Construct the Exemplary Chinese Police Image: Public Perceptions and Generational Differences

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In an era when online discourse and mediated scrutiny increasingly shape public attitudes, understanding how citizens construct the image of "exemplary police" has practical importance for legitimacy and governance. This qualitative study asks: How do citizens conceptualize an exemplary police image, how do these conceptions vary across generations, what obstacles hinder image construction, and what strategic pathways might address those obstacles? Using an online Jungian free-association task (n = 200; 1,740 descriptors) and follow-up semi-structured interviews (n = 30; >80,000 words), we applied inductive thematic analysis in NVivo 12 to generate empirically grounded findings across four birth cohorts. Results identify three core image dimensions—moral integrity, professional competence, and civic embeddedness—and reveal clear generational priorities——Baby Boomers: ethics; Gen X/early Millennials: relational trust; late Millennials/Gen Z: integrated expertise and digital responsiveness. We also identify three major gaps that hinder image construction: fragmented frameworks, conflicting enforcement–service standards, and uneven individual image awareness. To address these gaps we propose a three-part roadmap: institutionalize leadership (value alignment and accountability metrics); build organizational ecosystems (role modelling, incentives, and disciplinary clarity); and cultivate individual agency (co-created goals, peer reflection, and recognition). The study concludes that coordinated top-down, mid-level, and bottom-up strategies are necessary to co-construct a trusted, adaptable police image. Future research should test the model's generalizability in underrepresented regions, develop quantitative validation instruments, and evaluate targeted interventions .

Keywords: exemplary police image; generational differences; qualitative study; image positioning

Since the early 21st century, the rapid expansion of the internet and media channels has made image a crucial dimension of daily life, placing the image of the police at the center of long-term public attention. Social evolution and shifting public expectations have made it possible for adverse events or media hype to rapidly erode trust, and public perception directly influences support and cooperation with the police. High-profile incidents — such as the Guizhou "June 28" police cover-up, the wrongful-conviction cases of She Xianglin, Zhao Zuohai and Xie Yalong, the beating death of Lei Yang, the June 10, 2022 Tangshan assault, and the Hu Xinyu case (Feb 2, 2023) — have attracted

widespread attention and severely damaged public trust. A positive police image not only enhances public credibility, authority, and law enforcement effectiveness but also serves as an intangible governance resource to strengthen social stability. Conversely, improper image management can undermine trust and exacerbate police-civilian tensions.

Examining the characteristics, positioning, and construction of exemplary police images from a public psychology perspective holds significant theoretical and practical significance. On the one hand, this helps to uncover the psychological mechanisms that shape public attitudes, expectations, and trust, thereby enabling the development of more precise strategies for enhancing police images. Such strategies are particularly crucial when they fully account for the varying expectations of different generations, driven by their life experiences, media usage habits, and values. On the other hand, systematically examining how image attributes are generated, positioned, and cultivated can enhance the reputation of security organs, fostering a virtuous cycle of police-community interaction.

This study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature: the lack of a comprehensive, psychologically informed analysis of the exemplary police image within the context of generational differences. The specific research questions are: How do citizens conceptualize "exemplary police officers"? How do these differ across generational groups? What factors hinder the construction of a positive image? How can contemporary Chinese policing utilize public positioning strategies to overcome these challenges and cultivate an exemplary image?

Literature Review

Police image refers to the public's subjective impression of law enforcement, encompassing attitudes, evaluations, and expectations of police functions held by various sectors of society (Salmi et al., 2000). Traditional public relations research, both internationally and domestically, has focused on using police behavior and institutional publicity to establish an image of authority and demonstrate legitimacy (Reiner, 2010). Scholars generally categorize this into internal factors, such as personal integrity, professionalism, and behavioral consistency, and external factors, such as media presentation and community integration (Xu & Han, 2019; Liu, 2011). These dimensions collectively form the basic framework for the concept of police image.

