

# ***Interest in Studying Prisons: Understanding the Lack of Motivation in Penological Education in China***

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the phenomenon of the lack of motivation in the field of prison studies in China, a condition manifested among students, researchers, and practitioners alike. Drawing from the perspectives of these three groups, it argues that the perceived dullness of prison studies is not merely a pedagogical issue or a reflection of student apathy, but a symptom of a deeper structural problem within the discipline's epistemology and knowledge system. The paper contends that penological education in China have become overly objectified and narrowly oriented toward solving practical or administrative problems, neglecting its broader theoretical and humanistic dimensions. This utilitarian orientation has led to a disconnection between cognitive activity and subjective interest, turning research and learning into alienated forms of intellectual labor. Through engagement with critical theory—particularly the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas's concept of knowledge and human interests—the paper explores how genuine academic vitality arises when cognition is guided by emancipatory interests, and proposes three pathways for revitalizing the discipline in China: (1) critically reassessing the historical and institutional foundations of prison studies; (2) integrating it into wider social-scientific and theoretical frameworks; and (3) diversifying its relationship with practice beyond administrative agendas.

## **1. Introduction**

Among today's students majoring in prison studies, it is not difficult to observe this phenomenon: courses in this discipline are often regarded as dull burdens—long lectures and tasteless reviews and exams that must be endured merely to earn the required credits. Indeed, weariness toward learning among contemporary university students is nothing new. Yet on campus there is no shortage of popular courses filled to capacity, with eager auditors crowding the back rows—when the content interests them and meets their needs, young learners rarely hold back their enthusiasm. However, courses and lectures related to prison studies almost never appear on these lists of favorites. In students' perception, compared with those brilliant and sought-after courses, the color spectrum of prison studies appears uniformly gray. If one happens to be on the roll call list, the only option is to grit one's teeth and persist, hoping merely to survive the chill radiating from each weekly—or even more frequent—"prison-time" session. Pleasure, needless to say, is seldom part of the process.

Some may argue that the predicament faced by prison studies is nothing more than the common fate of all "unpopular" majors today. Researchers in other fields—linguistics or archaeology, for

instance—sometimes face an even worse situation than students’ indifference: empty classrooms and painful struggles to recruit students. Others may point out that a considerable portion of students majoring in prison studies were admitted through program adjustments (a fact that itself reveals something), while many others attend as part of job-training assignments imposed by their work units, and thus naturally lack intrinsic motivation. Yet can labeling prison studies as a marginal discipline, or citing the background of its students, fully explain their sense that the subject is “uninteresting” and their passive attitude of merely getting through without engagement? In some other majors that also suffer low enrollment—such as archaeology or linguistics—there is no shortage of highly motivated students deeply devoted to study, even attracting transfers from other departments by those who find genuine academic fascination in the field. If a student of finance transfers to linguistics, the typical reaction is a mix of regret and admiration: regret for the dimmer financial prospects, admiration for the steadfast pursuit of academic passion. Clearly, the so-called “unpopularity” of a major does not necessarily correspond to its intrinsic appeal; the former merely reflects a temporary social evaluation based on utilitarian concerns.

But does such “intrinsic appeal” hold true for the field of prison studies? Unfortunately, the kind of inspiring examples mentioned above are rarely seen here. In fact, the lack of motivation is not limited to students of prison studies—it extends to the scholars themselves. A direct indication is that the current body of active research and publication in prison studies is still dominated by senior scholars, while few among the younger generation are willing to devote themselves to the field (Wang Xuefeng & Gao Chang: 2024)<sup>[1]</sup>. Moreover, existing prison-studies researchers often intentionally shift to other areas. In exchanges with colleagues, the author has met scholars who once made substantial contributions to prison research but have now moved into criminal law and criminal procedure studies, as well as researchers who openly express the intention to “return to criminal law in the very end.” The reasons behind such moves or intentions, to some degree, resonate with the students’ own feelings: although they have achieved some results, their academic interest has been stifled, and thus they seek beyond prison studies a broader, more “interesting,” and more intellectually stimulating territory—usually the rapidly developing field of legal research (Wang Zhiliang: 2024)<sup>[2]</sup>.

