A Political Economy Analysis of Social Work's Development in China: A Social Development Perspective

Qian Meng and Mel Gray

This paper examines the phenomenal growth of social work in China and the complexities and challenges faced by the profession and related stakeholders in the context of neoliberal economic practice within a hierarchical top-down political system. It proposes developmental social work as a viable indigenous social work practice mode. This analysis based on a collection of academic papers and relevant government reports sheds light on the interplay between welfare developmentalism, institutional dynamics, and professional challenges in the broader sociopolitical context, not least the neoliberal co-optation of social development aligned increasingly with economic goals to the detriment of broader social and structural issues. It shows how the political parameters of the Chinese Communist Party and its pursuit of community integration and social development shaped China's approach to social work. It sees the necessity for a system of welfare services to address socio-structural issues and the indigenization and cultural adaption of social work in China as an expressly political process. Regarding the former, the government's strategy of outsourcing public services to accord with its agenda has resulted in a contractual relationship between social organizations, including nongovernment and social work organizations, and the state. This has limited the independence and hindered the development of a strong civil society, and curtailed social workers' autonomy, exacerbating professional challenges relating inter alia to the low number of qualified social work practitioners, limited job opportunities outside major urban centers, high staff turnover, and poor quality services provided by those without formal social work training. To enhance professional recognition in China, the paper suggests a holistic developmental approach that involves the resolution of individual

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problems through investing in people, helping them to build their capacity, drawing on social capital, and capitalizing on market opportunities to promote self-reliance, thereby contributing to community and social development.

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Social workers in the Global South have proposed that development-oriented (developmental or pro-poor) social work was far better suited to addressing issues relating to poverty and social inequality than remedial, individualistic, casework approaches (Gray, 2023; Gray & Lombard, 2022). Heavily influenced by Western practice models, over the last 30 years, social work in China evolved mainly as a profession focused on individualistic solutions, mainly through case-work interventions. When the Chinese Communist government recruited and deployed social workers to promote social harmony and mitigate social conflict, this approach did little to address broader regional, rural, and structural social problems, especially issues relating to migrant workers, and left-behind women, children, and older people in rural communities (Lai, 2022; Meng, Gray, Bradt, & Roets, 2022). These social problems were a direct result of transformative modern-ization that had led to rapid urbanization and the hollowing out of rural villages as rural populations moved *en masse* to more lucrative urban areas. The loss of economically active, able-bodied workers not only exacerbated rural poverty and underdevelopment but also brought massive social and economic challenges to urban areas. In addition, contributing to this situation was the industrialization and commercialization of agriculture, which led to the demise of smallholder farming, abandoned farmland, and reduced food productivity (Ku & Kan, 2020; Meng, Gray, Bradt, & Roets, 2019). Consequent threats to sustainable rural food production arising from the loss of arable farmland, declining food self-sufficiency, and increased reliance on food imports heightened concerns over food safety and security (Ku & Kan, 2020). Thus, some Chinese scholars have proposed that social development offers a more apt model for social work in China (Lai, 2022; Zhang, Yang, & Ku, 2008). Informed by social development as "a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development" (Midgley, 1995, p. 25), social investment advanced human and social capital formation as an empowering strengths-based approach to poverty alleviation. In this vein, the pioneering *Lvgeng* and *Shuangbai* rural social work practice models employed com-munity development strategies to address poverty and meet local people's service needs (Zhang et al., 2008). With their focus on capacity and asset building, these models have had a significant influence on rural social work practice in China. As Lai (2022) observed, in the developmental practice approach, "the social worker becomes a practitioner of social policy in the community with the goal of pov-erty reduction" (p. 1). For Lai (2022), the discourse of social investment offered "social workers an opportunity to obtain [a] larger space to practice" (p. vii), since

individualistic casework practices alone had "little impact on the oppressive social structure" (p. vii) in China. Further, it was highly likely that local authorities would absorb "community organizations built by social workers" (p. vii). However, this could have negative outcomes if used to engineer social change "unrelated to or even conflicting with social justice" (p. vii), as had happened in other contexts, where the neoliberal co-optation of welfare and social development increasingly aligned it to economic goals to the detriment of broader social and structural issues (Gray, 2010; Lai, 2022). The following discussion examines China's paths in negotiating welfare developmentalism and the increasing influence of neoliberalism on the development of social work and social work organizations since 2000. Table 1 provides a summary of the major developments and associated professional challenges discussed in this paper.

