

Review Paper

The Institutionalisation of Social Work Practice in China: Dynamics, Dilemmas, and Future Directions

Dade He*, Aizan Sofia Amin & Azahah Abu Hassan Shaari

Centre for Research in Psychology and Human Well-being, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: p132590@siswa.ukm.edu.my

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Abstract: Over the past forty years, China has developed a state-led model of social work practice. This study adopts a narrative review methodology, synthesising key developments in the institutionalisation of social work in China. It examines the value of this model in advancing professional development and improving service users' well-being, while also highlighting its key limitations. The first section outlines the shifts in the welfare system during the 1980s reforms and explains how these changes facilitated the institutionalisation of social work. The second section describes how the state supports social work practice and defines the roles of social workers. It argues that this model has expanded the workforce and enhanced service delivery, particularly when social order and individual needs are aligned. However, its heavy reliance on government funding constrains professional independence. When intervention strategies prioritise the restoration of social order, services may become regulatory rather than supportive, potentially undermining both service users' well-being and the profession itself. This paper therefore calls for a more balanced approach in which the state maintains a guiding role while allowing greater autonomy for practitioners. At the same time, social workers must develop stronger analytical capacity to identify the root causes of service recipients' challenges, especially within the broader context of individual–society relations, so as to ensure the profession fulfils its ethical mandate and contributes meaningfully to global social work discourse.

Keywords: Social Work; China; state-led model; dynamics; dilemmas.

Introduction

The development of the social work profession in China began in the 1980s. Over the past four decades, the state has consistently played a leading role in shaping its trajectory, and a state-led model of social work development has been established (Ku, 2020). In the realm of professional education, the government has played an active role in advancing social work programmes within higher education institutions. For instance, with state backing, the Department of Sociology at Peking University launched the first social work programme in 1988. As of 2025, at least 372 universities across China were offering programmes in social work, indicating the structured expansion of an integrated education system covering diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels. In terms of professionalisation, the Chinese government has also demonstrated a strong commitment.

A significant milestone occurred with the issuance of the Chinese Communist Party's policy document *Decision on Some Major Issues in Building a Socialist Harmonious Society*, which explicitly proposed "building a substantial workforce of social work professionals." (Communist Party of China, 2006). In the same year, the government introduced a national qualification system for social workers. The momentum was sustained by the State Council's strategic policy document the *National Medium- and Long-Term Talent*

Development Plan (2010–2020), which identified social work professionals as one of six priority talent categories. The plan also set an ambitious target of training three million social workers by 2020 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010).

Although social work is a profession with roots in Western societies (Wan Sulaiman et al., 2020; Mohamad Azhar, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024), China has consistently emphasised the need to indigenise its values, principles, and practice models, rather than replicating Western paradigms wholesale (Meng et al., 2024; Lin, 2022). In recent years, China has developed a state-led model of social work practice. However, few studies have systematically examined the advantages and limitations of this model. A systematic examination of the state-led model is essential, as it enables policymakers to identify areas for improvement and make more informed decisions regarding the institution's future direction of development. Such scrutiny ultimately contributes to enhancing the social work profession and improving the quality of services available to service users.

This research gap, if left unaddressed, may give rise to several negative implications. At the local level, such a lack of critical inquiry may lead the state to overlook its inherent constraints in fostering services that genuinely promote individual well-being. For example, the model may place undue emphasis on aligning interventions and the allocation of social resources with state-defined priorities, which can result in services drifting away from the actual needs of those who receive them. Such dynamics may ultimately trigger a broader crisis of trust in the profession, especially among those who rely most directly on social work services. At the international level, as China increasingly establishes itself as a major hub of global knowledge production, a growing number of countries—particularly those in the Global South—are likely to draw upon China's model to inform the development of their own social work systems.

Without a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, these countries may fail to anticipate the potential social and ethical risks involved in adopting China's state-led model of social work development. Against this backdrop, this paper addresses four key questions: Why did the Chinese government begin to strongly promote the development of social work from the 1980s onwards? Through what mechanism did the state support the implementation of social work practice? How has the state defined the roles and functions of social work within this institutional framework? And finally, how should the state-led model of practice that has since emerged be critically assessed? Engaging with these questions is of significant scholarly and practical value. Not only can such an inquiry help inform the future direction of social work localisation in China, but it may also—given China's increasing prominence in global knowledge production (The Royal Society, 2011; Li, 2018)—offer a meaningful critical perspective for other countries and regions seeking to draw on China's experience, particularly in the field of practice, in shaping their own social work profession.