However, maintaining a positive police image is often challenged by crises. Crises are exceptionally high-profile events that can dramatically shift public sentiment (Coombs, 2007). Research on image crises shows that police misconduct, excessive use of force, or corruption can quickly erode public trust, further fueling public suspicion (Mukhsinin, 2023; Stanford, 2015; Tyler, 2006). The development of social media has exacerbated this situation, as the rapid dissemination of negative news often constrains the timeframe for official responses (Meijer& Thaens,,2013). For example, the 2024 Zhuhai Sports Center "car accident" incident resulted in significant discrepancies between the government's news release and eyewitness accounts, leaving the public perplexed (Associated Press, Ewan, 2024).

Proactive image management has become crucial to this end (O'Connor, 2017). Empirical research confirms that a carefully crafted police image not only enhances public trust and satisfaction but also strengthens institutional legitimacy and operational effectiveness (Vaitkevičiūtė & Dobržinskienė,2022; Vigoda-Gadot & Cohen, 2015). Key attributes such as transparency, accountability, and empathetic community engagement are strongly associated with higher rates of public cooperation in crime prevention (McCandless, 2018). Consequently, police agencies worldwide

are implementing measures such as ethics training, community policing initiatives, and targeted media campaigns to cultivate and maintain a positive public perception (Okhrimenko, 2020)

Despite concerted image-building efforts, police organizations often struggle to bridge the gap between top-down messaging and grassroots expectations (Dang, 2025). While official initiatives tout "modernized policing" and "service-oriented reforms," public surveys consistently show that citizens prioritize concrete actions, such as fair treatment and a welcoming police presence, over abstract policy rhetoric (Simmons, 2009; Nickel, 2018). This discrepancy highlights that image-building strategies should not rely solely on government-led directives but must be grounded in the public's genuine feelings about the community.

Mannheim's (1952) generational theory explains how shared historical and social experiences shape distinct generational identities, in turn influencing political values, trust in institutions, and worldviews. These generational differences are particularly pronounced in China, which has experienced distinct periods such as the Cultural Revolution, economic liberalization, and the rise of digital media. Older generations often perceive policing through on-the-ground police presence and community patrols (Stoudt et al., 2011), while younger generations primarily engage with the police through digital channels, ranging from official social media posts to widely circulated citizen-filmed videos (Luo, 2022). These divergent experiences exacerbate cognitive gaps, resulting in distinct impressions of law enforcement.

While extensive literature examines the definition of police image（Salmi et al., 2000；Ullah et al.,2016；Russell,201), crisis management, and general strategies for construct it (Hine&Bragias, 2021), few studies systematically consider demographic nuances or translate specific public expectations into targeted positioning frameworks. In particular, generational differences in perceptions of police image remain underexplored, and models integrating psychological knowledge with practical image-building strategies are lacking. This study aims to explore perceptions of the "exemplary police" across different generations in China. Compared to previous research, which has focused on structural drivers and willingness to cooperate (Wu et al.2021), crisis communication and transparency strategies (Zheng,2023), attitudes toward specific police roles or internal organizational mechanisms (Sun, et al.,2021), and national discourse or contextual/tactical analysis (Scoggins,2022; Liu & Chen,2023), this study contributes by qualitatively characterizing the psychological dimensions and generational differences in public perceptions of the police from a public psychology perspective. It examines how these perceptions inform the strategic positioning of this image and explores how psychological insights can guide the shaping of the police's image. Ultimately, these perceptions are translated into a targeted, multi-layered roadmap for improvement, complementing previous studies that have focused on institutional or organizational dimensions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to capture the depth and nuance of public perceptions concerning exemplary police image characteristics and strategic positioning. Data collection utilized two complementary methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and a free-association task.

Participants

This study employed a two-stage, mixed recruitment strategy to capture both broad cultural associations with policing and in-depth, generationally informed perspectives. In the first stage, the free-association task was administered

via online recruitment, yielding responses from 200 participants who volunteered through community mailing lists, social media posts, and partner organization notices. Following completion of the free-association exercise, a stratified random sampling procedure was used to select a subsample of 30 participants for subsequent in-depth interviews. Stratification was performed by birth cohort to ensure generational representation: Baby Boomers (1946–1964, n = 7), Generation X (1965–1980, n = 6), early Millennials (1981–1996, n = 8), and late Millennials/Generation Z (1996–2010, n = 9). The target of 30 interviews was chosen because it falls within commonly accepted qualitative practice for achieving sufficient depth while remaining administratively manageable for intensive coding and case-by-case analysis (Boddy, 2016). In addition, the two-stage design — a large online free-association pool followed by a stratified set of in-depth interviews — provided methodological triangulation: the broad pool captured spontaneous cultural imagery, while the 30 interviews supplied balanced generational perspectives for detailed thematic analysis and allowed the team to pursue iterative coding until thematic saturation was observed. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of these 30 interviewees. This two-stage design allowed broad capture of spontaneous cultural imagery around policing while ensuring the interview sample provided balanced generational perspectives for detailed thematic analysis.