2000–2020: Welfare Developmentalism, Institutional Dynamics, and Challenges for Social Workers

With major welfare expansion through the social policy era (2002–2020), the Chinese state implemented social development strategically and effectively as a planned process, harmonizing social and economic goals for social improvement (Hong & Ngok, 2022). With the development of social work in China driven by the government, social workers became key players in building China's harmonious socialist society initially through independent social work organisations that emerged alongside public services, the first in Shenzhen in 2007 (Gao & Yan, 2015; Lai, 2022; Meng et al., 2019). This gave social work some autonomy and independence from state-controlled public services. These services grew exponentially and, by 2016, there were 1,163 loosely regulated social work organizations located mainly in the developed areas of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Situated mainly in urban social work organizations, most social work positions were largely administrative (Song, 2019). By 2016, there were 760,000 social workers employed in these positions, but only 300,000 had professional credentials (Ren, 2019). This figure rose to 550,000 credentialed social workers by 2019 with their efforts concentrated on poverty alleviation through support for vulnerable groups, including low-income, poor families, left-behind groups, individuals with disabilities, and older people to whom social workers mainly provided individual casework support and assistance (Yan, 2019).

A culture of experimentation, local management, and risk prevention characterized service provision in the early 2000s until a major policy change in 2011 brought the marketization of services, as neoliberalism became further entrenched. With this change, welfare provision through outsourced social services brought controlling contractual and financial obligations to social work organizations (Chan & Lei, 2017; Enjuto Martinez, Qu, & Howell, 2021; Howell, Fisher, & Shang, 2020; Lei, Luo, &, 2022; Xu, Li, & Cui, 2022). To achieve legitimacy, the social work profession required government sanction and integration within the country's social welfare regime and service culture and, thus, had

Table 1   Social work's development in China from 2000 onward

Timeframe	Development	Professional challenges
2000–2010	Social work had to conform to government-approved education and practice standards through the accreditation and licensing examination that validated practitioners' credentials. Social workers became key players in building China's harmonious socialist society through independent social work organizations that emerged alongside public services, the first in Shenzhen in 2007. A culture of experimentation, local management, and risk prevention characterized service provision with a heavy emphasis on casework, urban services, and the indigenization of social work.	A risk-aversive political environment, restrictive service context, lack of policy support and social recognition, and absence of a strong civil society led to limited professional autonomy and discretion, low salaries, lack of career development opportunities, high living costs, and a high turnover of social workers, while pressure to conform to government policy compromised social work values and standards.
2011–2020	The marketization of services with the entrenching of neoliberalism brought the outsourcing of welfare provision through controlling contractual obligations and the advent of contracted social work organizations and social workers, who had to embed themselves across a complex governance structure. It led to a call for pragmatic, developmental strategies deemed permissible by local government officials for meeting people's service needs and assisting social governance at the grassroots community level.	The authoritarian party-state, misaligned policy imperatives, and demographic variation across neighborhoods created difficulties in adapting to a privatized service environment. This was exacerbated by a lack of local government cooperation and coordination, while excessive government supervision and administrative power limited social workers' autonomy. Working to satisfy government requirements and avoid funding suspension, social work services gave less priority to meeting service users' needs and addressing structural causes.
2021–present	The advent of "red" social work with allegiance to party-political ideology and incorporation into party-political structures, as the state increased its hold on shaping social work.	Compromised autonomous professional mandate and increased party-political engagement.

to adapt to this policy change. This brought yet another round of challenges, as professional social workers had to embed themselves across China's complex governance structure, with the power matrix dividing power between vertically organized functional bureaucracies and horizontal, territorial authorities (Kan & Ku, 2021). As Yuen (2020) explained, just as the Chinese party-state was fragmented along hierarchical central-local lines, the local state (local government)

was fragmented administratively along a matrix of vertical bureaucracies and horizontal coordinating bodies (see Figure 1). Thus, the complex political processes surrounding the government procurement of services provided by social work organizations placed structural constraints on social workers who were now financially dependent on local states. The authoritarian nature of the party-state, misaligned policy imperatives across the distributed power matrix, and demographic variation across neighborhoods proved especially challenging (Yuen, 2020).

