

“Chinese Social Work 2.0” and Its Historical and International Significance

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Abstract: This paper explores the idea of “Chinese social work 2.0” by reviewing the situation, issues, and needs of Chinese social work for further advancement in historical and comparative perspectives. The “10 years of Chinese social work (2006-2016)” vs. a 30-year history of rebuilding social work in the Chinese mainland can be explained with the transition of GPP (general public policy). This helps to understand the various pitfalls and seeming downturns in Chinese social work over the past years and to understand the major decisions of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) by understanding the historical backdrop and theoretical rationale of “seeking balance” meaning that China formally parts with its “GDP first” doctrine and withdraws its “economic state” GPP from the historical stage, and “seeking sufficiency” meaning that China continues to base its public policy on economic construction rather than to follow a welfare state GPP. Chinese social work professionals should take advantage of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) by highlighting the core issue of “balanced” development and play a leading role in promoting social fairness and justice. The precondition for fulfilling this role is that social work must be placed among the main disciplinary categories (“Group I subject of social science and humanities”) in China with the enhancement of research and faculty competence via well-designed (doctoral) social work education.

Keywords: Chinese social work 2.0, general public policy (GPP), balanced strategy based on economic development, social work education and research

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As the name suggests, “2.0” is the upgraded version of “1.0”. At the threshold of the “Chinese social work 2.0” era, it is necessary to review the situations, issues, needs and our approaches to Chinese social work and plan for further advancements from historical and comparative perspectives. Social work rebuilding in the Chinese mainland has lasted for over thirty years, engaging many scholars in this cause and cultivating a large number of social work graduates. This paper traces China’s “readjustment of divisions and departments of higher institutions” back to the early 1950s and examines the development of social work in the Chinese mainland and then follows the development of social work in China’s Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao during the three decades when social work was suspended in the Chinese mainland. Thanks to years of investigation and communication, many precious historical records have been successively archived and analyzed in academic works. Now there are numerous related works, which, however, will not be elaborated in this paper. The term “Chinese social work 1.0” in this paper mainly refers to the social work achievements made in the Chinese mainland since the initiation of Chinese social work rebuilding in the 1980s.

Regarding the starting point of Chinese social work rebuilding in the Chinese mainland, there are different views in existing documents. Senior scholars, represented by Lei Jieqiong, worked hard to advocate the social work rebuilding in the Chinese mainland (Wang, 2004). Government support, primarily in charge of the civil affairs sector, was the actual promoter and a key source of the new foundation of social work (Peng & Lu, 2016). Due to a lack of both faculty and teaching materials, however, only a few non-integrated attempts at social work education and research were made back then. With the introduction of Chinese textbooks from China’s Taiwan, the rebuilding of social work in mainland was enriched with precious academic materials. A collaborative program on social work education and research was offered by the University of Hong Kong and Sun Yat-sen University in 1986-1987. This marked the first massive introduction of teachers to supplement self-cultivation of teachers and the beginning of systematic social work education for college students in the Chinese mainland. In 1984 BA graduates in sociology from Sun Yat-sen University became the first batch of college graduates since the initiation of social work rebuilding in the Chinese mainland. Moreover, from 1988 to 1989, Sun Yat-sen University also ran the first national training program for social work educators in the Chinese mainland, which was designed and chaired by Chen Sheying. With help from the social work faculty at the University of Hong Kong, this training program cultivated the earliest group of social work educators in the Chinese mainland. Chen also chaired many research programs, including the Research on Social Development Strategy and Social Security Reform in Guangdong Province, the Research on Urban Community Services in Guangzhou and the Research on Rural Community-level Social Security in Bao’an, Shenzhen. In addition, he also led social work majors to carry out field research and investigation internships, and supervised their graduation dissertation writing.

The Development of Chinese Social Work from an International Historical Perspective

Although the rebuilding of social work in the Chinese mainland has lasted over thirty years, it is still the latest “10 years of Chinese social work (2006-2016)” that is most talked about. As for why the first twenty years failed to generate impressive results, not many people seem to care and not too much research has been done. Is the contrast between the recent ten years and the first twenty years historically accidental or inevitable? Or to say, is there a historically leading factor in this regard? If so, what exactly is it? Can there be any theoretical interpretation? Following those ten-years of remarkable development, social work now seems to be in a downturn with various “pitfalls.” How should it be understood? As we know, one gains new insights through reviewing old materials. Without a thorough understanding of previous difficulties and setbacks, one cannot expect to cherish a meteoric rise, or remain optimistic about the future when encountering another setback. In this sense, a review of the social work rebuilding from an international historical perspective is of great significance to a full understanding of the mission, opportunities and challenges facing social work, as well as the connotations of “Chinese social work 2.0”.