This seems to suggest that the phenomenon we have described has deeper roots than mere student laziness or the “unpopularity” of the subject. It concerns not only factors outside the discipline but also its internal structure. The “lack of interest” in prison studies involves more than students’ learning experience—it is closely related to the discipline’s prospects for innovative development. From the perspective of disciplinary dynamics, this article will examine the main factors that have led to the current “uninteresting” state of prison studies, and, from the perspective of the relationship between interest and knowledge, discuss several key issues that must be recognized and addressed for prison studies research to overcome its existing limitations.

## **2. Interest in ‘knowing’: a reflection of the current discipline of prison studies in China**

Is it important whether a discipline is “interesting” or “uninteresting”? This question relates to the issue of the relationship between cognitive activity and cognitive “interest.” In the positivist tradition of the social sciences, knowledge is assumed to be neutral or “value-free,” a mere objective reflection of the object of cognition. If one adopts this view, the researcher’s subjective feelings have little to do with the content of knowledge itself, for the progress of knowledge follows its own internal logic and is measured by its degree of correspondence to the objective world. The knower or researcher merely lends intelligence and effort to make this process possible. The difference between an active, engaged researcher and one who is lazy or timid lies only in the speed of knowledge accumulation, not in its nature or truth value. Accordingly, whether a discipline is interesting or not has no substantial impact on the progress of its knowledge development. “Lack of interest” is merely a

personal feeling of the knower—if it dampens initiative, it can be offset by other forms of motivation.

In contrast to this positivist view that sharply separates knowledge from the knowing subject, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School—represented by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer—argued that knowledge and the knower exist in a dialectical relationship<sup>[3]</sup>. Knowledge does not possess neutrality and objectivity independent of cognitive and practical activities. Cognition is not merely the reflection of objective things or the discovery of laws governing their operation, nor should the pursuit of objective knowledge be taken as an unquestioned goal. Rather, cognition occurs within the social world, as a concrete link participating in the construction of social relations (including class relations). From this perspective, cognitive activity should not be understood as a detached process of adding bricks to the edifice of human knowledge, but as an action with specific practical orientation and value implication. Just as human action is always driven by motives and interests, interest is an essential dimension of cognition itself. Cognitive activity that maintains a healthy and dynamic theoretical-practical dialectic must be characterized by being well driven by interest—it becomes a source of energy and expectation for the subject, rather than a dull, joyless, and unrewarding labor.

Jürgen Habermas, inheriting this idea of critical theory, argued in his book *Knowledge and Human Interests* that interest is the foundation of cognition and guides cognitive activity; scientific development itself is driven by interest as well. Habermas identified three types of interests in cognitive activity: technical interest, practical interest, and emancipatory interest. The technical interest corresponds to humanity's desire to free itself from the threats of natural forces and to control nature for its own benefit; the practical interest corresponds to the human need to sustain communal life, achieve mutual understanding, and reach normative consensus; and the emancipatory interest corresponds to humanity's pursuit of individual freedom—liberation from the objectifying and dependent relations that pervade the social world. The representative sciences driven by these three interests are respectively the natural sciences, historical sciences and hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis and critical theory.

One major task of critical theory is to reveal the dominance of technical thinking—and the technical interest behind it—in modern society, and the impact this dominance has on the domains of human practice and life. In cognitive and scientific activity, this manifests as the unreflective positivist method becoming the prevailing standard of scientific research, with knowledge assumed to be neutral and detached from human interest. Meanwhile, deeper inquiry into human practical relations, the building of bridges for intersubjective understanding, and the exposure of the constraining and oppressive forces experienced by individuals—all in the name of human emancipation—fail to receive adequate responses under the dominance of technical thinking and are pushed to the margins<sup>[4]</sup>.

What, then, is the significance of this debate on the relationship between cognition and interest for contemporary prison studies?

