



### Social Work Education in China: The Way We Were and the Way Ahead

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<b>Author(s):</b>	<i>Ming-sum Tsui and Chui-man Pak</i>
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# Social Work Education in China: The Way We Were and the Way Ahead

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*Ming-sum Tsui and Chui-man Pak*

## Introduction

In April 2012, the China government announced its decision to train up 1.45 million social workers in the period from 2011 to 2020, to achieve the national goal of “one social worker serving a community.” This will not only be the biggest development of social work in terms of the number of social workers, it will also have a significant impact on the nature of the practice and professionalization of social work. As background information to enable western social work communities to understand this great change, this paper, based on the authors’ experience as participants and observers in the process of the development of social work education in China in the last two decades, provides a historical review of the development of social work education in China. The paper then discusses key issues regarding the growth of social work education that need to be addressed in the near future.

The sources on which this paper is drawn are, first, the authors’ long-term, first-hand observation and participation derived from membership in the group of pioneers who participated in the process of the planning and development of social work libraries and educational programs in China. In addition, there have been formal and informal contacts with key stakeholders of social work education in China. Finally we have drawn on the published archives in both English and Chinese regarding the development of social work in China, which include various government documents, official reports, research papers, master’s and doctoral theses, published journal articles, and information on the web.

## The Way We Were: Historical Development of Social Work Education in China

The development of social work education in China can be divided into three stages. The first stage, from 1922 to 1952, was the initial development of social work in China, followed by an absence of social work from 1953 to 1987. In this period, the social work profession and any associated education were completely absent in China as the Communist government closed all existing educational programs for ideological reasons. The second stage, 1987 to 2007, characterized the revival of social work in China and was centered on localized initiatives, such as in Shanghai. The third stage, that of nationwide development, was initiated in 2008 and is scheduled to last until 2020.

### Stage One: Initial Development of Social Work Education (1922-1952)

The initial development of social work education in China between 1922 and 1952 borrowed both theories and practice from western countries. This stage can be further divided into two sub-stages (Shi, 2009). The first one was the initial establishment of social work education in China (1922-1949). At that time social work programs in colleges and universities were a sub-branch of sociology and were described as Social Service Management or Social Welfare Administration, etc., rather than Social Work. Only a few educational institutions offered social work education, such as Yanjing University (a university sponsored by American funding that was closed in 1950s; now its campus has been taken over by

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*Ming-sum Tsui, PhD is a Professor of Social Work and the Program Leader of the Doctor of Social Work Program at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.*

*Chui-man Pak, MASW is a Visiting Associate at the Department of Applied Social Sciences at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.*

Peking University.)

The second sub-stage (1949-1952) was a difficult period for universities under the governance of the Communist regime. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, policy makers were skeptical of education programs that were perceived as part of a capitalist society (Law & Gu, 2008; Liu, Sun, & Anderson, 2012). During the restructuring of higher education institutions in 1952, all sociology and social work-related programs were eliminated from the universities (Shi, 2009; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002).

### **Stage Two: Revival of Social Work Education (1987-2007)**

After a break of 35 years, a group of scholars and government officials discussed the inclusion of social work into the formal plan for higher education in 1987. Sociologists and social work scholars who were educated before the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China and who occupied high positions in government played important roles in this advocacy process (Wang, 2012; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2008). In this stage, the State Education Commission of the China government decided to establish Social Work and Management as a recognized university discipline. In fact, in 1979, a year after the introduction of China's "open-door" economic policy, sociology had been re-introduced as an academic discipline in higher education (Law & Gu, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). In this regard, we may consider that the re-establishment of social work education in the higher education system is a sub-component of the "open-door" policy.

The sub-stage (1987-1993) of social work's re-establishment began with the re-introduction of social work into the formal subject list for national higher education. On this list, social work, described as Social Work and Management, belonged to the category of pilot projects, and focused more on macro aspects such as social policy, social security, social planning, and social development. In 1989, the prestigious first university in China, Peking University, with funding from a 1,000,000 RMB (equal to US \$330,000

at that time) subsidy from the central government's Ministry of Civil Affairs, started to recruit the first cohort of social work and management students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The agreement was to train up 100 officers through this program within five years. Graduates of this program have become the first professionally qualified social workers in modern China (Li, Han, & Huang, 2011; Shi, 2009; Xia & Guo, 2002).

Between 1987 and 1993, China moved from having no schools offering social work programs to fewer than ten schools with a few hundred students. According to Shi (2009), the scale was still small and was comparable to the situation in 1952 when social work education was stopped abruptly.

The sub-stage (1994-1998) saw the initial development of social work education in schools and establishment of a professional body. The China Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) was established in 1994. It aimed to provide a platform for social work educators to build up networks with their counterparts from other countries and regions, organizing short-term training courses, study visits, conferences, and research collaboration (Law & Gu, 2008; Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2010; Shi, 2009).