Zhu and Chen's (2013) case study of a government-purchased service project found a lack of local government cooperation and coordination, and excessive government supervision and administrative power that limited the ability of social workers to address the structural cause of service-users' problems. In working to satisfy government requirements and avoid funding suspension, social work services gave less priority to meeting service users' needs, lest the local government suspend funding. Zhu and Chen (2013) believed that the system could work only if social work services were able to establish a strategic, cooperative, independent relationship with local governments that employed social workers and social work organizations as vehicles for service delivery, not as agents and
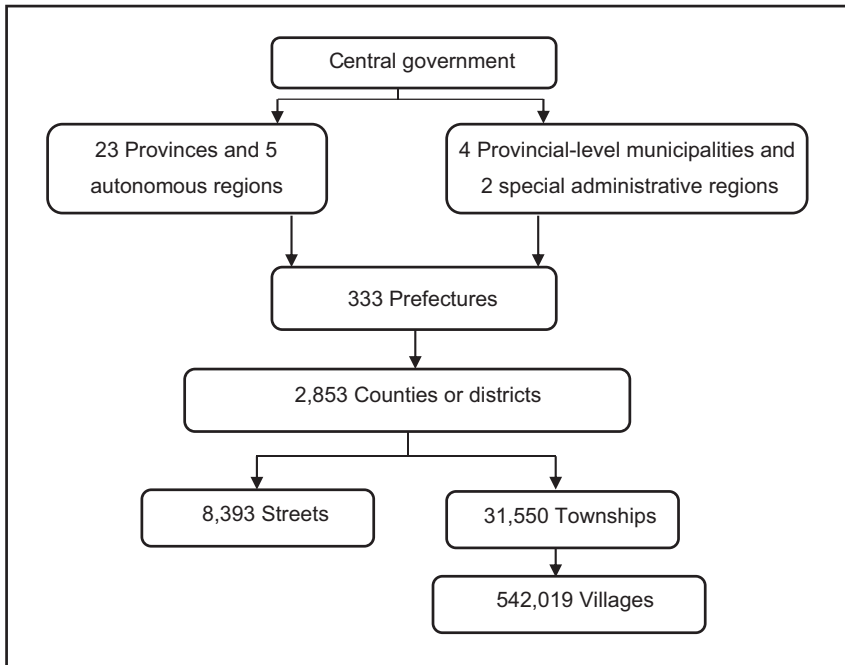

Figure 1   China's administrative structure.
Source: Adapted from Tan & Wong (2022).

agencies "for policy advocacy or interest representation" (Yuen, 2020, p. 183). In this marketized service environment, it was improbable that Chinese social workers could adopt a radical, critical political approach lest it engender conflict. This drew them increasingly to pragmatic, developmental strategies that local government officials deemed permissible for meeting people's service needs and assisting social governance at the grassroots community level.

Developmental Turn

Against this backdrop, Guo (2016) discussed the varying epistemologies of Western social work practice models using evidence-based practice (EBP) and action-reflective practice (ARP) as examples at either end of the empirical-pragmatic spectrum. Grounded in research, the EBP model sought to improve the effectiveness of services and efficacy of professional practice. Rooted in pragmatism, the ARP combined empirical and practical knowledge tailored to local situations. It favored situational, case-by-case, on-the-spot experiments and offered a micro-integrated foundation for professional competence. Guo (2022a) believed both models were limited, calling for structural approaches grounded in emancipatory social theories that promoted individual awareness and action to change vulnerable people's alienation and oppression. In questioning the applicability of Western social work theories and models, such as EBP and ARP, and their fit with traditional Chinese culture and socialist ideology, Luk (2017) drew on the theory of developmental social work (hereafter DSW) as pioneered in South Africa. Thus, he suggested a balanced focus on economic and social development, with social work in China following South Africa's lead in positioning itself within the country's social development, poverty alleviation, and community development processes. Describing social development as a government-led multifaceted system of social governance involving social work, nongovernment, and community organizations, he believed China's welfare system should follow South Africa's adoption of a developmental perspective, focused on social investment, community economy, and employment participation using DSW strategies involving community-based, sustainable livelihood approaches, participatory, democratic decision-making and social planning, and social policy practice and advocacy (Figure 2).

Within the government-procurement environment, the effective integration of professional social work in community governance became a critical issue in the goal of helping people to help themselves. Zhang (2011) believed that to address people's livelihood needs, social workers should adopt community-based strategies focused on sustainable livelihoods through economic empowerment, democratic participation, cultural heritage preservation, fair trade, urban–rural cooperation, mutual help, and environmental protection. Only then, could they respond to poverty and unsustainable development, and promote social justice.

In DSW, communities served as the primary workplace for social workers. Promoting people's capabilities involved increasing their situational agency,

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ **Dimensions:** Personal, social, economic, and environmental │
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┌──────────┐
│   **DSW**  │
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│ **Strategies:** Democratic participatory, community-based, │
│ sustainable livelihoods approach involving fair trading,  │
│ urban-rural cooperation, mutual help, local planning, and │
│ policy practice and advocacy                              │
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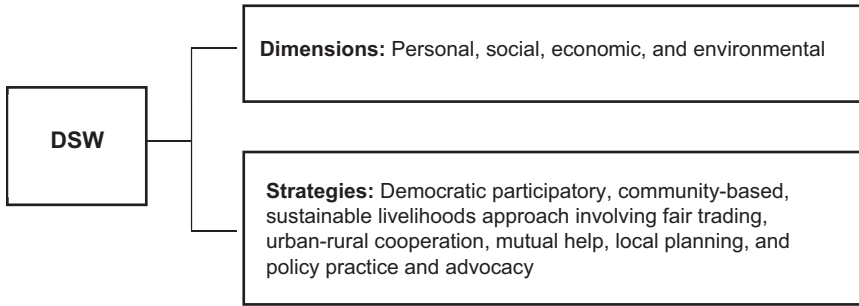
Figure 2   Dimensions and strategies of developmental social work (DSW).

which, in turn, enhanced their self-determination (Tong, 2023). Xu and Huang's (2020) study of a community center in Shenzhen showed the interactive relationship, and logic of action, between professional social workers and regional power subjects. The party-led project logic—embedding (weak) social workforces and (strong) regional administrative power subjects—led to the failure of professional social work practice. More effective was the restructured and optimized community governance structure that required professional social workers to integrate grassroots party and government resources to address common concerns. The party's leadership supported actions to enhance people's participation in community governance. Social workers could exercise some autonomy in doing this through the services they provide.