Table 1

Basic information of respondents

ID	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	Male	68	Retired(University Administrator)
2	Female	67	Retired(Police Officer)
3	Male	65	Retired(Factory Supervisor)
4	Male	64	Retired(Journalist)
5	Female	63	Retired(Nurse)
6	Male	61	Police Officer
7	Male	61	Police Officer
8	Female	56	Finance (MNC)
9	Female	55	Private Business
10	Male	55	Laborer
11	Female	49	Laborer
12	Female	48	Freelancer
13	Male	45	No job
14	Male	44	Government Staff
15	Male	43	No job
16	Female	42	Teacher
17	Male	37	Business Owner
18	Female	36	Private Enterprise
19	Male	36	Real Estate Sales
20	Female	35	Education & Training
21	Male	29	Maintenance Worker
22	Male	28	Farmer
23	Male	28	Administration

24	Male	26	Accountant
25	Female	25	Wedding Planner
26	Female	25	Software Developer
27	Female	23	Student
28	Female	23	Student
29	Female	22	Student
30	Female	22	Student

These cohort distinctions inform subsequent analysis of age-related variations in image attribute prioritization.

Data collection

Semi-structured Interviews

Follow-up interviews were conducted with the stratified subsample of 30 participants drawn from the online free-association pool. An interview guide—developed from the literature and pilot-tested for clarity and flow—framed open-ended questions about participants' conceptions of an ideal police image, evaluations of current policing practice, and suggestions for image enhancement. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to support thematic analysis.

Free-Association Task

The free-association task, administered online to the initial sample of 200 respondents, asked participants to list spontaneously the words or short phrases that came to mind in response to the stimulus term "exemplary police." This technique—adapted from Jungian associative methods for social research—was used to access implicit mental schemas and affective associations. Responses from the full online sample were compiled for frequency counts and co-occurrence pattern analysis to identify dominant descriptors and latent thematic structures. The associative responses contributed both as a population-level dataset (n = 200) and as the basis for selecting interviewees who could elaborate on emergent themes.

Research Procedure

To ensure methodological transparency and rigor, the study followed a systematic workflow from recruitment through analysis. Initial recruitment for the free-association task used online channels; after collecting associative data from 200 participants, researchers implemented a stratified random draw by age cohort to obtain the 30 interview participants. Selected individuals were contacted by telephone or email to confirm eligibility, outline the study aims, restate confidentiality procedures, and schedule interviews. Prior to each interview, verbal informed consent was reconfirmed and demographic information verified. Interviews followed the semi-structured guide and were audio-recorded with participants' permission; recordings were transcribed verbatim and redacted to remove personally identifiable information.

For qualitative analysis, NVivo 12 supported two complementary analytic streams. Associative responses from the full online sample were analyzed via frequency counts and co-occurrence mapping to reveal core image attributes and inter-term relationships, while interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis following established qualitative procedures. The primary analyst (Mao), who previously served as a community–police liaison and brings a normative orientation toward procedural justice, led coding. To reduce interpretive bias, a second coder unaffiliated with law

enforcement independently reviewed coding decisions, and member checks were conducted with three participants from each generational cohort to validate thematic interpretations. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee under reference number UMREC_2650.

Resutls

Coding Pipeline

We used NVivo 12 to organize and analyze both associative and interview data. First, in the open-coding phase, we reviewed raw transcripts and 1,740 free-association responses (collected online); after de-duplication these responses yielded 261 initial codes. Next, during axial coding, we consolidated and grouped those 261 initial codes into 76 nodes and subsequently organized them into 21 subcodes. Finally, in selective coding, we condensed the 21 subcodes into three core themes: Moral qualities, Professional competence, and Civic embeddedness. To ensure consistency, a second researcher independently coded 20% of the interviews and we calculated a Cohen's κ of 0.82, indicating strong agreement (see Table 2).