First, although the phenomenon discussed at the beginning of this paper—the “unpopularity” of prison studies courses among students—has existed for a long time, it has rarely drawn special attention from prison-studies scholars, nor has it become a topic for disciplinary reflection. This neglect reflects the mainstream epistemological tendency within the field: that the fundamental task of prison studies is to achieve a correct understanding of penal issues and to provide effective guidance for prison practice. The standard of success is accuracy, efficacy, and truth—not the satisfaction of the researcher's personal interest.

For this reason, when students of prison studies complain that the courses are boring or uninteresting, such attitudes are often viewed as disrespectful or even offensive to the academic enterprise. Since one has chosen prison studies as a scholarly vocation, personal feelings should give way to the objective advancement of knowledge—even if the process lacks the elements that inspire most people spiritually. Here we can clearly see that the positivist presupposition separating “interest”

from “knowing” has, in fact, become the default mode of operation in today’s prison studies in China.

A possible objection to this argument is that prison studies does not entirely exclude the element of “interest.” On the contrary, as a highly practical discipline, its success precisely depends on a sensitivity to the problems that arise in practice and an interest in finding solutions to them. Yet such interest is public in nature—often non-personal. It concerns, for example, questions such as: What are the social benefits and drawbacks of prisons as institutions for crime control? What is the legitimate basis and proper limits of prisoners’ rights? How can community-based sentences be carried out most effectively to prevent reoffending while ensuring fairness and legality? These questions, of course, may coincide with personal research interests, but that is not the key point. The key lies in the fact that they relate to public interests and needs, and that the fulfillment of these needs constitutes the fundamental driving force behind the development of prison studies as a discipline. From this perspective, the personal feelings of students and researchers are not an issue of the discipline itself but of the individual. A good student or researcher ought to be passionate and interested in the field of study; conversely, to complain that the courses or research are dull is regarded as a sign of incompetence.

This view, in fact, reveals a deeper problem—namely, that prison studies has been fundamentally structured after the empiricist-scientific model oriented toward “control,” with a dominant technical interest directed at solving concrete problems. This tendency can be traced back to the predecessor of prison studies in China—Laodong Gaizao Xue (the Study of Reform Through Labor). At its inception, this discipline was established to serve the policy of reforming criminals and political offenders through labor that had been in place since the socialist transformation movement of the 1950s. Its purpose was to study how to achieve the goals of reeducation and ideological reform. The concept of “reform through labor” itself was inherited from Soviet penal policy and its class-based approach to crime control, and it developed specific operational methods and evaluative criteria—applied in the reform of war criminals, former members of old social classes, and criminal offenders alike. In practice, it indeed contributed significantly to the sharp decline in conventional crime rates in the early years of the People’s Republic of China. The emergence and development of the Study of Reform Through Labor aimed to theorize this practical model—to clarify its conditions and sources of success, and to provide detailed policy guidance and theoretical support for its continued implementation.

Since 1980s, the growing influence of the rule-of-law movement has profoundly reshaped the field of penal administration. The principles of legality in punishment and protection of human rights gradually became the mainstream of prison reform. However, the core disciplinary framework, theoretical orientation, and methodological approach of the Study of Reform Through Labor continued in its successor—modern prison studies. In essence, the current understanding of the role of prison studies has not substantially changed from its predecessor: it remains a primarily practical discipline serving the work of prisoner reform, with its chief audience being prison administrators and policymakers in criminal justice. Similarly, the value of academic research in this field is largely measured by its practical relevance and utility for prison work. Under these conditions, it is easy to understand why the dominant interest of prison studies is institutional and public in orientation—an interest in serving public needs.

Then, is it redundant—or even inappropriate—to criticize a field of research dedicated to public service for being “uninteresting” or “boring”? Yet, as our earlier discussion of cognition and interest has shown, when technical rationality or instrumental interest becomes the sole driving force of inquiry in a given field, the consequence is the suppression and marginalization of other cognitive interests and sources of intellectual vitality, leading eventually to distortions within the field itself.