Zhang (2016) argued that to tackle local livelihood, living conditions, and environmental issues and further social justice and sustainable economic and social development, social workers had to maintain a strong community presence and collaborative relationship with the residents. This was especially important as community social work roles of capacity building, resource linkage, collaboration, and facilitation rested on trust. The primary goal was to revitalize the sociocultural fabric, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability of urban and rural communities by fostering public participation, promoting economic development, providing neighbourhood support, celebrating cultural diversity, and encouraging environmental friendliness.

Calling for decolonized social work education and practice, and participatory action research, DSW sought to respond to local community needs. Sensitive to local cultures and contexts, it valued local over professional knowledge. This developmental approach fit Guo's (2022b) vision of people-centered transformative social work that valued local knowledge and complemented the functions of traditional families and communities. Centered on empowerment, it sought to strengthen family and community relationships, make personal troubles public issues, and facilitate people's participation in local development. It sought collective rather than individualistic practice methods, including community development, social policy engagement, and advocacy, and called for positive and

productive rather than resistant and deconstructive engagement. Ultimately, DSW aimed to create thriving, liveable communities, where residents could lead happy and fulfilling lives. Social workers needed to intervene to improve rural resident's livelihoods by engaging in community economic activities, establishing farmer's cooperatives, and training local practitioners and volunteers (He, 2020; Jiang, Ping, & Sun, 2018). The social economy approach offered a model for community economic engagement.

Social economy approach: Lvgeng model

Situated between the public and private capitalist economies, the social economy propagated under Third Way politics in Europe and Australia constituted a third—nonpublic, for-profit—sector comprising social organisations or enterprises, including businesses with social causes (Chaves & Monzón, 2012; Gray & Crofts, 2002; Gray, Healy, & Crofts, 2003). Its goal was to alleviate dependency on state welfare through the development of for-profit social enterprises. Associated with social capital, the social economy was also the terrain of local community economic development and social entrepreneurship (Gray & Crofts, 2002; Kay, 2006). It rested on local ingenuity to alleviate the effects of welfare cutbacks as neoliberalism took hold. It excluded not-for-profit private welfare organizations that did not engage in "economic activity with a social remit" (Smith, 2005, p. 276), though encompassed cooperatives, mutual aid and self-help organizations, and voluntary associations that engaged in income generation or supported the livelihoods of their members. Based on principles of social justice, economic empowerment, democratic participation, and shared decision-making, social economy organizations mobilized local people's engagement in cooperative, voluntary, and collective income-generating activities designed to further developmental outcomes and meet people's livelihood needs. Motivated by shared interests, their members worked to find ways to support and enhance their income-generating activities, plowing profits back into growing the enterprise.

Defined as "an economy organized in such a way as to serve the needs and aspirations of ordinary people, not elites" (Wright, 2006, p. 107), Ku (2012) believed that the social economy offered rural social workers an alternative form of local, bottom-up, people-centered, community-based economic development. Focused on economic or income-generating activities, it capitalized on the linkages between and well-being of inter-related economic actors, including producers and consumers, and economic activities from procuring goods for production, marketing, and sales.

Ku and Kan (2020) saw the social economy approach as a viable, emancipatory alternative that provided practical strategies for community economic empowerment and social development. They referred to social economy as a social work practice framework that, in their case study of the *Lvgeng* model in *Pingzhai* administrative village, in the northeastern region of Yunnan province in Southwest China, promoted community empowerment and sustainable rural

development (Table 2). It also served as a poverty-alleviation strategy for rural farmers. They noted that it had inspired social workers to explore this alternative pathway for "sustainable food production and consumption" (Ku & Kan, 2020, p. 353). It empowered rural producers while giving urban consumers access to affordable, locally and sustainably produced food. Responding to the increasing demands for safe and healthy foods in urban areas, rural producers, organized into cooperatives, grew organic crops using sustainable farming practices. Chinese social workers, adopting fair-trade principles, helped rural producers connect directly with urban consumers to sell their produce at a favorable price:

> As a guiding notion for social work practice, social economy integrates people and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments within an egalitarian framework that has the potential to address prevailing structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power and resources. It is pluralistic, bottom-up, democratic, and non-monopolistic, and it prioritizes the needs of local communities. This social work approach offers useful insights for addressing agrarian challenges and building toward sustainable rural development (Ku & Kan, 2020, p. 353).