In the 1980s, reform and opening up was vigorously advanced in the Chinese mainland. Against such an inspiring and hopeful backdrop, community services were popularized in big and medium-sized cities and social work was under reconstruction in key universities such as Peking University and Sun Yat-sen University. However, the social causes and ideals, overshadowed by a climate of “centering on economic development,” were faced with an unshakable reality full of frustrations and short on resources. Back then, no one was sure whether significant progress would be made in social work specialization and professionalization, nor did anyone take it seriously. Deng Xiaoping’s remarks during his inspection tour of the South in 1992 accelerated the reform and opening up. “Centering on economic development,” the Chinese mainland raised its development to a new height. Yet, existing social problems remained unsolved while new problems emerged. This caused intensive concerns from those in China and abroad who cared about China’s social development. These people were committed to seeking experience and inspiration from Western countries. Concepts (such as welfare state, social policy, community care, social work and social services) which were considered as the cornerstone, the core or an important part of public policy in the West were not placed high on the public policy agenda of the Chinese mainland. Social work scholars and civil affairs officials called for more attention to real social problems; social work teachers with a background of philosophy or history did inferences and demonstrations in accordance with socialist requirements, only to find themselves disappointed. Such a confusion and helplessness motivated me to go abroad and look for scientific answers in developed countries.

I was disappointed to discover that no answer suitable to the reality of the Chinese mainland could be found in the welfare state theory born in the UK, an established capitalist country, or in

social policy studies initiated in the USA, a new “scholar tyrant” of the 20th century. Nevertheless, inspiration was drawn from related British and American experiences and gave rise to two major research issues. First, why did the Chinese mainland, although advancing reform and opening up, take a path opposite to the welfare states and center on economic development even at the cost of some social policy principles? Second, would China eventually become a well-developed welfare state? The first issue was particularly pressing at that time and was also crucial to assessing the historical decision of “centering on economic development.” Only those who truly understand China’s actual condition and have direct experience of the Chinese “in-system” operation can realize the harsh reality facing the then Chinese government—either develop the economy or be eliminated from the global economic system. Evidently, obsessive criticism did not help with trouble shooting. A government committed to reform would not be crushed by “criticism.” There was no way back to what it was like prior to reform and opening up. It was a regret that not many scholars or others in the international community could perceive this harsh reality or present any pertinent theoretical explanations. Instead, they tended to label the Chinese government’s decision ideologically or apply old-fashioned research paradigms (such as state socialism) to interpret it. I did some related research in Hong Kong from 1989 to 1991. My research findings (with corresponding papers first submitted to the Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong were later published in the USA and distributed globally) (Chen, 1996, 1998) criticized the West’s ideologization of China studies and the mechanical application of the welfare state model both in Chinese and overseas academical circles, opened a new research area of general public policy (GPP), and defined and interpreted the existence and development of China as an “economic state in transition” (Chen, 2002). Thus, the research findings filled the void of social policy studies and offered an international historical perspective to understand the development of social work in China.

The Transition to Economic State vs. the Development of Social Work in the Chinese mainland

“Economic state” is relative to “welfare state.” But neither term refers only to one of the many functions of a state or a government. Instead, both are defined from a perspective of GPP (This also explains why “welfare state” is exclusive to developed countries in the West and few of the third-world countries are placed in this category). The GPP is a guideline to determine a policy system’s priorities and preferred means (Morris, 1985). A welfare state takes the supply of social welfare as its priority aim and preferred means; while an economic state centers on economic development (accordingly, a “warfare state” is keen on engaging in aggressive wars while a “political state” highlights the impact of politics on all). Further analysis shows that countries implementing different GPPs are essentially different in terms of structure, functions and guiding ideology (Chen, 1996, 1998).

Since the establishment of socialist public ownership in China, one major function of the Chinese government has been managing economic affairs on behalf of the Chinese people, and the economic

sector has maintained a dominant status in the government structure (inclusive of budgeting). This is in stark contrast with welfare states in the West, which are based on capitalist private ownership. The capitalists or private sector entrepreneurs were almost non-existent in socialist public ownership. In this sense, concentrating on economic development was a most important historical mission for the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the government of the then newly established People's Republic of China (PRC). For example, the largest share of government budget was for extended reproduction, which was unimaginable in welfare states and was also the biggest pitfall in comparative studies. In fact, the institutional design in the early years of the PRC was based on the then advocated orthodox scientific socialism and to a large extent reflected this objective requirement. The institutional design covered a planned economy with "two productions" (production of material goods and production of population), the combination of education with productive labor, "enterprise-run social services" and government-regulated production.