Here, we must pay particular attention to the fact that the domain of prison studies encompasses more than prisons as institutions, their established guiding principles and operational models, and the

practical problems encountered in their administration. It also involves the foundational principles of law enforcement organizations, as well as the conceptual controversies and normative ambiguities that underlie the very existence of such institutions. In other words, prisons and penal enforcement differ fundamentally from the objects of natural-scientific research: in the cognitive process of prison studies, we inevitably confront matters that concern the relationships between subjects and between persons. When addressing normative questions, we cannot act as mere observers or outsiders—because the cognition of prison studies, in its very essence, is bound up with our self-understanding as human subjects.

Thus, when prison research is driven purely by technical interest and approaches problems in prison work from a supposedly neutral and observational standpoint, it largely relegates to irrelevance those interests that aim to promote mutual understanding among subjects, to engage in debates over what constitutes shared norms, or to seek the spiritual emancipation of the subject. In this way, it becomes a discipline concerned with resolving disputes rather than raising them. Technical rationality excludes the subject and the spirit, and as a result, it restricts the potential of cognitive–practical activity within the field. The symptoms of this restriction are subtly reflected in the silent resistance of the knowers themselves—in the yawns and absenteeism of prison studies students that we so often observe.

Therefore, the aforementioned phenomenon of “lack of interest” in prison studies is not without foundation in the discipline’s own internal operation. It may not so much reflect students’ laziness or aversion to study as it reveals deficiencies in the discipline’s motivational structure and research model. In what follows, we will provide more detailed examples and analysis to support this view, and then discuss how the current problems in prison studies might be addressed—specifically, what kinds of approaches or frameworks could genuinely reconcile the researcher’s intellectual interest with the generation of a more robust driving force for the discipline’s development.

### 3. The sources of ‘dullness’ in penological education and prison studies

#### 3.1 Dullness of prison studies from the perspective of students

First, let us take a closer look at what prison studies students actually mean when they complain that their courses are “uninteresting.” From the students’ perspective, the feeling of frustration or avoidance often arises the moment they open a textbook in the field—whether it be *General Theories of Prisons*, *Inmates Education*, *Penal Administration Law*, or *Correctional Theory*. It is not that the topics themselves are inherently off-putting. On the contrary, many students enjoy watching films and television dramas centered on crime and prison life (in fact, short clips from such works, when shown in class, are often far more popular than the lectures themselves). If we trace the source of this dampened enthusiasm, we may find it in the following contrast: many popular crime- or prison-themed screen works—regardless of whether they faithfully depict “reality” or distort it—excel at providing the audience with a sense of identification and immersion, as though they are personally experiencing the brutality of crime or the despair of prison life. Prison studies textbooks, by contrast, do exactly the opposite. Wrapped in layers of academic terminology, the reality of the prison has already been distanced from the subject; it becomes an object to be defined, explained, and analyzed. The neatly ordered chapter titles and contents further tell students that everything one needs to know about prisons has already been systematically categorized—this is a completed work. Indeed, when students turn the pages, what they read are finished theories and arguments that bear no immediate relation to themselves. Although these theories are carefully reasoned and articulated, they seldom evoke any sense of identification in the reader; instead, they reinforce the impression that everything about prisons has been exhaustively examined and studied, that established views (and even established controversies) already exist—so there is nothing more for the student, as reader or learner,

to do.

On the other hand, these “completed” materials, which demand no further contribution from the reader, are also highly rationalized—or, “disenchanted” in Max Weber’s sense. The mystery and dramatic tension that surround prisons in popular culture have been reduced to plain, factual descriptions that conform to the logic of reality—and are therefore dull. Such “facts” have little overlap with most students’ lived experience and fail to evoke any sense of personal involvement (after all, few students have firsthand experience as inmates or prison staff). Whereas in the field of criminology there is a particular theoretical tradition to understand the phenomena of crime as certain routine activities which by no means distinguish themselves inherently from “ordinary” patterns of social behavior<sup>[5]</sup>, in prison studies the tendency to demystify the dynamics of penal practice in prison and give them a rational look has been ubiquitous across the whole discipline, particularly in the field of administrative penology which plays a dominant role in prison studies in China. Even for those who expect to work in correctional institutions in the future, the content remains uninspiring—it is merely a theoretical presentation of what their future work and environment might look like.