Table 2

Coding Pipeline

Phase	Units coded	Outcome (coding units)
Open coding	200 online free-association respondents (1,740 descriptors)	261 initial codes
Axial coding	261 initial codes	76 nodes → 21 subcodes
Selective coding	21 subcodes	3 core themes; κ = 0.82

Thematic Findings

Our themes reflected a multidimensional view of the ideal police image. Moral Qualities included integrity, justice, responsibility, and respect for the law, and emerged as the most frequently cited category. professional competence covered areas such as legal knowledge, technical skill, physical fitness, and problem-solving ability. Civic Embeddedness captured qualities like approachability, empathy, patience, and clear communication. Together, these three themes provided a clear, empirical basis for examining generational differences and for developing targeted image-building strategies.(see table 3)

Table 3

List of coding information of Exemplary police image characteristics in China

Core code (reference points)	Associated coding (reference points)	The original vocabulary(extract)
	Justice (18)	Justice; fairness; proper handling of cases; hatred of evil;
	Clean (16)	Clean and honest; clean; do not take a needle from the thread;
	Patriotic (23)	Patriotism; love the motherland; serve the country; loyalty to the country;
	Courage (14)	brave; fearless of danger; courageous;

Moral qualities (162)	Love and dedication (10)	Love; work; dedication; on call; self-sacrifice;
	Responsibility (6)	Responsible; serious and responsible;
	Kindness (8)	Kind; friendly; smile;
	Love the Party (16)	Love the Party; be loyal to the Party; choose the Party firmly;
	Diligence (9)	Diligence; conscientious; hard-working; hardworking and capable;
	Loyalty (6)	Perduties faithfully; be a public servant; obey rules;
	Values (5)	Correct values; atheism; three views; stay true to the original intention;
	Belief (2)	Have a sense of faith; firm faith sense；
	Ideal (2)	Lofty ideals
	Political Consciousness (20)	High political consciousness; firm political direction;
	Unity (7)	assistance; unity; sense of cooperation;
Professional competence (50)	Mental health (4)	Good attitude; optimistic; mental health; positive and optimistic; not negative
	Solid knowledge (22)	Excellent professional knowledge; to be familiar with the law;
	Professional skills (24)	Excellent business skills; keen observation; insight; resilience;
Civic Embeddedness(49)	Service for the people (30)	Serve the people; the heart of the people;
	Public influence (6)	Be an example of the people; stand ahead of the people; be loved by them;
	Communication skills (13)	have strong communication and coordination skills;Can communicate

Analysis reveals that the public expects exemplary officers to demonstrate substantive legal expertise and technical proficiency in law enforcement operations. Respondents emphasized mastery of relevant statutes and procedural compliance, noting such knowledge is essential both for effective crime deterrence and robust protection of citizens' rights. Furthermore, participants highlighted the critical importance of situational acuity, rapid assessment capabilities, and adaptive decision-making in dynamic security environments.

Positioning of the Exemplary Police Image

Positioning—here defined as articulating distinctive traits that secure a unique place in the public psyche—is crucial for law enforcement to build citizen confidence and fulfill its mandate. Drawing on a free-association task (261 unique nodes) and over 80,000 words of interview transcripts, this study synthesizes public perceptions into a three-part framework. The most frequent associative terms—"integrity," "justice," and "service"—align with interviewees'

explicit expectations and coalesce into three interdependent dimensions: moral integrity, professional competence, and civic embeddedness. Together these dimensions form an integrated basis for strategic image-building in contemporary contexts.

Moral Qualities

Across age groups, respondents identified honesty, integrity and impartiality as the core of an exemplary police image. Citizens expect officers to apply the law consistently, explain decisions transparently, document actions, and admit errors—practices that institutionalize accountability rather than leaving ethics to individual discretion. Moral integrity also entails personal courage and composure in dangerous or chaotic situations; staying calm and decisive under pressure reassures the public and protects lives. Many interviewees described policing as a vocation: a self-motivated commitment to serve that sustains long hours and emotional strain. In short, moral integrity, bravery and a sense of professional mission together form the ethical foundation of public trust.

