition, they feel less marginalized and dissatisfied. Hence, we might expect less theft in publicly owned workplaces.

In sum, drawing on equity theory and research in the West, we can reasonably conclude that economic inequality, competition, and hierarchical work structures increase feelings of injustice, marginality, and exploitation, which culminate in workplace theft, and that these workplace characteristics are embedded in the organization of ownership. They are accentuated by private ownership and moderated by public ownership.

Based on the above theoretical overview, the introduction of private ownership would be expected to generate a higher rate of employee theft than would public ownership, and the introduction of private ownership to the economy of China would be expected to increase the rate of employee theft. However, there are important differences in the organization of public ownership in China as compared to the United States that may alter the expected relationship.

CHINA AS AN ANALYTICAL CONTEXT

First, it should be clear that public ownership is structurally different in capitalist and socialist countries. In the former, publicly owned enterprises (e.g., the Postal Service) generally do not define workers as owners—no more so than any other citizen. Employee owned companies (forms of collectives) frequently provide only limited employee ownership as stockholders (25%, 50%) with the stock actually held by an employee representative body, such as a union. Publicly owned organizations are still basically market driven. That is, work is still organized toward profit, employees are still hired from the labor market, and their wages and promotions are still linked to both the labor market and their own performance.

In China, a socialist country, public ownership (state or collective) more clearly emphasizes ownership by the workers. According to socialist ideology, every worker as the “master of the state” is an owner of his or her workplace; workers are not only employees, but are also employers. Traditionally, publicly owned organizations have also been less market driven. The workplace is frequently more political than economic: Work is organized toward carrying out a state plan with less regard to profit; most workers are assigned to work organiza-

tions by the state; wages and benefits (such as medical care, housing, education, transportation) are related more to worker status than to economic performance; and promotion is more related to political skills and connections than to economic performance (Lu, 1989, 1993; Walder, 1986). Because of these interlinking rights and benefits, workers are very dependent (economically and socially) on the workplace. They are rarely fired, which is ideologically prohibitive, and they rarely resign because that means losing everything associated with their worker status (wages, housing, medical, and educational benefits). Over time, this organization of the workplace has yielded structural arrangements that are evidently conducive to theft and a workplace culture that encourages it. Public ownership in China has produced a diffusion of responsibility for workplace property and a workplace culture that regards theft of such property as trivial. Every worker as the master of the state is an owner of his or her workplace. As an owner, everyone in principle is required to take responsibility for the workplace and its property, which in practice seems to mean that no one takes responsibility.

Public ownership has also produced a patriarchal or paternalistic culture among managers and workers (Lu, 1989, 1993; Walder, 1986), which leaves considerable margin for corrupt behavior on the part of managers and for nonproductive behavior on the part of workers (Lu, 1993; Walder, 1986). Managers become involved in corrupt behavior because political authority and economic authority are normally mixed and difficult to separate, and workers become involved in nonproductive behavior (e.g., absenteeism, socializing on the job, working slowly) because those behaviors are often ideologically permitted or tolerated. Frequently, they are seen not as deviant, but as counter-capitalistic behavior.

Within this cultural context, workplace theft is not always viewed as criminal or even deviant. Instead, it is frequently viewed as just another form of nonproductive behavior—the consequence of a lack of respect of public property, the wasteful organization of work; the mindless subordination of the central plan, low income (Chalidze, 1977), the political exploitation of workers (Los, 1988), and poor management (Lu, 1989; Walder, 1986). Reflecting its ambiguous moral status, punishment of this behavior can be trivial, frequently limited to group criticism and moral help.

We suggest, then, that the organizational differences in public ownership in China may undermine the applicability of Western theories concerning the relationship between ownership and workplace theft to the Chinese context. Contrary to Western theories and research, our hypothesis is that in the Chinese context public ownership is likely to be associated with a higher rate of workplace theft than private ownership. Indeed, the Chinese literature (Central Police Department of China, 1993; Chen, 1988; Deng, 1993; Fei, 1988) is filled with concern about the high level of workplace theft in the public workplace¹.