The same applies to prison-related courses themselves. As long as studies defines their mission as the objective description and theorization of prison phenomena and functions, no matter what pedagogical techniques the instructor employs, it is difficult to prevent students from perceiving the object of study as something alien. Even when they master this knowledge skillfully, they still do not see it as something intrinsically connected to themselves—it is merely a tool of practical use. Yet the process of acquiring this tool is tedious and monotonous.

We can thus reach a preliminary conclusion: the students’ sense of “boredom” in learning arises from the fact that prison studies become a body of objectified knowledge detached from the subject. The cognitive process of mastering this system can no longer be linked with the knower’s own interest in personal spiritual emancipation or in promoting the progress of social relations. Do prison studies have other possible forms of knowledge to offer? This question will be explored in detail in the third part of this paper.

### 3.2 Dullness of prison studies from the perspective of researchers

Starting from the students’ experience, we have, in fact, already encountered certain characteristics—or problems—of the cognitive and research approaches within the field of prison studies. These issues equally affect researchers. As mentioned earlier, many scholars of prison studies in China are rather reluctant to treat it as their primary academic vocation, preferring instead to identify themselves as researchers in the broader domain of criminal law. Apart from the intellectual attraction of the “integrated criminal science” approach, an important reason behind this phenomenon is that prison studies itself are widely regarded as a lower-tier field of research, with limited academic appeal. Consequently, many scholars of prison studies tend to develop an intention to “eventually return to criminal law,” moving toward a more orthodox and academically prestigious discipline.

How did such a perception arise? Clearly, it cannot be attributed to the research subject or topic itself, since high-quality scholarly work does not discriminate among objects of study—indeed, valuable and influential results often emerge precisely from obscure or neglected topics. As the core institutional focus of the field of penal enforcement, the importance of prison research has long been acknowledged in modern scholarship. Therefore, the reason must lie within the discipline of prison studies itself, in its research methods and disciplinary condition. The concept of cognitive interest discussed in this paper provides a useful lens through which to analyze this issue.

The phenomenon of “lack of interest” in prison studies is thus also worthy of examination. The limited enthusiasm and spontaneous support that prison studies receive from scholars are largely the result of its failure to effectively stimulate and sustain researchers’ genuine interest. Although

researchers are more familiar with the field than students and are therefore less likely to feel intimidated by its terminology and theoretical apparatus, they are nonetheless bound by a pre-established conceptual framework and conventional research methods—frameworks that define the objects of study, the key debates, and the evaluative standards of research outcomes. In terms of cognitive processes, both students and researchers confront a system of knowledge that stands apart from themselves, lacking intrinsic connection. The difference is that, unlike students who passively receive it, researchers must actively expand this system, extending its boundaries and adding new layers according to its internal logic. Most academic and institutional resources are directed toward advancing the discipline along this predetermined path. Although such research can yield various forms of recognition and reward, it remains largely detached from the researcher's inner intellectual interest.

If we look back at the historical development and intellectual lineage of modern prison studies, we will find that the early theorists of prisons and punishment—ranging from Enlightenment-era penal philosophers to later social theorists concerned with prisons—approached the subject from a far broader and more universal set of interests. They linked prison issues to fundamental problems of modern society. In exploring questions such as why the modern prison emerged and evolved, what penal principles underlie its operation, what techniques it employs for management and control, and how prison reform is shaped by social and economic forces, these scholars were simultaneously engaging with universal concerns: the nature of political relations under modern conditions (the relation between power and the individual), the constraints imposed on human subjects by macro-social forces, the foundations of justice, and even the existential situation of the modern individual. All of these inquiries resonated closely with the researchers' own intellectual passions and concerns (e.g. Durkheim: 1933<sup>[6]</sup>, Rusche and Kirchheimer: 1939<sup>[7]</sup>, Foucault: 1977<sup>[8]</sup>).

