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Contractual controls and pragmatic professionalism: A qualitative study on contracting social services in China

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Abstract

This study used the contracting projects of a district branch of the Women's Federation in Guangzhou as case examples to demonstrate both the Chinese state's contractual controls over social work organisations (SWOs) and the pragmatic response strategies of SWOs and professionals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventeen participants, including local officials of the Women's Federation and social workers from contracted SWOs. It was found that with the ultimate goal of consolidating the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China, the Women's Federation's dual role in politics and service provision had led to normative, managerial, technical and relational controls over SWOs. SWOs and professionals were generally submissive to these controls, but they employed diverse coping strategies, including compliance,

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bargaining, transformation and investment in personal relationships. The interactions within the contractual relationship created a pragmatic professionalism that embraced dominant political ideologies, employed de-politicising techniques, and personally depended on individual officials.

Introduction

In the past decade, there have been two ground-breaking developments in China's social welfare provisions. First, both central and local governments have promoted the contracting of social services to demonstrate the state's increasing commitment to welfare responsibilities. Second, the sub-contracting of social services has encouraged non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to accelerate the professionalisation of social work to promote eligibility for bidding and implementing contracts (Lei and Chan, 2018). As a sub-category of NGOs in China, social work organisations (SWOs) are expected to be operated by social workers and adopt professional values and knowledge to deliver social services (Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) and Ministry of Finance, 2012).

Unlike other types of NGOs that remain subject to dual-system registration with both the MCA and with a relevant government department to provide supervision, SWOs can register with the civil affairs authorities only. In 2009, Guangdong Province was the first local government to relax the dual-registration requirement for SWOs and also pioneered contracting out social services (Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, 2009). Since then, the experience of Guangdong Province in commissioning social services from SWOs was recognised and promoted. A wide range of social services has been purchased by various local governmental departments across the country, such as those for children of migrant workers, older people, ill patients, or people undergoing community correction or drug rehabilitation (Lei and Chan, 2018).

China's new approach for contracting out social services has resulted in the expansion of NGOs, although this development may contradict prevailing ideas related to state-society relationships. For example, the concept of civil society assumes an independent or even an oppositional societal sector to the state. However, emergent research has identified the dependency of NGOs on the state within contractual relationships in China (e.g. Cho, 2017; Hildebrandt, 2013; Howell, 2015; Teets, 2014). Thus, Chinese authorities may reap the benefits from NGOs through their provision of services, while NGOs' dependence

on state resources consequently consolidates rather than resists authoritarian rule. Similarly, the two fundamental elements of corporatism, namely monopoly and representation of interests, are inconsistent with the current development of SWOs in China. The competitive-based nature of contracting social services has dramatically increased the number of SWOs from 1247 to 9793 between 2012 and 2018 (MCA, various years). Again, Chinese authorities may employ different strategies to control NGOs' behaviour to ensure compliance with the state's interests rather than representing those of service users (Chan and Lei, 2017; Hildebrandt, 2013; Jing and Hu, 2017; Kang, 2019; Kang and Han, 2008; Li and Yang, 2020; Teets, 2014).

This study analysed the experiences of a district branch of the Women's Federation in Guangzhou (hereafter DWF) and its contracted SWOs to investigate the nature of contractual relationships between the state and NGOs. It aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What types of controls does the DWF exert on SWOs? (2) How do SWOs respond to these controls from the professional perspective?

Contextualising contracting social services in China

In order to move beyond the perspectives of civil society and corporatism, Kang and Han (2008) propose an alternative concept of graduated control to understand the state-society relationship in China. They argue that state control would differ as regards registration, supervision, management and resources based on the threats or the contributions of particular NGOs to the authorities. For example, politically antagonistic organisations would be absolutely prohibited and religious organisations should undergo strict supervision by relevant governmental departments. By contrast, some business and commercial associations were given greater autonomy and endorsement for taking over certain economic functions previously undertaken by the government. Non-registered NGOs and informal interest groups that posed no potential or actual challenge to the authorities may be either subjected to limited interference or incorporated into the government administration by being subsidised. In short, by purposefully and selectively exerting graduated controls, the party has managed to maximise the utilities of NGOs for its agenda and minimise their potential opposition.

The concept of graduated state controls is crucial for understanding the recent significant development of SWOs and contracting social services in China. It is evident that SWOs are those particular NGOs that have been afforded preferential treatment by the state. As mentioned above, direct registration was specifically made available for SWOs – first in Guangdong Province in 2009 and then nationwide in 2013. Meanwhile, the non-competition rule in registration – prohibiting the establishment of new NGOs if a similar one already existed in the same locality – no longer applied to SWOs. In terms of operational autonomy,

following the pilot reform in Guangdong Province, government departments had already been instructed not to intervene in SWOs' staff appointments, financial management or activity organisation (Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, 2009).