Government-purchased Contracted Social Work Services: Shuangbai Scheme

The developmental approach worked in tandem with the system of government-purchased contracted social work services already described. The policy change in 2011 brought the outsourcing of public services and contracting of private social work services first in in the city of Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, effectively placing them under provincial government control through conditional funding mechanisms (Department of Civil Affairs of Guangdong Province, 2016). Anchored in market mechanisms, a dual principal-agent structure, and contract-based service management, outsourcing was short-term, project-based, and reliant on third-party oversight, assessment, and evaluation (Chen & Zheng, 2019). It brought numerous challenges as social work organizations sought to adapt to this privatized service environment. To gain the government's trust and secure funding, social work organizations often cut costs through selective service provision with many focused on short-term outcomes rather than long-term community development initiatives, seemingly working against developmental goals. As the purchasing of services increased, competition intensified, leading to potential monopolies, secretive operations, kickbacks, illegal bidding, and tailor-made scoring. Third-party evaluations brought problems with self-determined criteria, and fabricated and malicious evaluations driven by significant commercial interests and the gradual erosion of objectivity (Chen & Zheng, 2019).

Initiated in 2017, the *Shuangbai* scheme by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs heralded a change in the approach to rural social service delivery (Kan & Ku, 2023). Rather than tailor-made services, it focused

on improving people's livelihoods through uniform, long-term, comprehensive, standardized service provision in rural communities (Chen & Zheng, 2019; Kan & Ku, 2023; Yan & Li, 2017). It established social work service stations across the province and thousands of new positions for professional social workers in these service stations with coordination centers at the municipal level that, in turn, oversaw welfare programs in the townships under their jurisdiction (Kan & Ku, 2023). Directly supervised, managed, and evaluated by the provincial government, each station employed a team of three to eight social workers (Chen & Zheng, 2019). The funding came from civil affairs offices at the provincial, municipal, and county levels, with the provincial department providing an annual budget of 17 million yuan for social work training and 12 million yuan for programs implemented by social work service stations (Kan & Ku, 2023). Reports indicated that the Guangdong provincial government planned to invest 1.458 billion yuan to increase the number of frontline social workers in the program to 30,000 and establish 1,611 social work workstations, allocating 30,000 yuan annually to each. Rather than contract NGOs to provide services, *Shuangbai* hired social workers on a contract basis (Kan & Ku, 2023; Lai, 2022).

Under *Shuangbai's* standardised, top-down scheme, the state played a direct role in staff hiring and program design, while the township government of each project site was responsible for recruiting social workers to staff the community service stations. Rather than being employees of existing NGOs, these social workers worked for the government on a contract basis and reported directly to government agencies. They were also required to go through a standardized training program in its administrative-led approach designed by the provincial department of civil affairs. Under the scheme, social workers received uniform training and instructions on how to engage with the different neighbourhoods through their stations. *Shuangbai* projects had a singular focus on improving service delivery and enhancing grassroots governance, in line with the portfolio of the Civil Affairs Department, with social workers performing administrative duties for the village government (Kan & Ku, 2023). Under *Shuangbai*, professional service provision involved individual assistance that began with building trust with officials in local government and village committees; identifying people in need; gathering information about the individual's family structure, employment, income, and health; and creating a service plan, including follow-up and eventual termination of assistance (Zhang & Liao, 2021a).

Zhang and Liao (2021a) believed that *Shuangbai* should go beyond addressing livelihoods to investing in human and social capital. Lai (2022) saw the potential for DSW through which Chinese social workers applied social work techniques to achieve community development goals by prioritizing vulnerable people and communities and using community-based interventions (Zhang & Liao, 2021b). Zhang and Liao (2021b) described the underlying developmental practice theory's grounding in sociological analyses of social problems and the theory of social capital. Social workers assessed the problems of service users in the social context of the community using an assets-based community development framework.

Essentially, in the developmental model, social work involves the resolution of individual problems by investing in people, helping them to build their capacity, drawing on social capital, and capitalizing on market opportunities to promote self-reliance, thereby contributing to poverty reduction.

Important to social workers' potential to contribute to community and social development was their ability to meet the myriad professional challenges each successive policy change brought. Essentially, social workers were constantly seeking ways to enhance professional recognition. Two processes critical to this in the social work discourse in China was increasing social work's relevance and responsiveness to local conditions; this meant that ensuring their practice theories and methods were fit for purpose through a process of indigenization. Initially, social work fell under the jurisdiction of civil affairs. Thus, early on, Wang (2001) conceptualized authentic social work within the context of civil mutual help and statutory welfare. As social workers adapted to successive policy changes and the multiple tasks assigned to them, indigenization increasingly became a process of Sinicisation (Xu, Tian, & Sun, 2021) that has intensified under post-2020 developments embedding social work in party-building activities through service provision and grassroots development. It is to these matters the discussion now turns. Table 2 describes the *Lvgeng* model and *Shuangbai* scheme.

