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Social work: A new phenomenon in China

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Social tensions are bubbling in China. Are social workers the way to maintain social stability?

When the Communist Party of China released the full text of the sixth plenum of the 16th National Congress in October 2006, there was a paragraph near the bottom that mentioned the need to increase the quantity and quality of trained social workers in China. To create the “harmonious society” that was former President Hu Jintao’s goal before he stepped down, the party leadership must “raise the professional standards of social workers which China urgently needs”.

“Social work was an academic discipline for a long time until 2006 when the government decided to officially recognise the social work profession as something which the country had to introduce,” explains **Chung Wai Keung**, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Singapore Management University.

“The discipline was introduced back in 1989 when universities started to have social work programmes. They trained social workers, but there were no jobs for them. So social workers ended working as HR personnel or teachers.”

Social workers needed

Where once there were no jobs for social work graduates, now there are plenty.

“The government has announced that they want to have three million professional social workers by 2020,” Chung told *Perspectives@SMU* on the sidelines of the seminar ‘China at the Crossroads’ at the School of Social Sciences. “Right now, they claim they have half a million, but you have to give a big discount on that figure; I think the actual amount is something like 10,000. At least, that’s the figure for the really professional social workers.”

“Right now there are more than 200 social work programmes being offered by universities and technical schools. There are more than 10,000 graduates every year but probably only about 10 percent of them end up being a social worker,” he argues. “The very low salary would be the major hindering factor.”

The reason for this policy shift is clear: social tensions borne out of overcrowding in cities, along with economic inequality that has threatened to destabilise Chinese society. Before the economic reforms of the 1970’s and 1980’s when everyone worked at a State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) and benefits were guaranteed even after retirement, “social services” comprised of nothing more than a visit by your supervisor.

China in the 21st century has embraced the capitalist model, and employee benefits have evolved accordingly i.e. nowhere near as generous as before. However, now that privatised SOEs are no longer obliged to provide “social services”, the government has to step in to address social issues such as dysfunctional family situations before they affect the stability of society as a whole.

“Integrated Family Social Services Centres are the latest development in terms of institutionalising social services,” says Chung, quoting the English translation for 家庭综合社会服务中心. “They’re almost like franchises. The government has two million RMB funding for each service centre and NGOs will bid for these centres. There are certain criteria for bidding, such as the number of social workers and what kind of services will be provided.”

Solving the problem

For a government whose primary concern is to maintain societal stability (维稳), these centres might seem like the logical answer to address rising social tensions, especially those caused by the mass influx of migrant worker into cities. However, it is precisely the political leadership’s concern with maintaining stability which can hamstring true efforts to address the source of social tension.

“For example, if you have troubled teens, you can organise some events to use up their energy but it is an indirect remedy,” says Chung on recent concerns about delinquent youth. But for the big issues of societal harmony, where the promotion of “community spirit” has been mooted to ameliorate ill-feelings caused by income inequality and urban overcrowding, Chung says, “If you want to build community spirit, the government can be quite suspicious of such efforts. They may think: if you succeed, what will you do next? Are you going to launch protests? So you can’t address the issue directly. You could have an event where people come down to have some food, but how does that create community spirit?”

There are also issues of the NGOs’ independence because they operate the Integrated Family Social Services Centres with the government’s money, and it is very difficult to raise funds by themselves due to bureaucratic constraints. Moreover, these centres are monitored by government officials although individual social workers are free to work within and around the regulations, Chung says.

The nature of social work

Much of how the social work profession develops in China depends on how practitioners reconcile its application in the country with the roots of its development.

“Back in the 1920s, Chinese universities had social work departments for a short of period of time. After 1949, of course, it all went away,” said Chung referring to the Chinese civil war and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. “When they re-introduced it in 1989, they looked around at Western societies and how social work was being taught. Most of the time, they used

textbooks which were directly translated from Western textbooks. So what was taught in Chinese universities was not much different from what was taught in Western universities.”

As such, Chinese social workers understand the basic concept of social work as a means to fulfill social justice and the promotion of human rights, the latter topic being a lightning rod for governmental scrutiny. Chung is of the opinion that social workers are aware of the constraints of working under the rules of the Communist Party, and will make the best of the hand they are dealt. However, he also worries about how social work and its effectiveness to achieve social stability will be evaluated by the powers that be.

“The government will spend all this money, but they might wonder if it does any good. In terms of KPIs, these centres have a certain number of visitors, or the workers need to visit a certain number of families. But government officials might look at the general society and say, ‘It’s still messy.’ I hope the government remains open to these efforts.”