Other than de-regulation, SWOs increasingly receive government funding to undertake contracting social services. Local governments' total expenditure on contracting out social services to SWOs reached 6.11 billion yuan (about £688 million) in 2018, which was 4.89 times as much as the 2012 budget of 1.25 billion yuan (MCA, various years). The central government even directed additional annual funding of 20 million yuan (about £2.25 million) during 2012–2018, which was mainly used for supporting SWOs to implement contracting social services in the least developed regions of the country (Chinese Community Newspaper, 2019).

The main reason for SWOs' de-regulation and receipt of sponsorship is their significant contribution to the state's hegemonic project to establish a 'harmonious society'. As Garrett (2020) argues, the party's legitimacy crisis, denoting a lack of sufficient hegemonic power in both coercive and cultural terms, has accompanied the economic reform. Despite the remarkable performance in economic growth and poverty alleviation, China has experienced increased social inequality and urban-rural division. The dismantling of urban work units in the 1990s resulted in the privatisation of collective services for vulnerable groups (e.g. poor older people). Privatisation, however, proved to be a failure because it not only overlooked the need for state investment to support civil society, but also underestimated the market's exclusion of vulnerable groups (Lei and Walker, 2013).

Described as a 'floating population', the major workforce sustaining China's economic development are migrant workers who left their rural home areas for work in the cities. Although the number steadily increased to peak at 17.425 million in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020: 394), this substantial population has long been deprived of social citizenship (e.g. public health or housing), especially when they migrate to cities without a local household registration. Even the recent reform of household registration, introducing a 'points system' generated a 'differentiating citizenship' only, affording migrant workers partial entitlements to public services based on their contribution to cities (Guo and Liang, 2017). Meanwhile, this floating population has left behind a large precarious group of family members in their rural hometown. For example, Duan et al. (2017) estimated the number of rural left-behind children as 40.51 million in 2015, equivalent to 15% of the entire child population in China. Moreover, 48.09% of these children were not living with either of their parents.

In order to stabilise these potentially socially turbulent groups, the party started to uphold the rhetoric of a 'harmonious society' around 2002, 'in which all people do their best, find their proper places in society and live

together in harmony' (Central Committee, 2006). One of the crucial substantive measures for achieving 'harmony' was to re-vitalise the state's leading role in welfare. 'Building a strong team of social work professionals' was proposed to demonstrate the party's leadership in constructing a 'harmonious society' (Central Committee, 2006). Echoing this, the MCA and the Ministry of Finance (2012) listed potential beneficiaries of contracting social services for SWOs, including the urban floating population, rural left-behind groups, older people, people with disabilities, people exhibiting deviant behaviour or those suffering from natural disasters. In short, the employment of purchase-of-services for these disadvantaged groups was expected to significantly improve the nation's fragmented welfare system.

Howell (2015) conceptualises the term 'welfarist incorporation' to refer to the new directions taken by Chinese authorities to relax registration for certain NGOs and purchase social services from them. Welfarist incorporation is defined as an emerging state-society relationship 'whereby selected civic organizations are invited by the state to assist in the implementation of policy' (Howell, 2015: 704–705). This concept has three distinctive features. First, welfarist incorporation adopts a competitive process to select different NGOs for services. Second, the scope of NGOs to undertake contracting social services is confined to implementation but with limited participation in policy making. Third, its aim is to serve the interests of the authoritarian state rather than represent those of service users.

Although welfarist incorporation can be used to characterise the phenomenon of contracting social services in China, two issues have yet to be resolved. First, if the premise of contracting social services rests on loosening state controls over SWOs (e.g. in registration and operation), how can the state ensure SWOs' submission in the contractual relationship? Simply by offering funding and contracts seems insufficient to address this question. Second, SWOs by definition should be operated by social workers based on their professional values and knowledge (MCA and Ministry of Finance, 2012). Although it may be criticised as a colonialist importation (Jia, 2008), social work training in Mainland China has been mainly based on knowledge transfer from Hong Kong and the United States. Social work academics from Hong Kong have been critically involved in the professionalisation of social work in Mainland China since the 1980s. For example, they not only supported the teaching in the earliest social work programme in 1990, but also enrolled large numbers of Mainland educators in their research programmes. In particular, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University has trained hundreds of social work masters students through a joint programme, who have subsequently become high-profile academics and practitioners in the Mainland. This collaborative model of 'training-the-trainers' is ongoing in the form of on-the-job training for Mainland educators teaching social work master programmes who do not themselves have a professional background

(Yuen-Tsang and Wang, 2020). Meanwhile, between 2012 and 2017, seven top universities in each of the United States and China were partnered to launch staff and student exchanges, curriculum development and research collaboration (Cohen et al., 2017). With such strong professional influences from Hong Kong and the United States, how would Chinese social workers reconcile the possible conflicts between imported knowledge (e.g. professional autonomy) and contractual controls as elaborated below? In other words, SWOs' and professionals' agency should be highlighted during their interaction with contracting agents.

