

# Social work in China – Historical development and current challenges for professionalization



*Yafang Wang, Shanghai (China)*

## 1. A brief review of the historic development of social work in China

From the 1900s till now the development of social work in China, like in many western countries, has been deeply embedded in the development of the society, which, in China, has been a turbulent process of social transition since the end of the 19th century.

It is well known that modern social work in China freshly started from the middle of 1980s. However, the first social work practice and education can be dated back to the beginning of the 20th century. With the closed door of the last feudal dynasty (Qing) being forced to open by the western powers, social work was brought to China by western missionaries at that time. The first sociology department was inaugurated already in 1914 at Shanghai College – a Christian college – by missionaries. At that time, social work courses were already provided in the department of sociology. This was regarded as the beginning of social work education in Chinese history (Hu, 2010). The first social work education sequently brought early social work practice. In Shanghai College, Daniel Kulp, an American missionary, based on his course of “social investigation”, established the “East Shanghai Commune” in the industrial Yangzepoo district, providing social services for the local under classes and their families (Sun, 1945).

Yenching University was another influential Christian University especially for social work education. In 1922, John S. Burgess established the Department of Sociology together with YMCA and YWCA Beiping (old name of Beijing), starting with training social service professionals. In 1925, this department was renamed as the Department of Sociology and Social Work (Hu, 2010). During 30 years of the Yenching University time, a systematic set of curricula of social work was developed. Its social work curricula well integrated liberal education with professional training, and kept a good balance between theoretical basic lectures (*e.g. General Sociology, History of social thoughts, Social Problems in China, Anthropology, Social political institutions etc.*) and professional core seminars (*e.g. Field visits, Social service practices, Poverty and relief, Welfare administration, Medical social work, Industrial social work, Community problems etc.*) (Hu, 2010). These church universities realized an important contribution to the first development of social work education and practice in China.

However, the early roots of social work development were heavily destroyed during the 15 years of the Japanese invasion and three years of civil war. After that, in 1949, the new China came into birth. However, both sociology and social work were discontinued at the beginning of 1950s by the new communist government because they were regarded as products of capitalism (Xia and Guo 2002; Yip 2007; Liu, Lam and Yan, 2012).

After ten years of Cultural Revolution, China finally started with the historic transformation period by implementing the reform and open-door policies. From then on, the old planning economy system was gradually replaced by the new market economy which of course has been with “Chinese socialist character”. The Chinese economy has been booming rapidly from then on and very fast became one of the central economic powers in the world. But such an economy boom, to a great extent, has much neglected the development of social justice and civil rights, environment protection, good cultural traditions, maintaining and improvement of the wellbeing of normal Chinese citizens. Especially in the 1990s, the new managerialism was introduced into and quickly employed by the central government; and some basic public responsibilities such as for education, public health and housing etc. were shrugged off by the central government to the local governments and especially to the market (Wang, 2012). Therefore, in the past more than 30 years of economic boom, China also witnessed intensifying social inequalities and conflicts, emerging egoism, declining social values and ethics, and a rising uncertainty of the whole society as well. Such social crises in current China are described as “cleavage of the society” (e.g. Sun, 2003).

Social work, as a crucial modern solution to many old and new social problems, has never been so important for the present China. This is the basic background why the Chinese central government, especially in its transformation of roles in social governance, finally decided to import and rebuild social work. In 1988, initiated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, social work education programs were re-inaugurated in Beijing University and three other universities. Since then, social work development in China started with a new era (Xiong and Wang, 2007).

## **2. Initiatives of social work policies in China: chances to improve the recognition of the new profession**

In general, the development of social work in China since the 1980s can be characterized as a top-down process. It cannot be denied that the state has been playing an effective role in initiating and structuring social work in China. Despite various difficulties e.g. lower recognition and less professionalization, a “spring” for social work development has always been highly expected both in academic and in practice, especially after more social work policies were gradually released.