By contrast, contemporary prison studies mainly revolve around relatively fixed agendas aimed at solving specific practical problems. Although such research produces tangible results, it primarily reflects instrumental and utilitarian demands. In this cognitive process, the researcher functions more as a provider of intellectual labor for the attainment of externally defined, value-neutral objectives—fulfilling the informational and technical needs of prison administration rather than pursuing questions that arise from intrinsic scholarly interest.

Nevertheless, compared with students, researchers occupy a relatively freer position. After all, they can choose their research directions and methods, and thus possess some room to transcend objectified modes of cognition. However, efforts toward such transcendence face significant obstacles. Beyond the general scarcity of resources for genuine academic innovation, researchers must contend with the powerful gravitational pull exerted by the institutional forces shaping the development of prison studies—from the establishment of its conceptual framework to the definition of its research goals. That pull originates from the dominant role played by prison administrators and practitioners in setting the discipline's research agenda. As early as the founding of "reform through labor" studies, the disciplinary agenda was designed primarily to address specific issues arising in prison practice. Therefore, to understand the problem of interest within prison-studies research, we must inevitably examine its relationship with the field of practice itself.

### 3.3 Dullness of prison studies from the perspective of practitioners

If the majority of prison-studies researchers have, in effect, detached their cognitive activity and intellectual interest from their work by following research agendas largely driven by prison administrative authorities, then frontline practitioners who directly engage with inmates would seem to possess a more immediate and practical motivation to pursue knowledge related to prisons—since such knowledge bears directly on their daily work and its effectiveness. Yet in reality, most research

outcomes in prison studies fail to generate significant appeal even among practitioners. Much like students of prison studies, these frontline workers often maintain a respectful yet distant attitude toward the carefully constructed theories and conclusions of the discipline. In their daily operations, reliance on past experience plays a far greater role than reliance on the body of knowledge produced by prison studies.

Why, then, does prison studies struggle even to awaken cognitive interest among frontline practitioners? One possible reason resembles the situation of both students and researchers: the knowledge of prison studies that practitioners encounter has become a fully objectified system—its categories of problems and corresponding solutions are already fixed, detached from the individual's own needs and interests. As professionals, prison workers are obliged to master the cognitive content and tools required for their field; yet as individuals who live within the realities of life, who seek to break free from the constraining forces of social relations, and who pursue spiritual freedom and self-emancipation, they find little assistance in the existing achievements of prison studies. In studying and applying these results, practitioners, like students, tend to experience the knowledge system as an external demand rather than a call of personal interest—it represents necessity, not freedom.

On the other hand, the absence of subjective interest is not confined to the sphere of cognition; it also manifests within the realm of prison practice itself. Although in recent years China has made considerable progress in prison reform and modernization, most efforts have concentrated on improving hardware conditions and addressing specific institutional issues. What remains absent is a compelling vision or ideal of prison practice—something capable of inspiring public admiration or mobilizing collective effort. In other words, within the design and understanding of the penal system as a whole, the orientation of China's prison administration tends to be conservative. When compared with the penal reform movements of the early modern era, one finds a striking contrast: reformers and practitioners of that time were animated by a concrete imagination of the future, which they linked with a passionate drive for action. By contrast, contemporary prison practice largely lacks such “imagination of the future”; what predominates instead are routine-bound or piecemeal reform plans that deal merely with immediate issues.

For today's prison practitioners, their scope of work is already delimited by a fixed set of agendas and behavioral guidelines: how inmates should be perceived, what kinds of conduct deserve reward or punishment, how learning and labor should be distributed, and so forth—all these questions have been predefined and answered within the supposedly objective body of knowledge called prison studies. Yet this mode of cognition concerns not the subject; rather, it drops a veil between the practitioner and the lived reality of the penal world, severing the immediate link that should connect them. It also blocks the very source of subjective interest that could drive both understanding and practice. In effect, the absence of such interest not only leads to stagnation in the cognitive realm but also hinders progress in prison practice itself—weakening the impetus for both intellectual innovation and institutional reform.