Methodology

This study adopts a narrative review approach, which involves summarising and integrating existing knowledge in a descriptive manner to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Kasa et al., 2025; Mbatha & Mofokeng, 2025). This method is appropriate for the research, as it enables the historical integration of diverse policy documents, theoretical perspectives, and empirical studies (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). It offers the flexibility and depth needed to critically assess the evolution and implications of China's state-led social work model. The review follows the steps outlined by Siddaway (2019).

First, the study clarifies its research objective: to examine the historical changes that prompted the Chinese government to actively promote the development of social work, the mechanisms through which the state supports its implementation, and the roles and functions of social work as defined by the state. Based on this, the study further explores the dynamics and challenges of the current model and proposes potential coping strategies. Second, a literature search was conducted through Google Scholar, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and official websites of the Government of the People's Republic of China using three main keywords: “China, social work” (中国、社会工作), “China, government purchase of social work services” (中国、政府购买社会工作服务), or “China, social work, social governance” (中国、社会工作、

社会治理), among others. The materials collected—whether in Chinese or English—include landmark policy documents, journal articles, books, book chapters, and case studies. Third, the study applies clear inclusion criteria. It prioritises materials published between 2000 and 2024 that focus on mainland China and are directly relevant to this research topic. A limited number of works published before 2000 are also included, as they are recognised as foundational sociological texts that help analyse and understand the essential role of social work in addressing the conflictual relationship between the client and society. The researchers then conducted a comprehensive review of the selected literature, identifying and analysing sources that could provide insights into the research questions through thematic analysis.

This process unfolded in several stages. First, all selected sources were read in full to develop a clear grasp of their central arguments and to identify material pertinent to the research questions. Second, recurring ideas, patterns, analytical claims, and illustrative cases were coded across the literature. These initial codes captured, for example, repeated accounts of the emergence of social work during the reform era, descriptions of the mechanisms through which the state supports social work practice, and criticisms concerning the model's implications for professional autonomy and service-user well-being. Third, the codes were compared and consolidated into broader thematic categories, with attention to how each cluster related to different aspects of the research questions. These categories were then reviewed against the full dataset to ensure that they were both representative and analytically sound. Through this process, three main themes were identified: “Historical Opportunities for the Development of Social Work,” “The Model of Social Work Practice with Chinese Characteristics,” and “The Dynamics and Limitations of this Social Work Model.” The article is structured around these themes, with pertinent literature incorporated in a focused and coherent manner.

The Findings

China's Welfare System Transformation in the 1980s

The development of social work in China from the 1980s was not coincidental. It was closely linked to the country's economic reforms and the transformation of its welfare system. As Wang (2014) observes, these reforms created the structural conditions necessary for the emergence of social work as a profession. This section examines how the restructuring of China's welfare system since the late 1970s laid the institutional foundation for the profession's development.

Phase one emphasizes on the socialist planned economy model and the construction of traditional welfare system (1949–1977). Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government began post-war reconstruction and socialist transformation. While a formal welfare system had not yet been established, various temporary relief measures were introduced. In urban areas, the state repurposed relief institutions from the former system to support vulnerable populations, such as older people, orphans, and persons with disabilities (Lin & Lian, 2019). For instance, vagrants, centralised education and labour rehabilitation programmes were implemented. In rural areas, land reform redistributed farmland to landless peasants, aiming to secure livelihoods through land ownership (Dikötter, 2013; China Land Legal System Research Network, 2022).

Phase two emphasizes on the welfare system reconstruction in the reform era (1978–Present). In 1978, China shifted its development strategy from political struggle to economic modernisation. With the introduction of reform and opening-up policies, the planned economy gave way to a socialist market economy. This shift fundamentally transformed the welfare system (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1987). Although public ownership remained dominant, the state began encouraging the development of non-public sectors.

Between 1955 and 1977, the traditional welfare system gradually took shape under the socialist planned economy. Within this economic model, individuals were required to engage in collective labour at locally organised production units. These units, affiliated with the state and operating at the grassroots level, were primarily responsible for organising members to participate in economic production according to centrally formulated plans. In line with this function, they collectively distributed goods and services to their members. In practice, these local production units served as proxies of the state in delivering cradle-to-grave

welfare support. In urban areas, they took the form of work units (danwei), which provided employment-based welfare and public services to employees and their families.