Meeting Professional Challenges: Measures to Enhance Social Work Recognition

Responses to political processes surrounding indigenization

As the implementation of quality social work services proved difficult in China's constantly changing political environment and service structure, the government

Table 2   Description of *Lvgeng* model and Shuangbai scheme

Practice models	Funding support	Stakeholders	Objectives
Lvgeng model	Self-reliant	Social work practitioners, scholars, producers and consumers, local residents, village committees, and NGOs	Poverty alleviation, sustainable rural development, income generating, capacity building, solidarity, economic empowerment, rural-urban alliance practice
Shuangbai scheme	Government purchasing and contracted funding	Social work practitioners, scholars, Guangdong provincial department of civil affairs, village committees, social work stations, and local residents	Professional service provision to meet local needs, human and social capital investment, capacity building

reported reflected dissatisfaction with social work services (Song, 2019). Lu's (2019) study found that most social work practitioners lacked the professional expertise and experience to cope with the multiple tasks assigned to them. As well as controlling work environments, some scholars noted that the ongoing use of mainstream Western social work theories had hampered social workers' responsiveness to local people's needs; thus, the need to transform Chinese social work to respond to local problems and cultures to enhance professional recognition (Xu et al., 2022; Yan & Cheung, 2006; Yan & Tsang, 2008; Yunong & Xiong, 2008).

In the early 2000s, Wang (2001) distinguished between the indigenization of social work introduced by the Global North and authentic, indigenous social work involving local, administrative, and civil affairs work. He described indigenous social work in China as administrative and semi-professional, with social workers deployed within the civil affairs administrative structure. It was semi-professional because those who undertook administrative, and civil affairs tasks did not have a professional social work education. At the time, there was a lack of nongovernment services, so Chinese people tended to seek help from relatives and friends in keeping with Chinese cultural traditions. An individual's social identity determined the assistance they could receive from the government welfare system, while their social relationships determined the help they could obtain from the civil system of family and community support networks. Thus, for Wang (2001), authentic social work constituted civil mutual help and statutory welfare, because, as modernization intensified, the traditional mutual help system within families and communities could no longer function as effectively as before and only a robust welfare system could meet people's service needs. However, the public welfare system could not cope with the problems arising from fast-paced urbanization and the central government would, as we have shown, later turn to the community "as a new locus of welfare provision and the basic unit of governance in urban China" (Yuen, 2020, p. 167).

Twenty years later, Xu et al. (2021) identified three stages of development of in social work in China: Indigenization, authentication, and Sinicization. Spanning 1987 to 2005, the first stage of *indigenization* involved the uncritical importation of social work theory and practice from Hong Kong, the USA, and Europe. From 2006 to 2012, the second stage of *authentication* involved the selective importation of Western social work knowledge and the training of a large social work workforce with social work academics and tutors from Hong Kong playing a key role. Beginning in 2013, the third stage of *Sinicization* saw social work firmly embedded in state-introduced, party-led system of social governance that emphasized responsiveness to local communities, and Chinese cultural values and socialist policies. Sinicization involved the development of Chinese models that addressed Chinese ethnicity, culture, and history and conformed to socialist goals and objectives. Wang (2023) referred to social work's attempts to respond to the state's agenda of Chinese-style modernization and intervene in areas such as social assistance, rural revitalization, migrant worker inclusion, social service provision, and social governance as a renewed process of indigenization

With the sociopolitical context as a structural hindrance for the Indigenization of professional values and standards, social work in China had to strike a delicate balance between adhering to its foundational values and conforming to the broader political agenda. Essentially, social work's effectiveness was dependent on its relevance and utility in serving the state's political agenda and the respective interests of state bureaucrats and key players involved (Yan & Tsang, 2008). In addressing the sociocultural impacts of economic reform within China's authoritarian, institutional governing structures, it straddled traditional Chinese cultures and contemporary political ideologies and related discourses (Leung, 2014; Meng et al., 2022). In an authoritarian environment such as this, social work is always political, no matter what the intervention involves. To be successful, social workers need to engage in political processes right down to gaining the support of local government officials and power elites. Unsurprisingly, the profession faced many challenges within this sociopolitical milieu.