Professional Competence

Professional competence rests on legal mastery, investigative skill, situational awareness, and physical and psychological readiness. Participants emphasized the need to know statutes and procedures thoroughly so interventions—from obtaining warrants to courtroom evidence—are swift and defensible. Acute situational judgment allows officers to intervene early and prevent escalation; operational excellence also requires endurance and stress resilience for pursuits, crowd control, or other demanding duties. To cultivate these capabilities, respondents suggested routine physical training, regular assessments, and stress-management techniques (e.g., tactical breathing, tactical pauses). Lifelong learning and continuous skills upkeep were presented as essential to maintaining community confidence.

Civic Embeddedness

Respondents expect officers to be approachable community members who listen patiently, de-escalate disputes, and proactively address local needs. Practical examples included informal outreach (e.g., "Coffee with a Cop," public office hours), community seminars, and participation in neighborhood events—activities that humanize police, elicit information that might not otherwise be shared, and prevent minor conflicts from escalating. Effective mediation skills and active listening were highlighted as tools that both defuse tensions and reveal critical reports. Embedding officers in grassroots contexts—walking patrols, safety committees, festival attendance—creates ongoing two-way communication, accelerates reporting, and strengthens mutual trust.

Historical Evolution and Discussion of the Characteristics of Exemplary Police Image

Baby Boomers' Emphasis on Moral Integrity

In the early years of the People's Republic of China (the 1950s and 1960s), the legal system was underdeveloped and public literacy was low, making policing highly dependent on individual judgment and ethical self-discipline. This dual vulnerability of history and institutions made morality the primary safeguard against power and wrongful convictions. As one interviewee put it, "Police during the Republican era served class interests, and after 1949, morality was needed to compensate for the legal immaturity" (Interviewee 003). Before the establishment of external oversight mechanisms such as judicial review (such as the reforms around 1979), the public tended to evaluate the police based

on "responsibility, diligence, and integrity." This generation's priorities reflect a lingering institutional memory: when institutions were incomplete, personal virtue was expected to be the cornerstone of legitimacy and credibility, a path that continues to influence contemporary negotiations of legitimacy.

Generation X and Early Millennials Emphasis on Civic Embeddedness

From the end of the Cultural Revolution to the mid-1990s (roughly 1965–1996), with the expansion of legal education and the popularization of compulsory education, public legal awareness rose, and the criteria for evaluating police officers expanded from simple morality to include daily interactions and community engagement. Reflecting on the financial incentives and image damage of the early reform period, interviewees noted that early policing lacked standardized public service etiquette (Interviewee 013). With the stabilization of legal and social order, the public favored a "people-oriented" policing model—one that combines impartial law enforcement with respectful communication, empathy, and patience. As interviewees noted, responsibility is fundamental, and a friendly interpersonal attitude can earn additional trust in police officers (Interviewee 008). Therefore, this generation's ideal police officer is one who integrates ethics and community engagement.

Late Millennials and Gen Z: The Integrated Competency Imperative

Since the late 1990s, legal modernization, digital transformation, and widespread education have fueled public expectations for a comprehensive upgrade in police capabilities. This generation emphasizes ethical and interpersonal skills as necessary but insufficient—technical literacy, cross-disciplinary problem-solving, and visible performance are equally important. Institutional evaluations (such as the multidimensional assessments for "National Outstanding People's Police") incorporate political awareness, professional competence, social responsibility, and public support, reflecting institutional recognition of multifaceted professionalism. As interviewees noted, earlier generations of professionalism have limited effectiveness in the face of insufficient technical literacy (Interviewee 029); others emphasized that contemporary policing requires a "triad of technical operations, interpersonal mediation, and social engineering" (Interviewee 027). Overall, legitimacy in a digital society relies more heavily on visible performance and continuous learning. Excellent police officers are expected to dynamically integrate ethics, relationship building, and technical expertise.

Limitations in construct the Exemplary Police Image

While numerous initiatives have contributed to cultivating a positive police image, several constraints impede their overall effectiveness.These are systemic issues that impact public perception across generations. While each generation may prioritize different attributes, the core institutional flaws are common, so there's no need to distinguish between generations when addressing current issues.