A four-dimensional framework of contractual controls and responses

Current literature concerning state-NGO contractual controls and responses suggests a four-dimensional framework. The first normative dimension is about how overriding values of the state can be transmitted through contractual relationships, so that NGOs re-adjust their own mission to cater to these political ideologies. Kang (2019) found that by distributing competitive-based contracts, governments fostered reliable or trustworthy NGO partners because NGOs had to submit to the governments' policy goals, such as delivering services instead of advocating rights, to secure contracts. Li and Yang (2020) discovered that a local Women's Federation in Shanghai prioritised the hierarchal account for sub-contracting and endorsed those contracting services that promoted 'family harmony', in line with the earlier instruction of the party's General Secretary Xi Jinping. Furthermore, a sub-district government in Shanghai even contracted out the highly political function of 'party construction' by commissioning NGOs to provide services for bonding retired party members (Jing and Hu, 2017). With the strong imposition of political values through contracting, most Chinese labour NGOs in Howell's study were found to diverge from their original goals that had already been narrowed in defending individual (instead of collective) labour rights, and re-direct themselves to more 'apolitical activities such as legal awareness, training in life skills and organizing cultural activities' (Howell, 2015: 716).

In the second managerial dimension, contracting agents often use programme evaluation to regulate NGOs' performance, while NGOs may have different response strategies. Neo-liberal ideas of purchasing and regulating rather than providing and administering social services have been widely shared amongst Chinese government officials. Consequently, contracting services and their NGO providers, such as in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, have commonly been subjected to numerous inspections every year using sophisticated standards of evaluation. It has even become standard practice for contracting agents to outsource service evaluation to an independent NGO,

expecting them to employ measurable and quantitative data to demonstrate the target SWO's effectiveness (Chan and Lei, 2017; Cho, 2017). In response, NGOs may embrace the governments' evaluation requirements, if these are in line with their interests. Otherwise, they would choose to ignore them especially if better alternatives were available (Fang et al., 2020). A more common scenario was for SWOs to reluctantly follow evaluation requirements, even when the criteria were inconsistent, unreasonable or even conflicted with their mission (Chan and Lei, 2017).

The third technical dimension refers to the circumstance when professional judgements are found to be secondary to the political agenda behind contracting social services. Although social workers normally prefer to serve vulnerable groups, it was reported that contracting agents persuaded them to provide services to as many people as possible in the general population. The political agenda for doing this was to show the state's care for society as a whole (Chan and Lei, 2017). Meanwhile, Leung's (2012) research detected a de-politicising tendency of social work practice in contracting social services in China. Social workers may not only choose those groups of service users that posed no actual or potential threat to the authorities, but also emphasise individualist rather that structural interventions. Moreover, the managerial tool of programme evaluation would bolster the obstacles of 'bureaucratic techno-politics' (Cho, 2017: 280), thus tying up social workers' energies in meeting the quantitative targets set out in the contract and focusing on organising recreational activities only.

The last relational dimension highlights the mutual dependence on informal relationships between contracting agents and NGOs. Jing and Chen (2012) studied the first competition for contracting social services in Shanghai. Contrary to the competitive nature of sub-contracting, they discovered that government officials preferred to work with locally-registered NGOs that would be more compliant with their instructions. Similarly, Li and Yang (2020) reported that government funders preferred a relational mode in which they tended to initiate and renew service contracts with NGOs with whom they were familiar. In response, NGOs in Shanghai had to constantly consolidate their informal relationship with officials to ensure future benefits (Jing, 2018). Social workers in Guangzhou were even portrayed as government 'foot soldiers', because they had to devote considerable time to assisting in extra and non-professional work (Chan and Lei, 2017).

The All China Women's Federation as a contracting agent

The All China Women's Federation (hereafter the Federation) is one of twenty-two state-affiliated mass organisations (*quntuan zuzhi*) in China. In

common with other mass organisations, the primary mission of the Federation is to mobilise the public and serve the state's purposes. The task of mobilising women to participate in revolution and state building had preoccupied the Federation's agenda long before the 1978 economic reform. Subsequently, the Federation's Charters in 1978 and 1983 referred to its status as, respectively, the 'bridge' or 'belt' between the party and women. The Federation's 'bridge and belt' function was associated with governments in the 1988 Charter, and the significance of the Federation in administration was even more influential after its recognition as 'an important pillar of state power' in the 2003 Charter (Ma, 2009).