## **4. Understanding the motivational factors generated by the self-orientation of prison studies as a discipline**

### **4.1 ‘Interest in knowing’ in prison studies and the possibility of its re-defining**

In the foregoing discussion, we examined the phenomenon and origins of the “uninteresting” character of prison studies from the perspectives of students, researchers, and practitioners. We found that in all three cases, the disconnection between cognitive activity and the subject's intrinsic interest stems from a shared cause: prison studies have become overly inclined to define itself, through fixed and objectified models, as a means of solving specific technical problems, while neglecting to integrate the study and understanding of prisons into a broader relationship between cognition and

practice. As a result, whether they are researchers or frontline workers, when they engage in the study or reflection of prison issues, they are compelled to confront a set of neutral theoretical discourses and agendas—discourses that are detached from their own practical and emancipatory interests—and must address problems in prison practice within this predetermined framework. Such cognitive activity is, in essence, a form of alienated labor. It is thus not surprising that all three types of actors discussed above—students, researchers, and practitioners—often display symptoms of fatigue and react to their work with a sense of “boredom,” much like workers on an assembly line.

When cognitive interest is narrowly focused on objectifying knowledge and pursuing utility, it does not necessarily contribute effectively to practical work or the resolution of real-world problems. In prison research and practice, such objectified cognition has, in fact, resulted in the rigidification of thought: most energy is spent dealing with problems and advancing institutional reforms within established frameworks, while the need to reflect on the prison system within the broader context of social relations has been largely marginalized. This mode of cognition strengthens technical knowledge of details within the prison system, but produces what might be called an “intensified one-sidedness”—the tendency to replace holistic understanding with fragmented, specialized knowledge. The outcome, therefore, is not a deeper insight into the reality of the prison, but rather a greater obscuring of its true nature.

The disconnection between cognitive activity and the subject’s interest inevitably undermines the developmental vitality of the discipline itself. As noted earlier, the absence of subjective interest leads to intellectual stagnation and a rigid knowledge structure, making it difficult to attract new energy and creativity into the field. In the long term, disciplines with genuine prospects for growth are those driven by interest and freedom, rather than by mere necessity. Therefore, if the discipline of prison studies is to possess sustainable and healthy vitality, it must begin by reflecting on how its cognitive subjects—students, scholars, and practitioners—can break free from the state of “disinterest” and the separation of knowledge from interest.

The key to transforming this situation lies in redefining the relationship between cognition and interest in prison studies—that is, in liberating the construction of knowledge from a purely utilitarian orientation so that it can genuinely respond to the cognitive interests of the knowing subject. In the context of China’s disciplinary development, achieving this transformation requires abandoning the long-standing model—dating back to the science of “reform through labor”—in which research agendas were largely determined by the administrative needs of the prison system. Instead, the discipline should evolve toward a model of development driven by more universal practical and emancipatory interests. Only through such a transformation can the disjunction between cognition and interest be fundamentally resolved, injecting enduring vitality into the growth of the field.

Finally, reorienting the cognitive activity of prison studies—from one subordinate to the agenda of administrative practice toward one guided by broader human interests—will also benefit prison practice and the prison institution itself. Compared with the objectified cognitive model, such an approach is better equipped to overcome rigid patterns of thought and entrenched preconceptions within the field, thereby providing more valuable insights and theoretical guidance for genuine reform and innovation in prison administration.

## **4.2 The approaches to transform cognitive interest and rebuild motivation in prison studies**

How, then, can the transformation of prison studies’ cognitive activity and its relation to subjective interest be practically achieved? Below, three main approaches are proposed as preliminary suggestions toward addressing this question.

First, it is essential to conduct a critical reflection on the traditional institutional structure of prison studies, in which the research agenda has long been set by prison administrative authorities. Through

a historical review of the discipline and an in-depth analysis of the theory–practice relationship, the origins of prevailing assumptions and existing knowledge structures should be clarified, with particular attention to how understandings of prison issues have been shaped by objectifying and control-oriented cognitive models. Such critical reflection would have the following effect: the commonly accepted and rarely questioned presuppositions of the discipline would be shaken and reexamined. This “deconstructive” approach—beginning with the task of clearing away the old—would help remove obstacles for the construction of new modes of cognition in prison studies.