In the mid-1990s social work education experienced a crisis. The central government's Ministry of Education considered integrating social work into sociology. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, universities such as Peking University, organizations such as the China Association of Social Work Education, the China Communist Youth League, etc., joined forces to persuade the Ministry of Education to maintain the independent academic status of social work. Finally the Ministry of Education not only retained the independent academic status of social work but also transferred it from the program category of "controlled development" to that of "non-controlled development offering a fast track for the growth of the professional education in social work.

The next sub-stage (1999-2007) can be named the rapid development phase. The reform of schools of higher education accelerated the devel-

opment of social work programs in China. In 1999 there were already more than 30 educational institutions offering social work programs (Shi, 2009). The central government, in response to increasing education demands both from the needs of the people and developmental needs of the country, allowed the schools of higher education to increase student intakes. Higher education was no longer only provided to elite cadres. People were aspiring to upward social mobility through higher education. The economic development of the country also required more educated people. Moreover, for survival and expansion, some schools turned their attention to social work as an emerging subject with potential and development prospects (Law & Gu, 2008; Li, Han, & Huang, 2011 Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2010).

This sub-stage also witnessed significant development of social work as a profession. A directive was first circulated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2003 to mobilize all provinces and cities to establish stronger professional capacity among their social workers (Chan, Ip, & Lau, 2009). Provinces and cities were encouraged by the central government to do more to professionalize social work in their respective administrative areas. Initially, Shanghai took the lead. In 2003 the Shanghai government announced the "Provisional Assessment Standards of Social Work Qualifications" as an attempt to officially recognize the professional status of social workers. There were two levels, Social Workers and Social Work Assistants. In the first examination, 5,586 people enrolled and 1,426 people passed, although only 665 registered as Social Workers or Social Work Assistants. In July 2003, Shanghai announced a social worker registration management system. In 2004, three organizations under the Shanghai City Government received contracts for government-purchased social welfare services. They employed 1,500 social workers to serve people in need such as substance abusers and elderly people. Based on the Shanghai experience, other provinces such as Guangdong province announced their own social work professional qualification examination and management systems (Shi, 2009).

The fifth sub-stage (2004-2007), nationwide rapid development, began with the announcement

of "National Social Workers Vocational Standards" by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security in June 2004. This was the first time "social worker" was recognized as a professional title by the government in China. Later on, the central government took over the examination and registration of social workers as well (Wang, 2012).

In July 2006, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly announced the "Temporary Regulations on the Evaluation of Vocational Standards of Social Workers" and the "Regulations on the Examination of Vocational Standards for Assistant Social Workers and Social Workers." This was the beginning of the central government's move to centralize the social worker vocational standard system, to be assessed by a nationwide examination, and began the process of including social workers into the National System of Unification of Vocational Personnel Qualification Certificates (Shi, 2009). Moreover, the change means that social work was formally recognized as a "listed vocation" (a vocation which has its status recognized by the government as a profession and eligible for civil servant posts) within the civil service structure (Law & Gu, 2008).

The most important milestone for the development of social work in China occurred in October 2006. The 6th National Congress of the 16<sup>th</sup> Communist Party China Central Committee proclaimed its intention to build a "harmonious communist society." In this process, the top leaders of China provided social work with a mandate to participate in the strengthening of social structure and improvement of social management. It was a formal recognition by the central government that the social work profession can be of value in relation to the social problems, social conflicts, and emerging social needs resulting from rapid economic growth after the implementation of the "open-door" policy in 1978 (Law & Gu, 2008; Shi, 2009; Xiong & Wang, 2007). To build up a strong force of social workers, it followed that additional measures and mechanisms were needed to enhance the training, capacity, qualifications, and professionalization of social workers. One such initiative was the selection of a number of cities, including

Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, to develop their own model or system of social work. The aim was to meet local needs through better delivery of social services (Chan et al., 2009).

**Stage Three: Great Nationwide Development of Social Work Education (2008-2020)**

A nationwide open public examination was in place in 2008 and those who passed would become Qualified Social Workers. They were classified into three categories: Assistant Social Workers, Social Workers, and Senior Social Workers. However, the examinations held were for Assistant Social Workers and Social Workers only. After several years, there were 11,039 Qualified Social Workers and 32,583 Qualified Assistant Social Workers (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2010). However, eligibility to take the examinations was not limited to individuals who had completed a formal social work training program; as a result social workers do not enjoy the similar high professional status as lawyers and doctors (Chan et al., 2009).

In 2008, the Ministry of Civil Affairs was formally recognized as the central government coordinating department for social work. Thereafter the Ministry both standardized the social worker registration system and issued requirements for continuing education in the social work profession. Therefore every Registered Social Worker has to complete 90 hours of continuing education every three years, and an Assistant Social Worker is required to complete 72 hours every three years (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2010).