It must be noted that the Federation's political role has wrestled with its expanding role of service provision. Its basic service function was first proposed as 'representing and safeguarding women's interests and promoting equality between men and women' in the 1988 Charter. Safeguarding 'rights' was placed alongside 'interests' in the 1998 Charter (Ma, 2009). Another service function of facilitating 'all-round development of women' was advocated in the 2018 Charter (Ma, 2009). All these service functions were proposed to resolve the Federation's legitimacy crisis during the economic reform, when it had difficulty in reaching diverse groups of women emerging in the private sector, such as the middle class, unemployed workers, migrant labour, and sex workers (Howell, 2003).

The Federation's dual role in politics and service provision has been simultaneously strengthened since the latest reform of mass organisations. In 2015, for the first time in the party's history, the Central Committee held the highest-profile meeting regarding the reform of mass organisations (Xinhua Net, 2015) following which the Federation launched relevant reform initiatives. In relation to its political role, the paramount principle is to maintain its presence in the party's leadership. As Xi Jinping stressed, 'The party's work on mass organisations can only be strengthened, not weakened' (Xinhua Net, 2015). Accordingly, the revised 2018 Charter clearly stated that the Federation should 'shoulder the political responsibility for uniting and guiding different ethnic and sectoral groups of women to listen to the party and follow the party' (Federation, 2018).

Other than highlighting its political functions, the latest reform also concerned the Federation's possible isolation from the masses. Thus, equal attention was paid to the role of service provision. Consolidating the service functions of Women's Homes – the Federation's grass-roots posts at community level – became a vital measure of the reform. Starting to be established in 2010, Women's Homes were identified as performing service functions including propagating the party's and governments' policies, protecting women's rights, and organising leisure activities (Federation, 2010). Current reforms have shown that grass-roots Women's Homes not only transcended from the lowest community levels to upper sub-district and district

levels, but also increasingly contracted SWOs for service delivery (Zhang et al., 2019).

Although the Federation's service provision was expected to demonstrate its 'popular nature' (*qunzhong xing*), the ultimate aim lies in increasing the Federation's 'political nature' (*zhengzhi xing*) and 'advanced nature' (*xianjin xing*). As Xi Jinping demanded, 'political nature is the soul of mass organisations and is in the first place', while the advanced nature should aim to 'educate and guide the masses to continuously improve their ideological awareness' (Xinhua Net, 2015). Therefore, Women's Homes have, not surprisingly, been employed to deliver ideological education of 'socialist core values' through service provision (Central Committee, 2015). Meanwhile, the significant development of NGOs specialising in women's services, supported through sub-contracting, should be 'politically led, driven, facilitated and serviced' by the Federation (Central Committee, 2015).

Method

This study investigated the contractual relationship between a district branch of the Federation in Guangzhou (DWF) and its contracted SWOs. It received ethics approval from the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Sun Yat-sen University. Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong Province which, as previously mentioned, was the first locality to relax the dual-registration for SWOs and initiate purchase-of-services. When this study was conducted, between December 2016 and June 2017, the population of women in the district was about 800,000. The DWF had seven full-time officials at district level; at the sub-district level, there were usually two part-time officials who also undertook other duties in each of the eighteen Street Offices.

Following the Federation's call to establish Women's Homes at grassroots level in 2010, the DWF immediately established the first community-based Women's Home in Guangzhou. In 2011, the DWF even innovatively built a comprehensive system of Women's Homes, one at district level, eighteen at sub-district level, and 256 at community level. Since 2012, the DWF has outsourced its Women's Home at district level to one SWO employing seventeen full-time social workers. In response to the Federation's reform in 2015, it further contracted out all but one Women's Homes at sub-district level to another nine SWOs employing thirteen full-time and fourteen part-time social workers.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with seventeen participants. The authors first approached the DWF's Chairwoman and received her consent to the research. With her referral, the authors succeeded in interviewing the other key staff from the DWF, who was mainly responsible for the operation of contracting social services. Then, the DWF helped the

authors access one Federation official from each of the four sub-districts, where contracting Women's Homes excelled in service evaluation during 2016–2017. Meanwhile, the authors contacted the DWF's ten contracted SWOs which were all established by local social workers. One social worker in charge of the contracting Women's Home from each SWO was invited to take part in the interview. A total of eleven social workers participated because one SWO recommended two participants. The social workers had an average age of 26 years old, three years' professional experience, and all had obtained national qualifications as either a junior or intermediate social worker.