Facing professional challenges

As discussed, the risk-aversive political environment, restrictive service context, lack of policy support and social recognition, and absence of a strong civil society reduced social workers' inclinations to engage in sensitive structural issues and advocate for marginalized groups (Huang & Xiong, 2018; Jiang, 2015; Yuen, 2020). These factors, coupled with limited autonomy and discretion, low salaries, lack of career development opportunities, and high living costs, led to a high turnover of social workers (Jiang, 2015). In Shenzhen, alone, the turnover rate increased from 8.2% in 2008 to 19.8% in 2013. The limited job opportunities outside major urban centers did not help the situation or the service environment, where qualified social work practitioners were in the minority, and practitioners without formal social work training provided poor quality services. This had a severe impact on professional development, especially relating to ethical practice standards. More broadly, the pressure to conform to mainstream political ideology has led to a dilution of professional social work values (Zheng & Zhang, 2020). This has led to low professional practice standards and a unique form of government-dominated social work implementing a state-led administrative decolonizing framework (Lin, 2022). It also led to a continued emphasis on individual casework and disregard for social reform, as state control limited social work's political mandate (Gao & Yan, 2015; Zhang & Liao, 2021b). Nevertheless, there were concerted attempts to indigenize Western social work theories and approaches that were consistent and aligned with Chinese cultural norms and political ideologies. In the main, however, indigenous social work in China focused on service provision and system maintenance rather than social change (Zheng & Zhang, 2020).

There have been various interpretations on the challenges faced by the profession. For example, Zhang and Liao (2021b) perceived four major challenges. The first related to its limited role in social assistance and governance in practice.

The second related to the difficulties in dislodging Western theories and models that were inconsistent with Chinese culture and political ideology in education and practice. The third was the large number of practitioners without a social work education and professional qualifications, and the fourth, was social work's ambivalent relationship with the government, due to the limits it placed on professional development and social responsiveness. For Zheng and Zhang (2020), social work faced three challenges. The first related to the *loss of its social functions*, due to its absorption in government and positioning as an administrator of grassroots governance. The second to a *loss of professional autonomy*, due to the profession's heavy reliance on government resources and funding support, and the time-consuming need to conform to the government terms of service provision and third-party assessments. The third related to the *loss of comprehensive service provision* with social workers selectively targeting low-needs clients to meet performance measures and favoring nonpolitical casework, teamwork, and community work rather than emancipatory social action and advocacy. There was a huge pressure toward conformity to core Chinese values, such as prosperity, civility, harmony, freedom, equality and the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship, and China's sociocultural dictum of helping people to help themselves. There was a danger that, in catering to party-political ideology and principles, social workers would lose their professional standpoint and rights-and-justice focus.

For Zheng and Zhang (2020), indigenization in China effectively involved aligning professional social work values with the government's program to promote social harmony. Social workers had to conform to government-approved education and practice standards through the accreditation and licensing examination that validated the credentials of practitioners, including assistant social workers and social workers without professional education. Eligibility was broad. Administrative personnel or community workers engaged in "social work practice" could become "social workers" if they passed the exam. The exam content emphasized mainstream ideologies, such as adhering to socialist core values and person-centered principles. As a result, administrators in the community committee became "social workers" and, through the credential exam, could offer government-purchased social services even though they lacked professional skills, approaches, and values. They used administrative methods and drew on their grassroots experience, favoring pragmatic rather than value-based professional practice founded on critical thinking and reflection. This effectively weakened the professional organization of social work, with the relationship between social work organizations, social workers, and the government resembling labor dispatching, in which the government issued contracts to purchase services from social work organizations employing social workers. The community committee, rather than the professional social work, organizational structure became the primary employer of social workers. In some underdeveloped areas, the local government changed job positions in community committees to social work positions, resulting in social workers practicing without any affiliation to social work organisations.

Within this organisational environment, Zheng, Wang, and Ma (2021) labeled social workers, sanctioned and mandated by the state, "red" practitioners to signify allegiance to a party-political stance and ideology rather than an autonomous professional mandate. They argued that the state used instructional leadership to promote service efficacy and enhance the legitimacy of its governance, while professionals lacked autonomy. "Leading the profession with red" was its strategy for shaping social work.