Second, new theoretical perspectives and research approaches should be introduced into the field of prison studies—those that better associated with universal human interests and enable the discipline to situate its problems within a broader map of modern social inquiry and normative theory. The goal is to free prison studies from the narrow framework of utilitarian problem-solving, allowing it to reflect a wider range of cognitive interests. At the same time, this would promote the expansion of the discipline’s scope and enhance its intersections with other social sciences, transforming it into a field characterized by broad-based concerns and multidisciplinary vision.

Third, it is necessary to reduce the excessive dependence of prison-studies research on prison administrative authorities and to achieve a pluralistic engagement between research topics and the sphere of practice. At present, the research agenda of prison studies remains heavily influenced by the operational needs of the justice administration, while feedback from administrative departments continues to occupy a disproportionately decisive role in evaluating academic outcomes. This situation reinforces the discipline’s one-sided alignment with utilitarian demands and deepens its separation from broader subjective interests. Conversely, other stakeholders in the penal process—inmates, victims, community workers, family members, other affected individuals, and even the general public—have yet to gain the same degree of influence over prison-studies discourse as the governing authorities. Integrating these diverse actors and social relations into the cognitive framework of prison studies would effectively counteract the rigidification and objectification of knowledge. Multiple standpoints and voices could also help prevent the emergence of unilateral agenda-setting and the “intensified one-sidedness” that grows beneath it.

The three approaches outlined above are most effective when pursued in coordination and mutual reinforcement. Together, they can facilitate the transformation of cognitive interest and revitalize the developmental momentum of the discipline. Moreover, any additional methods that help to break the old, utility-dominated disciplinary framework and strengthen the connection between prison-studies research and the subject’s intrinsic interests can also serve the same purpose and work in concert with the three strategies proposed here.

## 5. Conclusion

For teachers and researchers of prison studies, the students’ evasive behavior and passive attitude described at the beginning of this paper are undoubtedly a bitter pill to swallow. If there were a way to make the students learn their lesson the hard way—to forcibly turn each of them into the very opposite of what they are now—perhaps even the most despairing prison-studies teachers would gladly resort to it. Yet, as readers of this paper will have understood by now, the problem of prison studies being “uninteresting” does not lie in the students’ behavior; its roots lie within the structure of disciplinary knowledge and the mode of cognitive activity itself. Nor is it merely a common educational frustration—it is closely bound to the very dynamics of the discipline’s development.

At the conclusion of this paper, we hope that this bitter medicine may ultimately bring about a curative effect for the future of prison studies: namely, that it will prompt those working in the field to reflect on the relationship between cognitive activity and subjective interest, and on that basis, transcend the traditional agendas and utilitarian imperatives of the discipline. The goal is to rebuild

the driving force of prison studies upon more universal human interests. Under ideal conditions, such efforts would enable the prison studies of the future not merely to provide rigid answers to questions such as “What is a prison?”, “What does it do?”, and “How should it operate?”, but rather to pose new questions—to explore, within the broader context of modern social reflection, the essence of punishment and the essence of norms. What once appeared certain would be revealed as uncertain; what once seemed distant and abstract would become intimately relevant.

Such a form of prison studies would no longer be the prison department’s prison studies but rather everyone’s prison studies. The interest that drives inquiry and progress would not merely be the utilitarian interest of institutions, but would encompass the subjective interest of individuals seeking self-understanding and self-liberation. In the classroom of a reconstituted prison studies—one grounded in renewed cognitive interest—we could also expect that spontaneous effort and genuine intellectual engagement would no longer be so difficult to achieve, becoming instead the norm among students and researchers alike. This transformation would, in turn, stimulate scholarly production in prison studies to reach a level worthy of being called classical achievements in contemporary research.

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