Participants were asked about the contractual relationship between the DWF and SWOs, and the latter's responses to the former's demands. The transcripts of interviews were coded and analysed by using Nvivo 10. Four themes emerged from this analysis as discussed below.

Research findings

Normative control and response of compliance

Normative control refers to the measures implemented by the DWF to regulate the behaviour of SWOs in accordance with the Federation's rhetoric. Three specific strategies were employed for normative control. The first was to impose the Federation's values and functions onto SWOs. As the DWF Chairwoman insisted, 'Since grass-roots Women's Homes are the Federation's posts, we cannot indulge SWOs' complete independence to implement services based on their own values (DWF1).' Based on the Federation's Charter, the DWF stipulated in contracts that the value of harmony and the service functions should be upheld for contracting services.

The second strategy of normative control was to engage social workers in political rituals and internalise Federation's rhetoric. There were various forms of political rituals, such as meetings, work reporting, training, and party-building activities. For example, the DWF once organised 'Thematic Party Days' and its Chairwoman gave 'political education' to social workers. As she added,

> We regularly engage social workers in learning about the Federation's values and missions so that they can assimilate our thoughts into the contracting projects and better guide women to listen to and follow the party (DWF1).

As a third strategy, the DWF required the propaganda of the Federation's rhetoric to be made clear and visible. For example, the Federation's logo was to be displayed by all Women's Homes' sites and publications. According to the DWF Chairwoman, the purpose of this was to highlight the Federation's leadership and 'let women know whom to thank' (DWF1).

In response to normative control, SWOs have no option but comply. On the one hand, due to their consistency with the common practice of social work, the Federation's service functions of capacity building and protection of women were easily accepted by social workers. Four contracting Women's Homes at sub-district level focused on developing women's capacities such as leadership, employability or child care, and the other four held supporting services for the livelihoods of vulnerable women. On the other hand, the theme of maintaining 'harmony' prevails in practice. Other than three sub-district Women's Homes highlighting family education, 45% out of 709 social work cases during 2013–2016 were about mediating women's relationships with family members, while less than 9% were related to safeguarding women's rights or promoting gender equality. Moreover, SWOs and their social workers actively participated in the political rituals organised by the DWF to demonstrate their compliance. For example, all the SWOs participated in an academic conference held by the DWF and discussed how they could strengthen the Federation's influence on women. Some SWOs even invited the DWF Chairwoman to provide lectures for social workers on the party's leadership, because they believed that this would 'help social workers to foster correct values and adopt the party's doctrines as the guidance on practice' (SW1). Last, SWOs instructed social workers to cooperate with the Federation's propaganda. The Federation's logo and the description of its leadership were displayed as 'big and conspicuous' (SW7) on every occasion. A social worker who overlooked this was criticised and penalised in their service evaluation:

> At first, I found it troublesome to use the Federation's logo. However, I was criticised by DWF officials for not articulating the message that the services were led by the Federation. And points were deducted for that in the performance evaluation. Since then, I always use its logo and slogans wherever they are needed (SW9).

Managerial control and response of bargaining

Managerial control is transmitted through a micro-managed way of process evaluation to ensure SWOs of meeting the DWF's requirements. At the initial stage of service planning, Federation officials at both district and sub-district levels would review the SWOs' proposals, vetoing those they considered to have failed in translating the Federation's values and service functions into project designs. At the next stage of service implementation, Women's Homes were regularly inspected to ensure their compliance with DWF requirements, such as the clear and visible propaganda of Federation's rhetoric. At the last stage of annual appraisal, SWOs needed to submit all documented records to the DWF for a comprehensive review. Again, the DWF's officials

had the decisive power of evaluating the projects. SWOs would be disqualified from bidding for contracts in the following year if they received a 'fail' grade, while those evaluated as 'good' or 'outstanding' were deemed more competitive in future bidding. As the DWF Chairwoman stated, 'Monitoring and evaluating the performance of SWOs this way enables us to play a dominant role in contracting services (DWF1).'

Although managerial control can be identified at all service stages, SWOs have some room to bargain with the DWF if they can demonstrate their contribution to the DWF's intention. As illustrated by the Women's Home at district level, the DWF once advised the SWO to develop online services because it expected online services would facilitate access to a wider population of women. However, this had not been included in the original contract and would significantly increase the social workers' workload. During the subsequent negotiations, the DWF compromised in lifting the process evaluation standards, such as reducing outputs and promising a satisfactory outcome of the SWO's final appraisal. All the compromises were used to ensure the SWO's consent to achieve the DWF's purpose.