Traditionally, public ownership has been the dominant form of ownership in China. It includes all types of work organizations, from those that produce services to those that produce capital goods. The recent reforms in China have also

given rise to considerable private ownership in diverse forms. Private ownership has increased from about 8% of all companies in 1980 to about 20% in 1993 (State Statistics Bureau, People's Republic of China, 1981, 1994). This form of work organization is similar to private ownership in the West. Relationships between employers and employees are more economic, lawful, and formal, and less political, personal, informal, and paternal (Lu, 1989; Walder, 1986). Workers are hired and fired in response to market conditions and to their own work performance, and workers, correspondingly, have the freedom to change jobs. These transitions and changes of ownership provide a valuable opportunity to assess our hypothesis by comparing workplace theft in work units of public ownership with those of private ownership.

DATA AND METHOD

The data for the present study comes from a 1991 survey of offenders incarcerated in correctional institutions in Tianjin, a large city of China. The general goal of the survey was to investigate crime commissions and collect relevant information about offenders' backgrounds. The survey was administered and conducted by the Tianjin Academy of Social Science. Questionnaires were administered to a sample of offenders from prison and reform camps run by the city government. Respondents were assured that the questionnaires were anonymous and that their identities would not be revealed to correctional officers. Usable responses were obtained for a total of 1,063 inmates. The present study is based on the subset of 356 respondents who were workers before they were placed in correctional institutions (other occupational categories such as students are excluded from the analysis).

We measure workplace characteristics, including theft, by these respondents' perceptions of their workplace prior to imprisonment. The independent variable is ownership of work unit, which is easily described by respondents. It is measured by the question: "What kind of ownership does your work unit belong to?" Seven categories are listed in the original classification: (a) state owned enterprise; (b) state owned institute; (c) new collective enterprise; (d) traditional collective owned business; (e) privately owned enterprise; (f) foreigners' enterprise; and (g) government administration. A frequency distribution of this variable shows that the 7th category includes only a few cases; so we eliminate it from the analysis. We combine categories a, b, and d into a single category to represent public ownership. Category d is included in public ownership because, as Lu (1989) explains, there is very little difference in China between traditional, collective, and state owned enterprises. Categories e and f are combined into another new category: private ownership.

The remaining original category, "new collective enterprise", refers to any joint ownership between individuals, between individuals and a collective, and

between foreigners and citizens. Although this form of ownership is still called collective in name, it differs from the traditional collective ownership in nature. These new collective enterprises reflect the transition of Chinese economy from state-controlled market to a more free market. They are actually owned by individuals and not by the state or local governments. Therefore, we classify the new collective ownership as a type of private ownership. Our independent variable is thus a dichotomous measure distinguishing public (coded 1) and private (coded 0) ownership.

The dependent variable is workplace theft as measured by the respondents' perceptions. Respondents were asked, "Is there anybody who takes workplace property (raw materials, products, and tools) in your work unit?" The original response categories are *none*, *some*, and *many*. Given the ambiguities in the distinction between *some* and *many*, we combine these two categories and treat workplace theft as a dummy variable indicating whether workplace theft is perceived to be absent (0) or present (1).

In addition to these primary variables, we include three additional variables. One is a measure of the implementation of organizational rules, which might mediate any effect of ownership on theft. Studies in the West (Carson, 1977; Hollinger & Clark, 1983; Parilla, Hollinger, & Clark, 1988) report that strict implementation of organizational rules can reduce workplace theft. Literature on the Chinese workplace suggests that organizational rules are less likely to be strictly implemented in publicly owned enterprises because every employee is part owner of the organization, in ideology. The specific measure is based on the question, "What is your perception of the enforcement of work unit rules?" The original response categories are *lax*, *neither lax nor strict*, and *strict*.