By 2010, about 260 educational institutions, including universities, colleges, cadre-training schools (government officials training schools), and vocational training schools, were providing various social work programs and courses. The number of social work undergraduate students recruited was over 10,000 (Li et al., 2010).

In 2009, Master of Social Work (MSW) programs were launched in higher education in China. Thirty-three higher education institutions were approved to offer these programs and recruited their first cohort of students in 2010. These MSW students graduated and entered the job market in

the summer of 2012. In 2012, another 25 higher education schools were approved to offer MSW programs (Zuo & Liu, 2012).

In fact, long before the establishment of localized MSW programs, Chinese mainland universities and Hong Kong universities had established cooperative educational ventures. For example, the joint MSW program run by Peking University and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University recruited students in alternate years from 1999. The program aims to “educate the educators.” Most graduates from this program have become the leaders and senior educators of social work programs in China. At the same time, the University of Hong Kong offered part-time Master of Social Work and Master of Social Service Management programs jointly with Fudan University in Shanghai. In 2004, Dr. Sun Yat-sen University at Guangzhou started a full-time Master of Social work program that enrolled students nationwide, also with support from Hong Kong (Law & Gu, 2008).

The Ministry of Civil Affairs published “The Middle to Long-term Plan for Social Work Professional Manpower Building (2011-2020)” in April 2012 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, China Government, 2012). In response to the pressing needs for social services, the strategic target was to establish a huge team of social workers by training up a large number of social workers. By the end of 2015, licensed social workers will total 500,000, and another 950,000 will be added during 2016-2020, bringing the total number of social workers to 1,450,000. It will become the largest force of social workers in the world. Within the team there will be 200,000 social workers (middle level) and 30,000 senior social workers. Moreover, the social work team will include 80,000 social workers who have human services management knowledge and experience. Another 80,000 experienced fieldwork supervisors will be trained up to supervise fieldwork practicum for social work students. At graduate level, 30,000 MSW and 300 DSW graduates will be educated before 2020. In addition, 3,000 teachers with professional qualifications will be trained (China Daily USA, 2012). All these efforts will be directed towards the national goal of assigning one

social worker to every community in China.

However, the reality is that China has just 200,000 social workers in 2012. That means the nation has to educate 75,000 social workers in every year from 2012-2015, and 190,000 annually during 2016-2020. This is a “mission impossible” which goes beyond the current capabilities of higher education institutions, 320 colleges providing undergraduate social work programs and 60 universities offering postgraduate programs. With this training capacity, only 20,000 qualified social workers can be produced. And unfortunately, some of these go into other fields offering more attractive pay and benefits. Naturally, social work programs have to be further expanded. Hence, there are policy initiatives to build 300 key social work training institutes, including 50 national-level bases. More than 600 non-government social work organizations are operating in China, providing community services in different fields concerning people's well-being. On April 26, 2012, nineteen party and state departments, including the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, issued a plan. According to this, social service agencies and government departments should first consider qualified social workers when recruiting staff. Social workers will also be given preference when applying for civil service posts at all levels. In addition, better pay is promised by the government in order to retain excellent social workers.

### **The Way Ahead—A Mission Impossible?**

This rapid nationwide development of social work education can be seen as a “great leap” forward in social work education in China. It is mainly a top-down policy plan with specific targets, indicators, and schedules set by the Communist Party, since inputs from academia and wider society had little influence (Wang, 2012). In the last two decades, there has been much discussion and debate concerning the tensions and problems of social work education in China (e.g. Liu, 2003; Tsui, Chan, & Ho, 1996; Yan & Tsui, 2007; Yip, 2007; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002, 2008). To make the picture simple and clear, the authors highlight

three major issues only: (a) the mission and boundaries of social work practice, (b) integration of theory and practice, and (c) indigenization versus globalization that are the crucial issues affecting the direction and destination of the development of social work in China. This will eventually affect the well-being of China's population of 1.3 billion people.

### **The Mission and Boundaries of Social Work**

China is a huge country with a diverse populations located within her vast boundaries. There are needy people from cities to villages, from schools to communities, and from post-disaster areas to hospitals. In contemporary China, social work is always under the category of sociology and social service management. This explains why social work programs are still housed in sociology departments or schools of public administration in many universities. In the eyes of the country's leaders, social work is a tool to achieve social harmony, national unity, and the protection of the well-being of grassroots people for social stability (Leung, Yip, Huang, & Wu, 2012). In addition, social work is regarded by the China government as a tool for social control, not for social change - an executive arm for the actualization of social policies. This poses challenges for social work's mission in regard to empowerment (Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009; Healy, 2008; Dominelli, 1996). In China social work therefore encompasses a broader range of functions compared to western developed countries, which includes social policy, social development, social security, community development, capacity building, and post-disaster emergency relief work. The breadth of social work practice is reflected in the volume of workers involved. This is why the Professional Registration Examination for Social Workers is open to front-line workers with experience but who lack formal professional training. The path of professionalization of social work in China is the way ahead that we have to tread with care.