In March, 2003, social work was firstly recognized as a profession in Shanghai. Then in June 2004, social work was officially recognized as a profession in China by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. In July, 2006, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Personnel together announced the “Regulations for social work qualifications”. In October, 2006, on the 6th plenary session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the former president Hu announced the “Decisions for crucial issues regarding the political vision of building a harmonious socialist society”. To achieve such a big vision, it was declared that “a large and strong social work team should be developed in China”. This new policy was regarded as “the arrival of ‘spring’ for social work” in China. In 2009, the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced the “Regulations of continuing education for social workers”. In 2010, the first round of Master of Social Work education programs was inaugurated, like, in Beijing University and Shanghai University etc. In 2012, 19 ministries and committees together announced the “Middle and long term plan for development of professional social workers (2011-2020)”. According to this plan, by 2015 the amount of professional social workers should reach 500,000, and by 2020 1,450,000. Such a training plan for professional social workers, however, is seemingly quite ambitious. As reported by the

Ministry of Civil Affairs, by March, 2014, the amount of professional social workers has only reached 123,800. There is still a big gap.

Undoubtedly, the above mentioned social work policies lay a solid foundation for the official recognition of social work as a new profession in China. In addition, they directly urge the professionalization of social work which brings about a rapid boom of social work education all over China.

### **3. Transformation of Chinese welfare system and challenges for professionalization of social work**

The officially guaranteed recognition of social work and the good start of social work education as part of professionalization, however, is only one side of the social work development in China. To clarify the current challenges for social work, it is necessary to understand the Chinese welfare system because it sets up a basic framework for social work action and thus corresponding space for professionalization.

Since 1949, China has experienced two phases of welfare system development. *Firstly*, it was the traditional welfare system under the former planned economy system steered purely by the central government. The *second* phase is the emerging welfare pluralism system in which state, work-units, market, community and family all take part.

The traditional welfare system was established under the former planned economy system from 1949 to 1978. It was a deeply stratified and very narrow welfare system. With the reform of the economy system from planning- to market-oriented since 1978, the welfare system has been in a continuing process of transformation. In this process, the traditional form has not yet completely gone. Together with the emerging participation from the third sector, the transforming welfare system displays the following features: *Firstly*, the strong central administration is still dominant rather than the expected “small government, big society”; *secondly*, work units, especially the public institutions, still play roles in providing welfare for the employees; *thirdly*, the third sector, like social organizations, has been growing fast but still lacks autonomy in the relationship with public agencies; *fourthly*, the growing commercialization and privatization of welfare has brought more inequalities in welfare access; *fifthly*, the welfare system is still deeply divided between urban and rural due to the Household system (*hukou*), and between east-middle-west regions; *sixthly*, welfare is still not completely regarded as a civil right and therefore further stays in its narrow meaning; lastly, the state budget for social welfare is still kept at a much lower level. As reported by Zheng (2013), in 2013, the welfare input was still lower than 15% of the whole financial expenditure of the state.

Clearly, in such a strongly centrally steered, deeply divided and narrowly defined welfare system in current China, only limited autonomous action space is left for social work. To a certain extent, social work in the current welfare structure is still equal to the traditional civil work which can be regarded as a kind of indigenous non-professional social work or administrative work, which may hinder the professionalization of social work.

A structure of welfare agencies and their mutual relationship help to further clarify such challenges for social work professionalization. If only focusing on urban areas, the structure of welfare providers consists of public agencies: normally the government at different levels, work-units, communities or neighborhoods, various NGOs and of course families. Different from those in western countries, NGOs in China still stay in a subordinate and less autonomous status in their relationship with the government. In such a relationship, three

forms of NGOs can be identified. *Firstly*, the traditional mass organizations, typically like the Women's Federation, the Disabled Federation, the Communist Youth League etc., are theoretically NGOs, but in reality they are steered by the government and thus regarded as "second government" in social service area. In addition to mass organizations which are closely linked to the Communist Party, street committees can be grouped into this form too. The street committee system was established in 1950s as a kind of self-organization of the masses. So theoretically, they belong to NGOs. However, since the beginning, street committees have become the bottom of the vertical structure of the government-steered structures under the central administration system. This means, street committees, despite in form of NGOs, work as representative of the government. These NGOs therefore can be defined as the old semi-public agencies. The *second* form of NGOs refers to the newly established semi-public agencies, which are social organizations but actually set up and also steered directly by the government. Typical examples are incubators for social organizations and social organization unions established by the local governments. Recently, both forms of NGOs have got a new name, that is, the "hub social organizations", which are expected to play a bridge role between government and NGOs. But in reality, it has been criticized as a new model of control on the emerging NGOs. The *third* form of NGOs refer to those in original meaning, which however lack money and autonomy and therefore have to build up subordinate relationship with government to survive. In this meaning, they can be defined as the semi-free agencies.