For instance, eligible members could access welfare facilities established by the work unit at minimal or no cost. These facilities included sports centres, canteens, schools, cinemas, hospitals, housing, and more. In rural areas, People’s Communes controlled the basic means of production. Farmers joined their designated communes to participate in agricultural labour, which in turn entitled them to receive public goods provided by the commune. The communes also retained a portion of collective income for public service projects, including healthcare (e.g., medical stations and barefoot doctors), education, cultural and recreational activities, child care, and related services (Leung & Nann, 1995; Lin & Lian, 2019). In short, the traditional welfare system was collectively based and state-led, characterised by minimal market involvement and limited individual mobility. Further details are provided in Table 1.

As a result, the state could no longer serve as the sole welfare provider. On one hand, many individuals left production units for jobs in the non-public sector, thereby losing their unit-based welfare entitlements (Lin et al., 2020). For instance, the reform of state-owned enterprises led to mass layoffs, while coastal cities attracted rural migrants as centres of private enterprise. To meet the welfare needs of these populations, the government had to create new welfare mechanisms. Meanwhile, new social challenges emerged, such as left-behind children and elderly in rural areas and issues related to urban migration management (Duan et al., 2023). These developments exposed the limitations of a state-only welfare model. In response, the government began reconstructing the welfare system based on shared responsibilities and mixed economy. In specific, the new system has several features (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of China’s welfare system before and After 1977

Dimension	Before 1977	After 1977
Welfare System	Traditional danwei-based welfare system	Social insurance-based welfare system with multi-level provision (state–market–society–family)
Welfare Provider	Primarily the state and danwei (work units)	The state, supplemented by the market, NGOs, communities, and families
Target Population	Formal employees and their family members, especially in SOEs and public institutions	All urban and rural residents (coverage gradually expanded through universalised social insurance)
Dependency Structure	Welfare distribution was closely tied to one’s work unit	Welfare increasingly detached from work units; based on contribution, residency, and needs-testing.
Welfare Coverage	Comprehensive: housing, healthcare, education, childcare, pensions, food rations, and funeral support	Fragmented but expanding: pensions, health insurance, Dibao, housing subsidies, NGO services, market-based products
Welfare Nature	Non-universal and non-transferable; benefits as rewards for labour and political loyalty	Semi-universal, contribution-based, partially means-tested; focused on social protection and basic security
Governance Logic	Planned economy and collectivist ideology	Market-driven reforms, risk management, and social governance logic
Reform Driver	Central planning and political control	Economic restructuring, marketisation, rising inequality, and social risks

Source: Bai (2010); Carrillo & Duckett (2011); Lin & Lian (2019).

First, the state provides a basic safety net through minimum living standards for the most vulnerable. Second, a unified social insurance scheme was introduced across rural and urban regions, with contributions from individuals and enterprises. Third, the state encouraged the growth of private welfare services through market mechanisms. Fourth, non-governmental and nonprofit actors were engaged in service delivery. Overall, this system embraces a mixed economy of welfare (Bai, 2010; Carrillo & Duckett, 2011). Within this context, social work gained state recognition as a technical means to address social risks and deliver human services (Wang, 2014).

The model of social work practice in China

As previously noted, the transformation of China’s welfare system has created a policy environment in which the state actively supports the development of the social work profession. The Chinese government has established a state-led model to steer this development (Ku, 2020). In general, this model has two defining features. The government has established a service procurement mechanism to support the implementation of social work practice. Under this system, certain functions previously undertaken by the state are outsourced to qualified actors such as social work organisations. These organisations are responsible for delivering services to the public, with government funding allocated based on service volume and quality (Mok et al., 2021; Qu et al., 2023).

Currently, the government employs two primary models according to practical needs (Wen, 2017). The first is the post-based model, in which local governments establish social work positions based on assessed needs. Approved social work organisations recruit professionals to fill these roles and provide ongoing services. The second is the project-based model, whereby the government issues open calls for proposals targeting specific thematic areas. Social work organisations submit service plans and, if selected through a bidding process, are responsible for project implementation. Although the two models differ in form, both reflect the central role of the state in social work service delivery (see Table 2). First, in both cases, social work organisations and relevant practitioners are fully dependent on government funding—without it, services cannot be sustained. Second, regardless of the model used, service design and implementation must closely align with government priorities. Indeed, the state continues to monitor operations and conduct final evaluations to ensure that social workers’ practices such as the scope of services and service outcomes—are aligned with government-defined standards and expectations (Cho, 2017).