Lack of a Holistic Framework

Current measures for image building—such as mentoring, pre-job and on-the-job training, and rotational positions at the grassroots level—primarily focus on improving individual competencies, but lack a unified management system, organizational structure, and standardized guidelines. Image-related requirements are scattered across various business regulations and job responsibilities, lacking specific policies and authoritative oversight. This fragmentation has hindered the development of replicable, standardized practices. As one interviewee explained, "When reporting a

crime, each police officer followed different procedures, and no one provided clear guidance. In the end, I didn't know who to turn to for help." (Interviewee 030) Overall, the immaturity of institutional design, legal safeguards, and regulatory policies has hindered the systematic advancement of image building.

Insufficiently Comprehensive Standards

Public expectations of police officers demand both strict law enforcement to maintain order and compassionate service to earn their trust. However, a multidimensional standard that balances these two approaches is currently lacking. Consequently, frontline officers often face uncertainty when handling such situations. They risk appearing too forceful and losing support, while also undermining their authority through excessive leniency. One interviewee vividly described this contradiction: "Traffic officers are sometimes serious about issuing tickets, and sometimes smiling and handing out leaflets. Without a clear demarcation between when to be 'tough' and when to be 'soft,' they can easily appear inconsistent or insincere." (Interviewee 005) Therefore, image building needs to shift from a single dimension to a cross-disciplinary and cross-functional standard system, clarifying when procedures should be prioritized and when communication should be prioritized, thereby achieving a coordinated and dynamic balance between law enforcement, professional competence, and interpersonal communication.

Individual Officers' Lack of Image Awareness

While the overall image of the police may be positive, the indifference or dereliction of duty by individual officers can significantly negatively impact public perception. Respondents repeatedly mentioned instances such as perfunctory reception, blunt language, and a negative work attitude; lack of follow-up after reporting a crime; reprimands; and on-duty phone use and a lack of urgency (Respondents 022, 017, and 009). These subtle behaviors often erode public trust more directly than systemic issues. Psychological factors such as burnout and a lack of self-monitoring can exacerbate this problem. However, without image awareness training and individual accountability mechanisms, individuals struggle to recognize the impact of their actions. Therefore, continuous feedback mechanisms, such as community satisfaction surveys and peer reviews, coupled with performance incentives and outstanding recognition, are necessary so that every officer can view image building as part of their professional identity and view daily interactions with the public as opportunities to rebuild public trust.

Discussion

Intergenerational Alignment and the Evolution of the Exemplary Police Image

The exemplary police image is mutually supported by three dimensions: ethical integrity, professional competence, and community embeddedness. These three dimensions not only form the cornerstones of internal legitimacy (ethical training, socialization of values, and legal and tactical competence) but also generate feedback loops of trust or distrust through external public interaction (Tyler, 2003; Bradford et al., 2009). Qualitative data from this study demonstrates that a single dimension is insufficient to maintain an image: high ethics without skills can arouse suspicion (Putra, 2021); technical prowess without a moral foundation can also lack public trust (Turner, 2024). Therefore, constructing an exemplary police image requires not only cultivating personal virtues but also relying on institutional arrangements to transform these virtues into visible and evaluable community practices.

Generational differences reflect shifting priorities within a core of unchanging values. The "Baby Boomers," born between 1946 and 1964, respondents emphasise "absolute morality" — a binary ethic (right/wrong) rooted in formative

socialisation when legal oversight was limited, reputations and visible virtue were primary trust signals, and cultural norms stressed duty. For them, moral absolutes mean judging police by personal integrity and visible exemplary conduct rather than abstract procedural indicators. This suggests that image-repair for this cohort should foreground tangible moral exemplars while linking those symbolic gestures to institutional safeguards..

Generation X and early millennials, born between 1965 and 1996, grew up during a period of rapid social and institutional change. Marketization, urbanization, and community policing drove the increasing importance of daily interpersonal networks and the quality of grassroots services. Consequently, they place greater emphasis on relational trust—trust in police officers who demonstrate reliability, respectful communication, and active community engagement. This is because, in uncertain environments, these concrete interactions can better demonstrate the competence and predictability of police officers.