Post-2020: Party-building Via Service Provision and Social Governance

Ku and Kan (2020) described China as an economy in transition—from state socialism to marketization, from collectivism to capitalism—noting this had "created profound challenges for the Party at the grassroots" (Kan & Ku, 2021, p. 78), which were exacerbated by the economy's failure to rebound after the pandemic lockdown. The economic slowdown posed a challenge to the CCP's legitimacy, given its reliance on economic growth to create employment and improve living standards. Consequently, Hung (2023) reported that 21.3% of Chinese citizens, aged between 16 and 24 years, living in cities, were unemployed as per the reports in August 2023. The high youth unemployment rate evoked an anti-work movement among young Chinese workers, known as "lying flat." Hung (2023) observed that the CCP might resort to repression as its primary policy strategy to address economic stagnation and prevent threats to the Chinese regime. Instead, in response to its waning authority in urban society, the CCP had sought "to deepen its territorial reach and regain political relevance by emphasizing welfare provision and service delivery at the grassroots" (Kan & Ku, 2021, p. 75). In doing so, it had co-opted social workers and previously independent social work organizations "as 'partners' and 'collaborators' in service provision … [to] regain its ability to mobilize the masses through appropriating the vocabulary of participation and volunteerism" (Kan & Ku, 2021, p. 75) they espoused. Given the accompanying marketization of services, in successfully fusing CCP authority with market power at the urban grassroots, it had "appropriated social forces to reestablish its presence and bolster its legitimacy, with important implications for the autonomy and professionalism of [increasingly politically quiescent] NGOs" (Kan & Ku, 2021, p. 75). Thus, the CCP continuously strengthened its integrative control over social organizations to reinforce its leadership, in the process of recruiting social workers to carry out party-building work, including establishing internal Party cells and organizing activities such as study sessions. This was a standard requirement and decisive factor in the evaluation of social work organizations involved in government-purchasing arrangements (Kan & Ku, 2023). The move to consolidate Party-building began in earnest with the 19th Party Congress in 2017, reflecting the Xi administration's overarching priority to reassert CCP control at the grassroots through institutions of neighborhood self-governance, namely, residents' and residential affairs supervision

committees, homeowners' associations, and property services enterprises. As Kan and Ku (2021) observed:

> Embedding the Party into the organs of neighborhood governance has transformed the way welfare and services are provided at the community level. Two recent developments encapsulate this: the proliferation of Party Mass Service Centres and the enrolment of social-work organizations into grassroots Party work (p. 81).

The most recent policy changes embedded in the *2023 State Council Institutional Reform Plan* firmly aligned China's social institutions with Party ideology. Since the Reform Era began, there have been nine rounds of State Council (China's cabinet) reorganization, in 1982, 1988, and every five years thereafter. With the first 20 years of the 21st century described as its social policy era, massive change in Chinese politics saw its Party leader, Xi Jinping, gradually changing the State Council's powers to increase CCP actionaries' control of decision-making at all levels. Thus, Xi's third term in office saw the concentration of executive power in the hands of CCP working groups rather than ministers and other administrative officials. As part of a broader plan to restructure the Communist Party and state institutions, the National People's Congress (NPC) approved the 2023 State Council Institutional Reform Plan. Its *Working Procedures for the State Council* no longer referred to prior socialist ideologies, such as Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, effectively embedding Xi's political thought in the State Council's rulebook reduced from 64 to 43 articles. They require China's hierarchical governing structure, comprising administrators and decision-makers at all levels, to defer to higher-ranking CCP leaders on all major decisions.

Falling under China's cabinet, the State Council, the 2023 Institutional Reform Plan established a new Central Social Work Department as a functional department of the Central Committee. This new Department exercised "unified leadership" over the reclassified National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration, enhanced Party-building initiatives in the nonpublic sector and grassroots organizations, guided the construction of the social work workforce, and took over the duties of the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In short, it had a central role in the development of the system and its capacity for governing urban and rural communities, including the drafting of social work policies (State Council, 2023). With its political blueprint of building a socialist harmonious society through the maintenance of social stability and control, the CCP decisively mitigated emerging threats to state governance and legitimacy. In this way, the Chinese government spearheaded the development of social work, tasking social workers with mitigating social issues through professional service provision, effectively limiting their capacity to address structural and politically sensitive issues and uphold human rights and social justice within this authoritarian context.

Conclusion

The fast-paced changes in China through the Reform Era quickly rendered institutional structures and forms of engagement through the social policy years obsolete. Party-led services are drastically changing the social work terrain as social workers adapt to yet another round of policy change. Under the influence of neoliberalism, the government transitioned from direct service provision to purchasing services from social work organizations. This shift was also indicative of the Party's strategic approach of reinforcing its leadership and political control by positioning social work as a service provider and an instrument for governance and Party building, which placed political constraints on social work and limited social workers' professional autonomy. Further, the complexities arising from the shortage of qualified social workers and the ongoing presence of unqualified practitioners, along with limited job opportunities outside major cities, low salaries, and high staff turnover, also compromised the quality of services and constrained social workers' professionalism. In response, China's social work practitioners, drawn into community governance through service provision, have increasingly theorized their practice in developmental terms. This paper described two examples that aimed to address challenges through grassroots developmental community interventions: the *Lygeng* social economy model and *Shuangbai* comprehensive service scheme. In its Chinese iteration, DSW involves a pragmatic approach that requires social workers to negotiate the hierarchical and horizontal power matrix, while avoiding conflict with the authorities at all levels. For this, they need well-honed skills of political engagement to gain and maintain the trust of party leaders and government officials, on the one hand, and service users and residents, on the other. In negotiating this tricky path, they constantly confront and negotiate numerous constraints on their ability to tackle sensitive structural issues and advocate for marginalized groups, while continuing to make a positive contribution to the community and social development.

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