Technical control and response of transformation

Technical control refers to the intentional influences of DWF on social workers' professional autonomy, which can be manifested in the limited choices in target groups and intervention approaches. Based on the Federations' political agenda of bridging the masses of women to the party, the DWF had set the tone for all contracting Women's Homes to target women in the general population. The DWF Chairwoman strongly opposed social work's distinctive feature of working with vulnerable groups:

> We should not only focus on disadvantaged women. This would make the Federation look like the same as SWOs. Our mission is to represent and connect with the broadest group of women (DWF1).

Other than the general population, the DWF also demanded that social workers intervened with groups that posed potential threats to social stability. One social worker reported her experience of being required to provide services to those who would 'cause many problems', such as 'female street cleaners, street vendors or migrant workers' (SW2).

The DWF's influences on professional judgements is also evident in preferences of intervention approaches. As mentioned previously, the DWF emphasised 'harmony' as a normative control. Actually, this value essentially pointed to the pursuit of social stability and discouraged social workers from challenging the status quo. In one instance a group of women initiated a petition against a government-sponsored urban relocation project. Instead of

advocating for this group, DWF's officials asked social workers to organise rec-
reational activities for them (e.g. flower arranging, tea tasting or yoga) to dem-
onstrate the government's care and relieve their negative emotions.
Meanwhile, officials also proposed that social workers should provide family
education for these women, as they believed that drawing back their attention
to their families would diminish their engagement in social actions.

With regard to the DWFs' technical control, social workers rarely
adopted radical intervention approaches, instead, seeking incremental trans-
formation that appears more acceptable to the DWF. Actually, the DWF
admitted its shortcomings in 'meeting the needs of women from different
backgrounds because of the lack of professional knowledge and skills'
(DWF1). Therefore, the DWF had the expectation of innovating its trad-
itional administrative-oriented services by working with SWOs. This expect-
ation provided possibilities for social workers to influence the DWF, on
condition that they could demonstrate their helpfulness.

One SWO's experience illustrates possible success in transforming offi-
cials' understanding of contracting social services. Local officials initially
required the SWO to provide health education in a Women's Home for
general women. After one year's successful service delivery, the SWO
gained trust from local officials and convinced them to pilot a new project sup-
porting vulnerable women into employment. Unlike the traditional one-off
relief provided by the Federation, the SWO adopted a community approach
by establishing mutual-support groups, empowering them to apply for exter-
nal funding, and facilitating them to produce handicrafts for sale online. Since
this community approach effectively increased the incomes and self-confidence
of vulnerable women, the SWO was subsequently sponsored by the DWF to
promote this project in more communities.

This example clearly contradicted the principle of technical control that
embraced individual-oriented intervention for a general population. As one
social worker summarised:

> We gradually introduced social work values and methods into the DWF. Now
> more officials have begun to recognise the importance of our approach. We are
> influencing the government. Don't you think this is some kind of achievement?
> (SW10)

Relational control and response of 'investment'

Relational control denotes an informal superior-subordinate relationship
developed between DWF's officials and social workers. This relationship is
mainly demonstrated by the frequent demands of officials on social workers
to undertake extra administrative work that had not been included in the
initial contract. Social workers perceived these personal favours as an

'investment' from which they could expect a future return. As illustrated by social workers, typical administrative work included collecting demographic data of women, writing reports for officials, or helping with traditional Federation events (e.g. celebration of Women's Day or commendation of 'Beautiful Families'). One social worker reported that she had spent a quarter of her working hours on similar administrative work (SW2). As another frustrated social worker stated: 'I feel like I am subordinate to the Federation. If they say one, I cannot say two (SW9)!'

Three reasons can be identified for the formation of relational control. First, since Federation officials usually doubled up in performing other roles in Street Offices, they were always overwhelmed by a heavy administrative workload. Accordingly, they tended to take advantage of social workers from contracting projects, treating them as personal foot-soldiers. Second, these officials considered the SWOs to be the Federation's subordinate units, especially after the DWF had stressed its leadership in contracting projects. Therefore, SWOs were considered more as 'a new workforce that can be deployed by the Federation' (DWF1). Third, relational control could be consolidated when the DWF monopolised the resources for contracting. As pointed out by a social worker: 'Only by building a good relationship with the Federation officials can we possibly have the contract next year (SW7).'

In response, social workers were reluctant to turn down additional administrative tasks, regarding these as an 'investment' in return for future DWF's endorsement. As one social worker stated: 'Since officials require us to help with their work, I will ask them to help with mine (SW2)'. For example, one social worker was asked to organise the traditional commendation for 'Beautiful Families'. After the success of this event, officials 'changed their attitudes…and developed a long-term cooperative relationship' with the SWO (SW6). As another social worker believed, 'It was worth undertaking additional work because with the DWF's endorsement, we could access kindergartens and schools to promote our services (SW1).