Late Millennials and Generation Z, who grew up after 1996, demand a balanced approach between ethics, interpersonal relationships, and technology in the context of digitalization and hybrid security threats.Generation Z demands this balanced approach because, as digital natives, they expect rapid, transparent, and verifiable accountability while facing a mix of online and offline security threats. Their frequent use of social media, coupled with numerous high-profile incidents, has spurred them to excel at verifying and disclosing information. Therefore, visible procedures and measurable performance are crucial. At the same time, hybrid threats like cyberthreats, misinformation, and cross-border crime demand technical expertise, while daily collaboration relies on interpersonal trust. These factors combine to foster a preference for a policing model that demonstrates ethical, relational, and technological proficiency.

The findings also point to a broader theoretical claim about the evolving basis of state legitimacy: across cohorts, the grounds of trust appear to be shifting from person-centred moral evaluations toward institution-centred assessments of procedural fairness and technical competence. In older cohorts trust is more readily anchored in perceived moral character and interpersonal integrity; in younger cohorts, by contrast, legitimacy increasingly depends on visible, systematized indicators of performance and accountability. This generational transition resonates with classic sociological distinctions between personalistic and legal-rational sources of authority (Weber,1978), and it aligns with procedural justice perspectives that foreground fair procedures and transparency as key determinants of legitimacy (Tyler,1990). Framing our empirical patterns in these terms clarifies that image work is not merely reputational management but reflects deeper structural shifts in how citizens judge authority — a shift with direct implications for what kinds of reforms will be perceived as legitimate by different cohorts.

Three major societal changes underpin this evolution. First, the shift from centralized to networked governance, which has made policing a partner in co-governance; second, the fragmentation of the media landscape, which has increased public expectations for transparency; and finally, the shift from a localized threat landscape to a diversified one, which underscores the necessity of professional expertise.

This suggests that image building should not be limited to discrete training or ad hoc activities, but should form performance guidelines that coordinate internal organizational development, such as codes of ethics and certifications, with external engagement, such as co-creation platforms and real-time feedback. This should permeate recruitment,

assessment, and leadership evaluation processes, thereby establishing a unified attribution framework between ethical, professional, and relational capabilities.

New Path: Complementary Strategies for Building an Exemplary Police Image

Establishing a sustainable image across generations and contemporary demands requires three interconnected paths: leveraging leadership as a cultural catalyst, fostering an institutionalized organizational ecosystem, and stimulating individual initiative.

Leaders must exemplify values and assume measurable accountability. Senior commanders should demonstrate integrity, professionalism, and community orientation in patrol and crisis response. Community trust audits and procedural fairness indicators must be embedded in performance and promotion evaluations (DiNapoli et al., 2019; Cockcroft, 2014) to transform exemplary behavior from a slogan into an institutional consideration.

Organizational ecosystems should embed ethics, competence, and community engagement into daily processes: first, establish recognition and mentoring mechanisms to strengthen role modelling; second, reshape performance management by incorporating indicators such as citizen satisfaction and procedural fairness into assessments to mitigate the bias of evaluations focused on arrest counts (Rosenbaum, 2025); third, incorporate victim-centred procedures and restitution pathways—responding to documented victim neglect—to ensure that front-line practice prioritises repair as well as enforcement, and provide targeted training and accessible support services for marginalised populations so reforms address differential harms and help rebuild legitimacy among vulnerable groups (Eze et al,, 2020; Sherazi et al, 2023); fourth, incorporate core values into recruitment, training, and scenario-based exercises to ensure that leadership visions are translated into concrete actions; and finally, strengthen transparency and ongoing evaluation through regular community surveys and public dashboards (Minelli & Ruffini, 2018).

At the individual level, a balance must be struck between empowerment and accountability: police officers should be involved in setting development goals and empowered to creatively solve problems. Monitoring and targeted coaching should also be implemented, along with peer review and reflection mechanisms such as after-action sessions to disseminate experience and foster self-awareness (Prenzler et al., 2013). Publicly recognizing small, tangible acts of kindness can closely link individual behavior with organizational credibility, encouraging every officer to consider building their image as a professional duty (Botha,2023).

In summary, only by synergistically embedding leadership demonstration, institutionalized ecology, and individual initiative into policing practice can the image of exemplary police officers be continuously shaped and maintained under different generational expectations and changing social conditions.