Yet, this socialist "economic state" was born out of a grinding war and was confronted with successive external provocations and various internal problems. As a result, China gradually took "class struggle as the key link" in theory and deviated from the due development course of an economic state in practice. One after another political movements kept ideologizing and politicizing GPP, thus bringing the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to a climax and doing severe harm to the national economy and people's livelihoods. It would be like putting the cart before the horse to overlook this historical fact of extreme politicization, the importance and even the decisiveness of GPP, simply impute economic backwardness to some previous institutional arrangements of an economic state, or hastily attribute the rapid economic development of China since 1978 to western economic thoughts. In fact, one conclusion of my GPP studies is that some institutional designs, including moderate state planning as a positive economic factor, were not tested in practice in a scientific, objective and systematic way under normal conditions in the history of the international communist movement. That is why the biggest historical significance of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee was "clarifying confusion and bringing things back to order," namely, restoring an economic state and shifting work focus to economic development. During the advancement of reform and opening up, specific new measures, moves, strategies and tools were introduced to ensure the reconfirmed GPP. In return, the GPP created a favorable historical condition for the successful establishment of market mechanisms in China. It was the combined efforts of the depoliticization of the economic state's GPP and reform and opening up that have facilitated the rapid economic development and current prosperity of the Chinese mainland. This is the defining feature of the "China model." Also, "centering on economic development" inevitably concerned all aspects of social development, including the fair supply and distribution of various social resources, such as social welfare services, medical treatment and public health, housing and education. Under such circumstances, there was of course not much room for social work to develop. The "economic state," along with the entire society's highly economized GPP orientation, was a primary reason for the failure to make significant progress in the first twenty years of social work rebuilding in the Chinese

mainland.

However, the economic state, which was eventually realized after the Cultural Revolution, immediately underwent a process of gradual de-economization. This was first reflected in government restructuring and function transformation (expansion of enterprise autonomy; replacement of profit delivery with tax payments; shift and relocation of economic sectors, reforms and improvements of social management institutions), which was driven by the reform and opening up. Following this, “venturing into business” became a new trend and a mixed ownership economy took shape and grew. As the economy grew at a rapid yet imbalanced pace, social problems were highlighted and received increasing attention from public policy (Chen, 2013). Entering the 21st century, the CPC Central Committee successively put forward a series of strategic visions concerning the building of a harmonious socialist society and expanding space for social work development in the Chinese mainland. In particular, the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society* was approved at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the CPC in October 2006. The argument that “the principal contradiction in Chinese society has evolved into one between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life” was put forward at the 19th National Congress of the CPC in October 2017. Thus, from prioritizing economic development to also giving due consideration to social equity, the GPP of the Chinese mainland entered a new era. This is the historical background and conceptual logic of promoting the “10 years of Chinese social work development (2006-2016)” (rather than thirty years) prior to the 19th National Congress of the CPC.

Seen from this larger picture, the GPP interpretation and predication completely corresponds to the judgment of the principal contradiction facing Chinese society made at the 19th National Congress of the CPC. The GPP has been upgraded from “centering on economic development” to “relying on economic development and striving for a dynamic equilibrium between economic and social development.” This has been my research perspective and suggestion for decision-making. It can guide the future development of Chinese public policy with two points. The first is seeking “balance,” which means abandoning the “GDP first” doctrine (i.e. always centering on economic development) and withdrawing the “economic state” from the historical stage. The second point is seeking “sufficiency,” which means continuing to rely on economic development and avoid copying the public policy model of welfare states. In historical and comparative perspectives, the Chinese mainland is now approaching a new era of “post-economic state,” (Chen, 2013) which is the most appropriate theoretical explanation (i.e. China will neither return to an economic state nor become a welfare state). During the period of economic state, China’s most important public policy communication was flooded by a variety of economic theories. In contrast, during this new era, social work can share leadership responsibilities with other social sciences. This is an irresistible trend and is also where social workers’ confidence comes from. The way ahead for social work may be full of twists and turns, but the future is sure to be bright and promising (Xu, 2017). Although there is no

shortage of development opportunities, it remains to be further examined and analyzed whether social work in the Chinese mainland can outshine others in leading the trend of the times and tackling the major social contradiction of “imbalanced development” .