The two remaining variables are the age and educational attainment of the respondents. We treat these as control variables because each might be related to both placement in different kinds of work units and to perceptions of workplace theft.

In China, the government has promoted a stable occupational structure built on two major official controls. First, geographic and residential mobility from one city to another, and from countryside to urban areas, has been highly restricted. Each citizen has a registration record in his or her neighborhood police station. Residential mobility without special reasons is not allowed by the police station. Second, the job market is planned and controlled by the state. In the past, for most Chinese workers, the initial work unit assignment by the government was often a lifetime placement. As a result, occupational mobility was rare. This rare occupational mobility suggests that age might related to workers' perceptions of their work units. Older workers may be more likely to report workplace theft simply because they have been in the same work unit longer. Therefore, we include age as a control variable that is measured in years.

Finally, educational level of respondents may also affect their perceptions of workplace theft because people with more education are more likely to be aware

of and understand organizational rules and, thus, are more likely to perceive workplace theft. Education is measured with five categories: 1 = illiteracy, 2 = elementary school, 3 = middle school, 4 = high school, and 5 = college.

Before proceeding with the analysis, an important methodological limitation of the data needs to be acknowledged. Our measure of workplace theft is based on the perceptions of respondents in a sample of incarcerated inmates. Although the use of workers' perceptions to measure organizational properties is quite common in the organizational literature (see Hollinger & Clark, 1983), the use of imprisoned workers is unusual. The reason for doing so is quite simple: We know of no other source of information on ownership of work and workplace theft in China.

It would certainly be unrealistic to assume that our sample is representative of the general population. However, the key issue is whether the use of this unrepresentative sample is likely to yield biased results. We suspect that inmates might provide elevated reports of workplace theft, especially if they themselves are disproportionately involved in such activity. On the other hand, we have no reason to expect that such over estimation is systematically linked with the independent variable of interest—work organization—and hence that the relationship between variables would be distorted. Nevertheless, we caution that our results must be regarded as tentative and exploratory in nature.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the frequency distributions for the variables in the analysis. The vast majority of respondents (88.8%) are classified as being employed in public enterprises, which is not surprising given the relatively recent implementation of economic reforms in China. Workplace theft is reported to be fairly common. Almost three quarters of the respondents indicate that such criminal behavior occurs in their work units. Slightly less than half of the respondents (41%) state that the organizational rules on the job are strict. With respect to individual characteristics, the sample is roughly equally divided between young and old workers, with a majority having attained at least a middle school education.

Turning to our main hypothesis, Table 2 reports the results of logistic regressions of workplace theft of the various predictor variables. Model 1 reveals the bivariate relationship between ownership of work unit and workplace theft. Consistent with our hypothesis, the logistic regression coefficient (.77) is significantly positive. The odds of theft being present in the work unit are about two times greater in public than in private work units ($\exp(b) = 2.16$). In Model 2, the strictness of organizational rules is entered into the equation. This variable has the expected negative effect on workplace theft, which is consistent with previous studies done in the West (e.g. Carson, 1977; Hollinger & Clark, 1983; and Parilla et al., 1988). However, contrary to the hypothesis of a mediating effect, the coefficient for ownership retains its strength and significance, with the measure of rules controlled.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTIONS OF VARIABLES

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Ownership of work unit		
Public	316	88.8
Private	40	11.2
Perceived workplace theft		
Absent	94	26.4
Present	262	73.6
Strictness of workplace rules		
Lax	39	11.0
Neither lax nor strict	171	48.0
Strict	146	41.0
Age		
25 years or below	186	52.2
26 years or above	170	47.8
Education		
Illiteracy	11	3.1
Elementary school	68	18.0
Middle school	192	53.9
High school	76	21.3
College	13	3.7

NOTE: Age is collapsed into two categories to give a concise presentation.