Conclusion

In answer to the four guiding questions, citizens depict "exemplary police officers" in three interrelated dimensions—moral integrity , professional competence , and civic embeddedness; these dimensions vary by cohort, with older generations privileging individual moral character, middle cohorts emphasising reliable relational service, and younger cohorts demanding visible, institution-level markers of procedural fairness, technical proficiency, and digital responsiveness. The main obstacles to a positive image are fragmented frameworks, conflicting enforcement–service

incentives, and uneven officer-level awareness—conditions that are magnified by high-profile adverse events and perceived opacity. To overcome these gaps, a coordinated, multilevel public-placement strategy is required: institutionalise leadership with clear accountability metrics; build organisational ecosystems that translate values into shared practices, common metrics, and visible role models; and cultivate individual agency through co-created goals, peer reflection, and recognition. Mapping solutions onto problems makes the pathway persuasive: organisational ecosystems directly remedy fragmented frameworks by creating routine, shared protocols; accountability metrics align incentives to resolve enforcement–service conflicts; and officer empowerment addresses uneven awareness by enabling public-facing competence. Embedding procedural fairness indicators into performance assessments creates the visible, quantifiable accountability younger cohorts expect. Together, these steps both revise theoretical understandings of shifting legitimacy—from person-centred morality to institution-centred procedure—and provide a cohort-sensitive, actionable roadmap for rebuilding police image and trust.

These three paths—top-down leadership culture, mid-level organizational design, and bottom-up individual police agency—reinforce each other. For example, the Baby Boomer generation's emphasis on ethical leadership can be achieved through clear ethical standards and accountability, while the younger generation's focus on procedural fairness and expertise can be addressed through ongoing training and community feedback loops. In short, building an exemplary police image requires both a stable, values-driven structure and empowered individuals. Leaders must foster a culture in which ethical behavior and skilled service become intrinsic to the force's operational culture.. This integrated approach, grounded in research findings and supported by policing studies, provides a sustainable roadmap for enhancing public trust and legitimacy.

This study has four key contributions. First, it develops a public psychology paradigm that transcends traditional public relations and legitimacy models and integrates the cognitive and affective mechanisms of image formation. Second, its dual-mode qualitative research method, combining structured interviews with Jungian free-association tasks, captures both explicit cognitions and implicit mental schemas, generating a rich local dataset. Third, we propose an anthropomorphic model that views the police organization as an organic whole: leadership (the "head"), systems and processes (the "body"), and individual officers (the "lifeblood") must develop in synergy. Fourth, by examining the standards and formation of excellent police images in China, we provide a Chinese perspective for international research on police image and offer a reference and comparison for developing police image across different countries. At the same time, we acknowledge several limitations: our purposive and snowball sampling methods favored participants with network connections in urban areas, potentially underrepresenting the perspectives of rural and ethnic minorities; the free-association task may have tended to elicit socially desirable descriptions; and the cross-sectional design can only capture static images and cannot track changes during periods of crisis or reform.

Looking ahead, we recommend four specific avenues for further research. First, generalizability studies should test our tripartite model in underrepresented contexts, such as rural provinces in western China and ethnic minority areas, to assess its robustness across diverse cultural and geographic settings. Researchers could collaborate with local institutions to conduct simultaneous qualitative and quantitative surveys to compare how the core dimensions manifest themselves in diverse social settings. Second, quantitative validation is needed: developing a standardized survey instrument to translate concepts such as the normative foundation, capacity framework, and civic inclusion into operational indicators, and then analyzing their predictive power on outcomes such as public trust, complaint rates, and

citizens' willingness to cooperate in crime prevention. Structural equation modeling can clarify the relative impact of each dimension on trust and legitimacy. Third, intervention evaluations should pilot and rigorously evaluate targeted image-building initiatives and measure their impact on crime statistics, community satisfaction indices, and intergenerational differences in trust. Randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs would enhance causal inferences. Fourth, the research could be expanded to encompass different countries and conduct cross-sectional comparisons to broaden the international perspective and longer-term significance of this topic. Through these future research directions, scholars and practitioners can refine our theoretical framework, validate its applicability, and identify the most effective strategies to jointly construct a dynamic and publicly trusted image of the police in China's changing social environment.

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