Table 2. Comparison between post-based and project-based government procurement models in social work in China

Model	Post-Based Purchase Model	Project-Based Purchase Model
Core Target	The government funds employed workers to deliver ongoing services	The government funds the delivery of service outcomes based on specific project themes
Service Orientation	Routine and stabilising services (Such as routine community services, disability support, eldercare)	Thematic and innovative services (Such as domestic violence, youth development, psychological crisis intervention).
Duration	Long-term and continuous	Short-term and time-bound (Such as 3 months to 2 years)
Service Stability	Relatively High: social workers are stationed in communities and build sustained relationships	Relatively Low: services terminate at project end; high staff turnover
Professional Autonomy	Limited: prone to administrative tasks and bureaucratic control	Relatively greater: encourages service design and professional intervention
Evaluation Focus	Attendance, service attitude	Service outcomes, project deliverables, quantitative indicators
Common Issues	Risk of being reduced to labour dispatch; bureaucratisation; lack of innovation	Fragmented services; over-adaptation to policy trends; short-term achievements
Strengths	Ensures service continuity at grassroots level; builds permanent staffing	Promotes professional growth and supports innovation
Weaknesses	May become formalistic; limited career development for social workers	High cost; limited sustainability; intense competition among providers

Source: Wen (2017); Qu et al. (2021).

The role of state-defined social work: social governance and stability

From a sociological perspective, social work is a professional practice that mediates the relationship between individuals and broader social structures. In this context, it is important to clarify that the term “individuals” should not be understood narrowly as single persons, but rather as a broad category encompassing multiple layers of service recipients. As Li and Fang (2010) argue, restoring service recipients to their ‘normal’ social

roles is a core objective of social work practice in China. Notably, they emphasise that the concept of “service recipients” extends beyond individuals to include groups and communities. Specifically, at the individual level, this usually includes the poor, the ill, people with behavioural difficulties, and migrant populations—each facing distinct challenges that lead to diverse service needs. At the group level, categories such as women, older adults, children, young people, and persons with disabilities are recognised as sharing common social vulnerabilities.

For instance, adolescents may exhibit rebellious behaviour during transitional stages, while older adults may face issues related to ageing and care. Furthermore, families, institutions, and communities are also regarded as important targets of intervention, as Chinese social work must respond to dysfunctions within these broader units. These interventions aim to support people in managing life challenges, promoting both personal well-being and social development (Li & Wang, 2014; Sarnon@Kusenin et al., 2021). Correspondingly, social structures should be understood as the institutional frameworks and systemic conditions that shape individuals’ lives, such as social policies, cultural norms, economic systems, and political contexts. In fact, a long standing debate in sociology concerns whether society should be seen as an integrated, stable system or a site of ongoing conflict (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Practitioners aligned with the former perspective focus on assisting individuals in adapting to dominant social norms and institutions (see Afifah Idris et al., 2020). In contrast, those who adopt a conflict perspective tend to challenge existing social structures and question their implications for both individuals and society. From this standpoint, analysing the role of social work involves asking whether its core purpose is to maintain the status quo or to facilitate social transformation (Lei et al., 2021).

The Chinese government’s leadership in promoting social work is rooted in its vision of incorporating the profession into a broader system of social governance (Wang, 2018; Wu & Kang, 2023). As Leung et al. (2012) point out, the state often treats social workers as an informal extension of administrative power.” The primary goal of social governance is to get long-term stability. According to official interpretations, social stability is achieved when the majority of citizens voluntarily comply with shared norms and contribute to maintaining order (The Central People’s Government, 2006; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015). This reflects the state’s preference for a highly regulated society rather than one marked by contestation or disruption. Such orientation has deep historical roots: when China shifted from class struggle to economic development in 1978, the state declared that social stability was essential to economic progress (Deng, 1993). Within this policy framework, social work is expected to support grassroots order maintenance. The state’s interest in the profession lies less in its ethical or humanistic values than in its utility as a tool for soft governance. For example, social workers’ skills in psychosocial support, and relationship-building are often regarded as effective strategies for achieving more flexible, human-centred governance (Leung et al., 2012). (Leung et al., 2012). As a result, social workers are increasingly tasked with assisting the state in managing individuals whose lives deviate from dominant social norms or in addressing environments perceived as threats to social stability.

Discussion

China’s model of social work practice diverges fundamentally from the dominant Western paradigm, which typically follows a bottom-up approach grounded in civic participation, advocacy for marginalised populations, and a commitment to structural transformation (Tsang, 2001). In contrast, China’s approach is primarily state-led, emphasising social stability, policy compliance, and service delivery within government-defined frameworks (Qu et al., 2023). This section critically assesses how this model has generated both momentum and constraints in advancing the professionalisation of social work and enhancing broader welfare outcomes.