Discussion

Four dimensions of contractual control

It must be acknowledged that China has made significant progress in the welfare sector in terms of the rapid expansion of SWOs and increased social services provision in recent years. SWOs have been given relatively more autonomy regarding registration and operation within the state mechanism of graduated controls (Kang and Han, 2008). With this preferential treatment, the state intended to co-opt SWOs as instruments to provide contracting social services and ultimately consolidate the party's legitimacy. However, the question of why this welfarist corporation (Howell, 2015) can prevent

SWOs from being independent and representative of service users' interests, as suggested by the perspectives of civil society and corporatism, remains unsolved.

This study addressed this knowledge gap by proposing a framework of contractual controls with three characteristics. This framework includes four comprehensive, normative, managerial, technical, and relational levels. This synthesis improves the common one-sided focus of contractual controls in current literature (Fang et al., 2020; Howell, 2015; Jing, 2018; Jing and Chen, 2012; Jing and Hu, 2017; Kang, 2019; Li and Yang, 2020). Second, these dimensions are coherently related as spanning macro- to micro-levels. The imposition of Federation's rhetoric at the macro level led to the all-round project management at the meso-level. Due to these macro- and meso-controls, the professional autonomy of individual social workers was restricted and personal dependence on Federation officials may be created. Third, all these contractual controls serve the contracting agents' agendas. The Federation's purposes in maintaining social stability and allying with the masses of women were transmitted to SWOs and professionals by political rituals and propaganda in normative control, process evaluation in managerial control, restraints of professional judgments in technical control, and informal superior-subordination in relational control. In short, the comprehensive and coherent system of contractual controls is effective in ensuring the submission of SWOs, even though SWOs have seemingly been granted more autonomy recently.

Diverse response strategies of SWOs

Previous research has tended to depict social workers from SWOs as passive recipients accepting whatever forms of controls contracting agents dictate (Chan and Lei, 2017; Cho, 2017; Leung, 2012). However, this seems to under-estimate the agency of professionals and over-simplifies the complexity of their interaction with contracting agents. This study enhances existing literature by identifying four coping strategies employed by the profession in response to the contractual controls: compliance, bargaining, transformation and invest-ment in personal relationship. It must be admitted that, facing the overriding power of the contracting agent, SWOs and professionals generally submitted to the unequal contractual relationship. They accepted and acted in accordance with Federation's rhetoric. They endured a complex process of evaluation and inspection throughout all the stages of services. They even conceded profes-sional autonomy by catering to the Federation's practice preferences or by acting as the personal foot-soldiers of officials.

However, social workers may manage to benefit from the unequal contrac-tual relationship based on their rational calculation. This study demonstrated the possibilities for SWOs and professionals to bargain with the DWF in

reaching compromises in managerial control and seeking opportunities to transform the Federation's technical preference if their work had been perceived as contributing to the Federation's objectives. Moreover, social workers may strategically make use of the superior-subordinate relationship and seek future support from Federation officials. In short, the identified strategies reflect the significance of SWOs and professionals in promoting positive changes.

Pragmatic professionalism

Based on the contractual interaction between the DWF and contracted SWOs, these findings shed some light on understanding China's social work. Yan (2013) proposes an approach of 'decentring values and being pragmatic' for the indigenisation of social work in China. This pragmatic approach prioritises the use of social work applications (e.g. theories and skills) which are believed to be more significant in practical problem-solving. Based on this idea, this study proposes the concept 'pragmatic professionalism' to describe the current nature of social work in China (Lei and Huang, 2018). This means that by selectively abandoning, choosing, or adapting the components of imported social work models, the profession displays four features that can fit into the local contractual relationship within an authoritarian context.

The first feature is about upholding the political ideologies of the state, which can be illustrated by the Federation's rhetoric to 'listen to the party and follow the party'. The second refers to SWOs' limited independence in project management, which would be shaped by performance evaluation as set by contracting agents. The third relates to the tendency of social workers to adopt de-politicising techniques for intervention with a general population. The last is a possible bonding of an informal-subordinate relationship with government officials in exchange for future endorsement and support.