### **Integration of Theory and Practice**

Owing to the strong influence of Marxist think-

ing, social scientists, including sociologists, political science scholars, and economists in modern China have usually received very rigorous training in philosophy, social theories, and sociological ideas. Since the China government adopted a top-down approach in planning and implementing graduate social work education, only top universities with at least five years' experience in offering PhD programs in social sciences are eligible to establish new MSW programs. As a result, Tsinghua University, a prestigious university with an excellent background in science and technology (the so-called "MIT in China") and the China Academy of Social Sciences were approved to offer MSW programs, even though they have no previous experience of running social work programs. On the other hand, some colleges with very successful experience and a track record in offering BSW programs and related fieldwork, for example, The China Youth University for Political Sciences, were rejected in the first round of application.

In fact, in many MSW programs, there is a lack of qualified social work teachers. Social scientists from other disciplines, for example, sociology, political sciences, and psychology, are invited to teach social work courses. Although they have a very strong background in theory and research, they lack experience in direct practice in social work. Two main issues are emerging. First, fieldwork education is sometimes taught in a manner resembling fieldwork in conducting social research (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008; Ting & Zhang, 2012; Tong & Liang, 2012). Second, there is a great gap between the learning of theories and the practice of knowledge (Liu, 2003). Social workers will not be able to use theories to inform their professional practice. At the same time, they cannot also summarize their practice wisdom and experience for generating theories and models (Chu & Tsui, 2008).

### Globalization versus Indigenization

Social work is an international profession with local practice and a history of more than a century (Healy & Link, 2012). Advocates of globalization argue that the development of social work in Chi-

na should follow the track of international social work, even though it may be a fast track. Thus, there should be an international definition of social work, a common core set of social work values, a code of practice, a common language, and a similar core curriculum (Leung, 2007). Then social workers in China can engage in meaningful exchanges with their counterparts in other parts of the world. Another strong reason for globalization is advocates' belief that many contemporary social problems in China are similar to, or even "imported" from, western countries (for example, substance abuse).

However, as a country with long history, great culture, and the biggest population in the world, China has its own distinct social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Adoption of theories and practices from the western world without adaptation will result in at least two major problems. First, the application of western social work to Chinese culture may be inappropriate, impractical, and ineffective. In addition, this adoption will be perceived as a kind of professional imperialism (Gray, 2005; Migdley, 1981, 1990, 2001; Tsang & Yan, 2001; Tsui & Yan, 2010). This will be unacceptable to the professionals and people in China. However, an over-emphasis on indigenization will make social work applicable only to specific contexts and settings. Social work in China will become a national profession only instead of part of an international one (Gray & Fook, 2004). Between the dilemma of globalization and indigenization, on the one hand, we have to be an international profession with core values and common knowledge (Chan & Chan, 2005; Yan & Tsang, 2005); on the other hand, we need to practice locally in indigenous communities. What we need is a "two-hand social worker" with wisdom to integrate the two (Chu & Tsui, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Ku, 2008). As suggested by Cheung, Gao & Tsui (2012), indigenization is not one-way, not one-dimensional, and not self-centered. Social work education in China should include the analysis and application of "indigenized" factors along with input from other perspectives so that we can be assured that the test of practice efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness becomes our priority before the delivery of its content (pp.

1-2).

### Conclusion

The rapid development of social work and its education in China, in fact, can be interpreted as an extension of her “open-door” policy from the economic sector to the wider society. If China meets its targets, she will become the biggest platform for social work practice and its education. This will probably be the greatest event of the social work world in this century. We may expect that if there is something new in social work in this century, it may come from China.

Social work in China is at a crossroads at this moment. As social work educators, what we need to do is not to deride this challenge as a “mission impossible.” In fact, plans for social work in China will provide a golden opportunity for “east meets west” to ensure a genuine exchange of wisdom and knowledge. With the principle of equal partnership, much effort can be put into collaboration. What China needs, in fact, may also be what the west wants. For example, there will be great demand for visiting social work scholars to teach in China. Universities in China are also eager to send their teachers on attachment to western schools of social work to learn how to teach social work. At the same time, numerous graduates will apply for admission into MSW, DSW and PhD programs in the west. Practicing social workers will also need staff development to equip and refresh themselves with the state-of-the-art knowledge and skills in helping their clients. Exchange opportunities will be valuable to both the social workers in the west and the east.

Let us walk together in the way ahead.

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