The dynamics of the state-led model of social work practice

China’s state-led model has driven the rapid expansion of the social work sector. One clear indicator is the substantial growth in both social organisations and qualified professionals. By the end of 2022, official data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs recorded 891,000 social organisations across mainland China—nearly double the 462,000 registered in 2011 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2023). Over the same period, the number of

qualified social workers also surged. In 2022, approximately 931,000 individuals held professional credentials, including 165,000 assistant-level and 28,000 full-level social workers, compared with only 40,755 and 13,421 respectively in 2011. These figures suggest that strong government leadership has been critical in developing both institutional infrastructure and professional capacity within a relatively short timeframe.

When social work supports individuals in adapting to mainstream societal norms, thereby contributing to social development and personal wellbeing, this model has proven highly effective. On the one hand, social organisations and practitioners, funded and overseen by the state, exhibit strong administrative responsiveness in advancing social governance. On the other hand, the persuasive techniques employed by social workers help service users voluntarily align with social norms and institutional expectations, facilitating higher-quality governance outcomes. For example, in Yangjiang, Guangdong Province, social workers recently played a key role in managing community responses to emergency flooding caused by typhoons. Acting promptly on government directives, they conducted door-to-door safety inspections in high-risk areas (Guangdong Social Workers Double-Hundred Project, 2025). Notably, when residents resisted evacuation measures despite evident safety hazards, social workers applied professional techniques—such as active listening, clarification, and persuasion—to educate and reassure them. Their efforts ultimately secured public cooperation, safeguarded lives and property, and preserved social stability. This example illustrates that when the goal of maintaining social stability aligns with the interests of both individuals and society, the state-led model exhibits strong operational dynamics: it enables social work to demonstrate not only high levels of execution and compliance, but also—technically—enhances governance by fostering voluntary adherence through humane and participatory methods, offering a constructive alternative to top-down enforcement (see also Huang, 2023; Guang, 2023).

The limitation of the state-led model of social work practice

Indeed, encouraging individuals to voluntarily comply with social norms is, in many cases, essential for maintaining social stability and promoting individual well-being. Social workers are well positioned to contribute to both social order and personal development, thereby demonstrating the professional value of the social work profession. However, many personal and collective hardships are rooted in structural injustices that constrain individual agency and opportunity (see Oliver, 2013). In such contexts, the role of social work should extend beyond merely adjusting individuals to conform to the existing order, and instead encompass the critical engagement required to challenge inequality and promote social justice. In practice, however, this is difficult to achieve. Within China's current state-led model—where social stability remains the overriding priority—social workers often find it challenging to implement needs-oriented interventions or to engage in advocacy for structural change (Liu, 2018).

Niu and Haugen's (2019) research is illustrative. They conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a social work centre serving foreign populations in Guangzhou. Their study revealed that practitioners are frequently required to collaborate closely with local police stations to monitor the daily behaviour of foreigners and to educate African foreigners on how to be 'good' citizens according to Chinese cultural norms. Consequently, many foreigners living in the community have begun to develop doubts, and even aversion, towards the role of social workers, as what they truly seek is assistance with practical matters, such as maintaining a valid visa or finding a school for their children, rather than surveillance of their private lives. At the same time, they believe that they are not obliged to fully conform to Chinese cultural norms and should have the right to maintain their culturally distinctive ways of life within the community. Social workers also contend that these tasks fall beyond the scope of their professional duties.

Furthermore, Niu and Haugen's (2019) research reveals that social workers are often required to comply with the demands of street-level police officers. Within the state-led model of social work practice, they must adhere to any work arrangements imposed by relevant government departments. Many social workers perceive this as conflicting with their professional values, and some ultimately choose to resign. From a humanistic and socially inclusive perspective, the root issue lay not in the failure of migrant populations to assimilate into mainstream culture, but rather in the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of accommodating cultural diversity. Indeed, the study found that although the social workers themselves

recognised that such disciplinary practices were inappropriate—and that their role should instead focus on creating inclusive and supportive environments—they remained constrained by administrative expectations and state-defined boundaries of intervention. A similar dilemma emerged in interviews conducted by the authors with social workers supporting individuals with physical disabilities. According to the interviewees, some clients expressed strong dissatisfaction with what they perceived as inadequate or unjust government disability policies. However, social workers were limited to offering emotional support and encouraging compliance with existing policies, as their professional role did not permit engagement in policy critique or reform.