Pragmatic professionalism is tailored to the Chinese context in which the authoritarian state and its contracting agents have overriding power over the profession. First, the fundamental changes of pragmatic professionalism for professional values seriously challenge the global standards of social work which highlight human rights and social justice (Jia, 2008). Second, compared to some Western counterparts (e.g. Sweden and United Kingdom) which practised a neo-liberal style of performance management (Harlow et al., 2013), Chinese SWOs were left with much less flexibility in service design and implementation, but with more interference and impositions from contracting agents by means of programme evaluation. Third, the preference for de-politicising techniques seems to echo the prevalence of psycho-therapeutic orientation in Western social work (Kam, 2014). However, the de-politicisation of Chinese social workers is more related to their deliberated

concerns about avoiding confrontations with the authoritarian state. Fourth, since social workers are often required to undertake extra administrative tasks for officials, this relationship is subordinated far beyond the scope of 'interpersonal networks' (Teets, 2014: 150) or 'personal relationships' (Hildebrandt, 2013: 226) as exhibited in other types of NGOs in China. The personal dependence of social workers may be beneficial for short-term returns from officials, but this would sacrifice the institutionalisation of an equal partnership for contracting social services in the long run.

Contracting social services and the party's legitimacy

Current literature points out the primary importance of understanding the authoritarian state's intentions for policy development in East Asian welfare regimes (e.g. Walker and Wong, 2005). Echoing this, this study analysed the Federation's agenda for contracting out grass-root Women's Homes. Since the latest reform in 2015, the dual role of the Federation in politics and service provision has been simultaneously strengthened, which can be demonstrated in the persistence of the party's leadership and the provisions of services to women. The articulation of the dual role reflects the party's discourse about the nature of mass organisations – 'political' as led by the party, 'advanced' in socialist ideological awareness, and 'popular' amongst the masses. Therefore, the sub-contracting of Women's Homes to SWOs can be seen as an instrument for achieving the party's hegemonic project of building a 'harmonious' society characterising social stability (Garrett, 2020). In order to deliver this political agenda, China's social work has been constructed as submissive and pragmatic, with a particular focus on solving individual rather than structural problems. It is only after revealing the state's intentions behind contracting social services that one can better understand the substantial contractual controls with pragmatic professional responses in China.

Contracting social services with Chinese characteristics

China's contracting social services share some similarities with those of Western democratic counties. Since the late 1970s, neo-liberals have attempted to reduce the size of the public sector by transferring welfare delivery to NGOs. Contracting out can thus be considered as a privatisation strategy, by taking advantage of the third sector which is believed to be more economic, efficient, and effective (Harlow et al., 2013). However, the structure and operation of neo-liberal governance, such as experienced in Canada and UK, have jeopardised NGOs' autonomy and capacity and diverted their focus from community-orientation to running a 'business' (Evans et al., 2005). In terms of leveraging NGOs for welfare delivery and co-opting them into governance, this neo-liberal way of contracting social services is

consistent with the Chinese approach. That is: contracting social services can be used to co-opt NGOs and the profession of social work to serve the party's agenda of maintaining social stability through service provision.

Although China and its Western counterparts share a common goal of taking advantage of NGOs in contracting social services, the Chinese approach shows three distinctive characteristics in motivation, context and authoritarianism. First, the top-down aspiration to strengthen the party's legitimacy is the fundamental driver for introducing contracting social services. This is essentially different from Western welfare state utilisation of contracting social services to reconcile the inherent structural contradictions between capitalist accumulation and legitimacy (Offe, 1984). Second, instead of aiming to reduce the public sector, the employment of contracting social services is actually significant in improving China's fragmented welfare system by increasing social spending. This is the reason why the practice of contracting social services can be described as 'China's social welfare revolution' based on the cases of Chinese cities (Lei and Chan, 2018). Third, the leading role of the state in contracting social services within an authoritarian country results in contracting agents' overriding power. This can be demonstrated by more interference from comprehensive dimensions of contractual controls and much less autonomy for NGOs and social work compared to neo-liberalism that seems to produce more autonomy and flexibility.

Conclusion

Based on the contractual relationship between the DWF and its contracted SWOs, this study revealed that the Federation's intentions of implementing the state's policies and mobilising the masses of women had been transmitted to SWOs through contractual controls. SWOs were generally submissive to these controls, but used diverse strategies to positively influence contracting agents. This study argues that the emerging profession of social work in China could be characterised as pragmatic professionalism. Pragmatic professionalism has had relatively limited impact on addressing inequality caused by the unequal distribution of power, but it may offer some opportunities for social workers to address social issues.

Since this study only focused on the Federation's contractual relationship with SWOs in one locality, future research should be extended to other contractual relationships with different types of contracting agents and their contracted NGOs. Particular attention should be paid to discover more forms of contractual controls and various empowering experiences of SWOs and professionals to contend to these contractual controls. Last, comparing different typologies of contractual relationships would advance the understanding of contracting social services in China.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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