Similarly, the majority of social workers in China also work in NGOs. However, the socio-political landscape of NGOs in China, in particular, the relationship between NGOs and government in respect of welfare provision, is actually still narrowly determining the possible action space of social work. Either in the dominant public agencies or in the old or the newly established semi-public agencies, the so-called social work normally equates to traditional civil work, which normally consists of public relief for people in poverty or disaster, certain support for people without families, without living resources or without working abilities, help for veterans with job finding, and broad daily life administration especially at community level including for instance services for the elderly, marriage registration, birth control, cultural events organization, children adoption, anti-drug work, social order keeping, community education etc. Such traditional civil work is mainly directed and practiced by "civil servants, cadres, and laypersons" and typically "characterized as more administrative rather than service-oriented" (Zhang, 2009). Regarded as a typical indigenous social work, the traditional civil work constitutes an important and also dominant part of social work practice in China. However, it is still far from professional; besides, some of its basic concepts, like the still narrower understanding of social welfare, the rather strong administration, the dominant top-down control structure etc., could even provide confusing and conflicting situations for social work in a western meaning. It is therefore undoubtedly difficult for social work as an imported welfare concept to be well recognized and integrated into the Chinese indigenous socio-political context. This is often the case, for instance, when semi-professional (if not yet professional) workers from semi-free NGOs come to work together with public agencies or with semi-public agencies, particularly at community level. In this respect, challenges for professionalization of social work in Chinese indigenous context should always be kept as a critical concern.

#### **4. Summary**

In general, social work development in China since 1980s can be characterized as a complete top-down process steered by the government. It is clear that social work cannot function well

without support from the social welfare state. In China, the state has been playing a crucial role in initiating and leading the development of social work, and even in promoting its professionalization. However, it should also be critically reflected that such a top-down process dominantly steered by government which leaves less autonomous space for social work can also potentially impede the professionalization of social work. Therefore, social workers should never stop struggling for professional identity, for public recognition as well as for professionalization.

### **References:**

- Hu, Jierong (2010): Yenching University and the Early Years of Social Work Education in China, *China Social Work Research*, 7:193-226. (Chinese)
- Liu, Y., Lam, C., Yan, M. (2012): A challenged professional identity: the struggles of new social workers in China, *China Journal of Social Work*, 5:3, 189-200.
- Sun, Benwen (1945): Sociology since Fifty Years, in Qin, Xiaoyi and Pan, Gongzhan (eds.) *Historical Resources of Republic of China: China since Fifty Years*, Chongqing: Shengli Publishing House. (Chinese)
- Sun, L.P. (2003): *Cleavage: Chinese Society since 1990s*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press. (Chinese)
- Wang, S.B. (2012): Involution and Development of Social Welfare in China: Institutional Change of Social Welfare in the Market Transition, *China Social Work Research*, 8:1-38. (Chinese)
- Xia, X.L. and Guo, J. (2002): Historical development and characteristics of social work in today's China, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 11(3), 254-262.
- Xiong, Y.G. and Wang, S.B. (2007): Development of social work education in China in the context of new policy initiatives: issues and challenges, *Social Work Education*, 26(6), 560-572.
- Yip, K.S. (2007): Tensions and dilemmas of social work education in China, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 50(1), 93-105.
- Zhang, W. (2009): Soziale Arbeit in China – Einfuehrung in die Rahmenbedingungen, die Struktur und den Stand, *Forum Erziehungshilfen*, 2009(2).
- Zheng, G.C. (2013): The current situations and development trends of social welfare in China, *Journal of Renmin University Of China*, 2013(2)

*The author works as an assistant professor at the Department of Social Work at the Faculty for Sociology and Political Science at the Shanghai University (China). Her main issues are welfare state transformation, professionalization of social work in China, education in social work and social work with migrant workers.*

*This article is supported by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Program of Ministry of Education of China. The title of the project is "International Comparison of Social Work Paradigms: From Anglo-American Paradigm to European Continental Paradigm". The number of the project is: D.09-0137-13-403.*