In essence, these cases highlight an inherent tension: while many social workers acknowledge that the pursuit of social justice and emancipation lies at the heart of their profession, the state-led model significantly restricts their autonomy and capacity for critical engagement. In this regard, Niu and Haugen's (2019) study reveals that many social workers were unable to tolerate the persistent intervention of street-level police officers in their daily practice. Such interference led them to feel that their work no longer embodied the core professional value of helping others. As a consequence, a considerable number became disillusioned and eventually left the profession. This illustrates how excessive emphasis on obedience to state expectations erodes professional identity. Hence, policymakers need to recognise that overemphasising state authority in guiding social work practice can impede professional autonomy, prompting social workers to question their professional identity and eventually contributing to burnout.

These developments undoubtedly undermine the long-term goal of building a stable and committed social work workforce. Moreover, this not only hampers the development of a distinct professional identity but also limits the long-term improvement of client well-being. For those social workers still working within such institutions, their awareness of, and capacity for, reflective and critical analysis of the structural roots of their clients' dilemmas may be eroded. Over time, some may internalise a depoliticised worldview that frames clients' struggles as personal failures to adapt, rather than recognising their structural roots (see Foucault, 1977; Leung et al., 2012). This may result in the services they provide becoming ineffective in addressing the real nature of clients' problems. Undoubtedly, such a possibility would further hinder the achievement of the profession's foundational mission—to advance inclusion, liberation, and social change for the well-being of individuals.

Conclusion

This paper offers a comprehensive review of the social and historical context underpinning the Chinese state's support for the development of the social work profession, along with the formation of its state-led model of practice. There is no doubt that state policies and financial investment have facilitated the rapid expansion of the profession. Moreover, by integrating social workers into a governance system focused on maintaining social order, the state-led model has proven to be highly effective and responsive—particularly when the objectives of social stability align with the needs of individuals and communities. The authors maintain that the state-led model of social work practice, which emphasises state-led approaches and the development of social governance, retains considerable practicality and applicability in contemporary China. China is a populous country and the largest developing nation in the world. Therefore, a stable and orderly environment is required to advance various aspects of development.

Evidence has shown that this model can facilitate social workers' participation and lead to high-quality governance outcomes. However, this model limits practitioner autonomy, especially in cases where addressing service users' needs requires challenging or transforming prevailing social structures. Such structural tensions may ultimately constrain the long-term development of the profession and diminish the well-being of its service recipients. We call for a more balanced framework for social work practice—one in which the state retains its leading role, with the cultivation of social stability as the central theme, while social workers are afforded greater professional autonomy to engage in advocacy when appropriate, thereby fostering necessary social change in response to their clients' dilemmas. For instance, the state could support experimental initiatives led by social workers aimed at advancing localised social innovation at the community level. Such initiatives may include encouraging social workers to prioritise service users' own interpretations of the

difficulties and challenges they encounter within their communities, and to design interventions grounded in these perspectives and actual needs—even when the primary aim of such interventions is to foster structural change at the community level rather than to target individuals directly.

For example, in the field of disability services, current policy priorities in China tend to focus on “supporting disabled people to achieve social participation”. Under this policy orientation, social workers are often confined to the role of providing rehabilitation-oriented, individualised services. However, the state could also support social workers in listening to the disabling experiences of disabled residents, identifying the social barriers that hinder participation at the community level—such as inadequate accessibility infrastructure or widespread prejudice and discrimination among residents—and developing appropriate strategies to address these obstacles. Admittedly, efforts to tackle such social barriers may trigger tensions and conflicts within the community. For instance, residents may express dissatisfaction if they are required to contribute additional community funds for the construction of accessible facilities; similarly, community education activities aimed at addressing discrimination may provoke resistance or resentment from those who hold stigmatising attitudes.

Nevertheless, these conflicts are largely contained at the community level and remain limited in scope. They are unlikely to escalate into systemic challenges to the broader social order. As such, exploratory, community-oriented practices of this kind—despite generating localised tensions—should not be regarded as conflicting with the state’s overarching goal of maintaining macro-level social stability. In parallel, it is critical to strengthen social workers’ capacity to identify the social and structural roots of clients’ personal difficulties, rather than merely educating them to attribute all of the clients’ problems to individual failings. Within a tightly regulated, social-order-oriented model, practitioners may become accustomed to framing service users’ problems as individual shortcomings, rather than recognising them as outcomes of structural injustice. Reclaiming this critical perspective is essential for fulfilling social work’s foundational mission of promoting equity and social justice.

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