Necessity for Further Improvements in Chinese Social Work

There was a process that led me to truly understand the necessity of “transforming and upgrading” the social work in the Chinese mainland. Such an understanding was not derived from any theoretical deduction, certain stereotyped judgment or “closed-door” speculation. After retiring from my administrative duties, I had more time to follow the development of Chinese social work and have gained much more perceptual knowledge via various channels. I have done field research in south, east, north, southwest, northwest and central China, Hong Kong, Macao and other regions in China and I have had multi-level exchanges with local social work faculty, students, practitioners and service objects both inside and outside of the lecture rooms, conferences and other institutions. Even when I was abroad, many students came all the way from China to share their perplexity. According to them, social work development in China was in full swing yet it somehow left an awkward impression. When returning to China, I learned of the dilemma from scholars, even some senior professors at such top universities as Tsinghua. They held that some of the existing practices made it difficult to have academic communications of real substance with their overseas social work counterparts and to express their concerns about the future of social work in China. According to the estimated survey data shared by an official from the China Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), of all social work teachers in the Chinese mainland, only 19% have a degree in social work studies.

After thirty years of social work rebuilding, social work teachers without a corresponding educational background are still widely accepted as the norm. There are some reasons. First, there is a substantial lack of qualified social work teachers. Second, many social work teachers shift their work focus to applying for more funds and running organizations. Such phenomena are regarded as nothing but normal and are awarded in the form of “leading talents in social work” selection. This leads to the academic immaturity and weakness in social work and prevents its independence from sociology. When in charge of the earliest social work student education and faculty training at Sun Yat-sen University over thirty years ago, I paid close attention to social work specialization and professionalization. Today, the two tasks seem to have been achieved, but they are not much valued and are troubled by poor income, low morale, brain drain and other problems. The professionalism remains at a stage of “exploration.” A series of basic and core issues are waiting to be solved, not to mention other issues not yet identified or put forward. Some say, “Social work in China is characterized by factions and pitfalls; it’s like a full grown man being treated like a three-year-old.” The confrontations between different views tend to focus on the “independence” of social work from sociology and the “integration” of the two. The fact is, however, the challenges facing social

work development in the Chinese mainland do not only concern social work's relationship with sociology, but also its relationships with other areas such as psychology and mental health, cultural anthropology, ethics, public policy and management, public and development economics, and law. All social behavior-related disciplines are theoretical basis or part of social work. Yet social work still has to struggle for a discipline status. After all, it has theoretical and practical needs to do so for the fair distribution of academic resources closely related to its sustainable development (application of research funds, contributions to core journals, increases in PhD programs and inclusion in "Double First-Class"—a national program for China's higher education excellency).

There is no doubt that so far social work development in the Chinese mainland, what I call "Chinese social work 1.0" has made significant achievements, which should be attributed to the hard work of the earliest pioneers in Chinese social work education and research rebuilding. However, judging from social needs, the change of times and some undeniable social work problems, a qualitative leap is in urgent need for the development of social work in China. Social work educators, researchers, practitioners, supporters and coordinators (including those from higher education and R&D management sectors) across China should work together to facilitate such a qualitative leap. With the successive return of Hong Kong and Macao to China and the increasing cross-straits exchanges between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, social work development in the Chinese mainland cannot be done in isolation. Chinese characteristics should not be considered unique to the Chinese mainland. The social work achievements and problems in China's Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan should be deemed an organic part of the localized development of Chinese social work and also constituent indispensable experience and knowledge to the transformation and upgrading of Chinese social work. In addition, Chinese social work should strive to align with international social work standards, make more academic contributions, and set good examples in practice to correspond to China's rapidly rising international prestige.

Some ascribe the difficulties facing the first twenty years of social work rebuilding in China to the institutional restrictions of an economic state's GPP. If so, there are some key tasks that could or should have been completed in the last ten years of social work development (also known as the "glorious period"). One such failed key task is about being promoted to a "Group I subject (of social science and humanities)" on par with public administration, public security, pedagogy, journalism and communication. Possible causes should be traced in social work itself. In 2006, the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society* (hereinafter referred to as the *Decision*) was adopted at the the Sixth Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee. According to the *Decision*, forging a large number of social work talents and bringing up a well-structured group of highly-competent social work talents were imperative for building a harmonious socialist society. In 2006 alone, the development of social work was more than once included in the core document of the ruling party and the work report of the government, which was rare even in the international community.

What the *Decision* highlighted was not sociology or other disciplines, but social work. It is

regretful that social work staff failed to grasp such a rare opportunity in the history of Chinese social work development to join the “Group I subject (of social science and humanities)” club and become on par with other “sister disciplines”. It needs to be pointed out that there was no such excuse as “bad timing.” After all, the first social work program in the Chinese mainland was born out of nothing. Now, social work program can be found at universities across the country, yet it cannot run as an independent discipline. Besides, almost all disciplines, except social work, require their teaching staff to have a corresponding educational background. One cannot help questioning whether such an “exemption” is a matter of logic or benefit, as the status quo is inconsistent with the decades old original intention of rebuilding social work as an independent discipline.