TABLE 2
LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF WORKPLACE THEFT ON OWNERSHIP
OF WORK UNIT AND CONTROL VARIABLES

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Model</i>					
	<i>1</i>		<i>2</i>		<i>3</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t-ratio</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t-ratio</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t-ratio</i>
Ownership of work unit	.77	2.21*	.78	2.17*	.84	2.24*
Strictness of rules	—	—	-.82	-3.95**	-.85	-4.01**
Age	—	—	—	—	-.02	1.41
Education	—	—	—	—	.49	3.09**
<i>N</i>	356		356		356	
Model χ^2	4.614*		21.775**		33.335**	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Finally, Model 3 contains all predictor variables. The effect of ownership remains significant with controls for the individual characteristics of respondents. Age proves to be unrelated to perceptions of workplace theft, whereas the more highly educated are more likely to detect theft than the less educated.²

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Although the structure of ownership has been implicated as a cause of employee theft, there is little systematic research linking workplace theft and the organization of ownership. In the past, such research would have been difficult, given the very limited variation in ownership forms. But, given the recent economic reforms in China, which have led to multiple forms of ownership, such research is now possible. Indeed, China may now provide more variation in the organization of ownership than any other country, making it the optimal location for such research.

We have tried to exploit this opportunity. Using a sample of inmates who were asked about characteristics of their work units, we examined the relationship between the organization of ownership and workplace theft. Our initial bivariate analysis clearly indicates that public ownership is more likely to be associated with workplace theft than private ownership. This finding is further confirmed when the effects of other important variables are held constant. Net of the effects of implementation of organizational rules, age, and education, the effect of ownership of work unit still remains reasonably strong in the predicted direction.

In addition, consistent with previous studies in the West, the implementation of organizational rules has a significant effect on workplace theft. Work units with strict rules have significantly lower levels of theft. Finally, educational level also significantly affects respondents' perceptions of their workplace theft, which is consistent with our expectations. We speculate that education is likely to increase workers' awareness of organizational rules and, thus, is likely to increase their awareness of workplace deviance.

In sum, the results of our analysis are consistent with the view that public ownership of work organizations in China has led to a diffusion of responsibility and a workplace culture that regards theft of workplace property as trivial. Every worker is assumed to be responsible for his work unit, but nobody truly takes on responsibility. In this respect, the contemporary situation in China may be similar to that in the former Soviet Union, where stealing socialist property had become "very much a part of everyday routine, a fairly common way of livelihood . . . no longer perceived by many as deviant behavior" (Pomorski, 1977, p. 240).

As noted above, methodological limitations of our data preclude definitive conclusions. We, nevertheless, regard these findings as highly suggestive, and we call for further comparative studies of the association between organization of ownership and workplace theft in the West and the East.

NOTES

1. The exact extent of workplace theft in China is difficult to establish. National crime reports are not readily available, and those that are available are based on urban areas. These statistics do not include workplace theft as a distinct category, but rather include it within the general categories of theft, burglary, and larceny. Some general information, however, is available from official records, such as *The Central Police Department of China* and *The Law Yearbook of China*. The latter reports rates for subcategories of crime from 1981 to 1991 (for a useful discussion of *The Law Yearbook of China* as a source of data see Rojek, 1995). Although this report shows very stable and low rates of violent crime over this period, it shows much higher and climbing rates of larceny, the crime category most likely to include workplace theft. Larceny rates increased from 4.72 per 100,000 population in 1981 to 81.27 in 1991.

Another source of information on workplace crime and the growing official and public concern about it, is reflected in Chinese journals and newspapers. In 1991 the Chinese government launched a campaign against property crime that included a specific campaign against workplace theft. Some academic studies have also appeared (Chen, 1988; Deng, 1993; Fei, 1988). They commonly focus on worker attitudes and "defective" administrative structures.

2. We also conducted ordinary least squares regression analysis based on this full model by treating the dependent variable (workplace theft) as an ordinal measure with three categories (1 = *no theft*, 2 = *some*, and 3 = *many*). The substantive results are the same, although the significance level of ownership of work unit decreases slightly.

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