Admittedly, the GPP transformation in the Chinese mainland is of great help to the development of social work. But this does not mean social work is free from institutional restrictions. In fact, before commemorations such as “ten years of social work” and “spring of social work” ended, social work programs were abruptly suspended in Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou) and a few other universities. It was like a cold spell in late spring, chilling the entire social work community from head to toe. The decision of suspension did not solely target the social work program. Knowing that is helpful for a more profound understanding of China’s higher education management system and the decision-making process with Chinese characteristics. Of course this phenomenon has something to do with Chinese social work’s half-invisible existence and its failure to seek independence even after “ten years of social work development.” Although social work was not singled out for a special mention in the core document of the 19th National Congress of the CPC, the opportunity for further development remains. The determination on the transformation of this major social contradiction, made at the 19th National Congress of the CPC, has paved the way for social work to lead social development in the new era. By grasping the core issue of “balanced development,” social work can clarify misunderstandings, oppose deliberate twistings of the core idea of the 19th National Congress of the CPC, and play a leading role in realizing social fairness and justice. One prerequisite for playing such a role is that social work must rise to become a “Group I subject (of social science and humanities)” with enhanced strength of social work research and specialized faculty training (including post-master social work practice and serious and meticulous design of professional and academic doctorate degrees).

Forging “Chinese Social Work 2.0” and Driving the New Trend of Balanced Development

This paper interprets the historical and international significance of “Chinese social work 2.0” and proves the necessity of further improving Chinese social work. Yet, what are the exact characteristics and requirements of “Chinese social work 2.0”? How can China lead the trend of balanced social and economic development by forging “Chinese social work 2.0”? Due to limited space, I was not able to answer these questions one by one in this paper and will further explore and answer them in follow-up

articles. Nevertheless, based on the above review and questions, a few key suggestions can be made to form a reference guide for mapping out a program of action and studying a hypothetical system.

First, the concepts of China, Chinese characteristics and Chinese social work should cover “both sides of the Taiwan Straits, Hong Kong and Macao” to have meanings in entirety, instead of restricting them to the Chinese mainland.

Second, it is necessary to have a correct understanding of the relationship between localization and globalization. Social work practitioners should learn widely from others’ strong points, seek win-win cooperation, and avoid becoming localized in a “self-created trap” or globalized into a “blind faith in foreign things.”

Third, there should be significant progress and a qualitative change in professionalism. Social work education should be undertaken by teaching staff who have received strict and systematic social work training (i.e. those holding a social work degree or enjoying a corresponding exemption). Social work should be recognized as a “Group I subject (of social science and humanities)” in the Chinese mainland. On condition that disciplinary boundaries are clearly defined (which means social work is not subordinate to any other discipline), social work is encouraged to have more equal dialogue and cooperation with other disciplines (rather than “kick away” related disciplines such as sociology and economics) and offer PhD programs which are independent from and also in collaboration with other programs.

Fourth, social work teachers at universities and colleges should prioritize teaching and research work, give considerations to related services, and be dedicated to student cultivation. More specifically, they should enhance social work research and methodology study, follow the law of higher education, take the initiative to participate in university management and higher education system reforms, and establish a set of accreditation and certification standards and evaluation systems which are rigorous, effective and, most importantly, independent.

Fifth, the practice of social work should be dominated by full-time social workers who clearly identify with their own profession. Social work specialization and professionalization should be mutually promoted and institutional design should ensure relative stability and professional dignity of social work as a career so that social work practitioners are at the same social status with other “helping professionals”.

Sixth, social work should boost balanced social development. Driven by professional ethics and a sense of mission, social work practitioners should commit themselves to serving the public and promoting social fairness and justice, and actively engage in public administration and social policy formulation.

The purpose of these moves is to allow people from all walks of life to understand the double attributes of social work (scientific and artistic attribute), its theoretic and research basis concerning literature, history, philosophy, economics, law, technology and mathematics, as well as its dominance in applied social sciences and social practice.

These six key suggestions are of great significance to a thorough understanding of the missions,

opportunities and challenges facing Chinese social work. A true “spring of social work” is yet to come. Social work educators, researchers, practitioners, supporters and coordinators should work together to bring “Chinese social work 2.0” to reality as soon as possible.

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