Editorial: A call for more papers on social work practice in China

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A brief review of the English literature on social work in China suggests that more had been

written on social work education and to a lesser extent on the professional identity of social

work, than on social work practice. This may be a reflection of the different social and

government forces influencing the separate though intertwining paths of social work

education, social work practice, and public recognition of the social work profession. The

growth of social work education, however, is not driven by the need for social workers or

human resources planning. Neither is it hampered by the lack of social work faculty. Several

scholars had written of the lack of social work jobs, which were not attractive, given the low

pay and low social status of social workers. There were over 10,000 social work graduates a

year but only 10% could obtain social work jobs (Lin & Chen, cited in Leung 2007; Zhen,

2008). Recent introduction of government policies by the central government and in places

such as Shanghai and Shenzhen to formally recognize and establish social work positions

augur well for the growth of social work jobs (see Law & Gu 2008; Leung 2007; Yuen-Tsang

& Wang 2008; and Zhen 2008).

The re-introduction of social work as a discipline in universities is linked to growth in

higher education, the ensuing social problems related to rapid economic development and

public concern over the dismantling of traditional welfare support provided through *danwei* (work units) system (Yuen-Tsang & Wang 2008). Social work training had gained momentum not only in the universities but also in pre-service and in-service training of Civil Affairs officials. Consequently, it had attracted scholarly attention on this topic. Debate on social work education in mainland China tended to focus on the influence of Western social work; the cultural relevance of importation of curriculum contents, particularly from the USA and Hong Kong; adherence to an international definition and standards of social work; and the implications for contextual adaptation and indigenization in a market economy that is ruled by a socialist, centralized form of government, populated by 1.3 billion people, dominated by Han Chinese, and complicated by multi-ethnic and multi-lingual diversities (see e.g. Chan & Chan, 2005; Law & Gu 2008; Leung 2007; Xiong & Wang 2007; Yip 2007; Yuen-Tsang & Ku 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang 2002).

The article by Yan and Cheng, in this issue, on "Searching for Chinese characteristics: A tentative empirical examination" is an addition to this genre of work. It provides a refreshing change in asking whether social work in China embodies Chinese characteristics and examines this question among a small sample of graduating social work students.

As social work education is well covered in the literature on social work in China, in this editorial I wish to draw attention instead to the practice of social work in China, particularly in the context of a rapidly urbanizing society and the uneven economic development in

different regions. In their article on "Predicting the trajectories of emotional well-being of Chinese community dwelling oldest old adults: urban and rural differences", Sun, Kosberg, DeCoster, and Li (this issue) highlight the plight of the oldest old in rural areas, as compared to their urban compatriots and the worsening situation in emotional well-being over time. Another contribution highlighting the rural-urban differences in social and economic well-being is the article by Robinson and Perkins (this issue) on "Development needs assessment in China: Lessons from an international collaborative filed school in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region". The authors report on their experience in conducting needs assessment, as part of an international field school project.

Descriptions and analyses of social problems in China are plentiful. What is lacking is studies on solutions to these problems and of specific relevance to this journal, scholarly work on social work response to problems of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, marital dissolution, family violence, drug abuse, mental health, HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, etc. A reading of the limited literature available on appropriate approach to various problems indicated advocacy of social development rather than clinical practice, given the physical vastness of the country and its rural-urban development (see Yip 2007 and Yuen-Tsang & Wang 2002). Leung (2007), however, observed that clinical social work practice and individualized counseling services were evolving to become the dominant form of practice in China, especially in Shanghai. This might be so in big cities but is it reflective of the smaller

cities, towns, and rural villages?

From the time of the Chinese revolution up to the 1980s, the rural population accounted for 80% of the total population (Hewitt 2008), with 70% living as peasant farmers (Sachs, 2005). By 1990, the rural population fell to 73% (Hewitt 2008) and to 56% in 2007 (Encyclopedia Britannica 2008). Notwithstanding the reduction in extreme poverty and the rise in per capita income, those concerned with social development issues had highlighted several problems arising from economic reforms favoring certain special regions, the rapid urbanization of China, and the rural-urban divide, particularly the social and economic inequalities between regions. Lo and Jiang (2006) said that the economic development of middle and western regions were lagging behind the coastal regions by twenty years. One group of residents affected by the regional inequalities and that had caught the attention of the government, the media, and academia is the millions of migrant workers, or "floating population" moving from poor rural areas in search of work and better lives in the more prosperous southern and coastal regions (Hewitt 2008). According to Farndon (2008), these 200 million or so migrant workers contributed to China's economic miracle, by providing the hard labour needed in building factories, offices, apartments, and Olympic stadiums. Not only were they doing lowly paid jobs that urban residents were reluctant to do (Liang & Ma cited in Lo & Jiang 2006), they were also not eligible for welfare benefits (Zhang cited in Lo & Jiang 2006). Financial hardships often meant both parents had to seek jobs in the cities and as

they lacked permanent accommodation there, most of the migrant workers would leave their children behind in the villages, to be cared for by older parents and relatives (Farndon 2008).

Another group of workers that had also drawn the attention of the media, social workers and academics is Hongkongers crossing the border to work in mainland China. Lau, Ma, Chan, and He (this issue), in their article on "Commuting assignments in mainland China: Cost and benefits of cross-border work arrangements" utilized a resilience perspective to study the effects of commuting assignments on marital couples and their children and the policy implications for family support.

Even as China's economic power is projected to grow further and the country becomes wealthier, social workers should pay attention to those affected by the process of economic development, namely, the migrant workers in the cities; children and older persons left behind in the villages and farms; the urban poor; city dwellers affected by urban renewal, those laid off by state enterprises, and those not able to get jobs despite a booming economy.

Currently, the literature on social work practice in mainland China is relatively sparse. More empirical studies of social work practice with vulnerable groups as such should be conducted, presented, and published. The article by Guo, Zhang, and Sherraden (this issue) on "Household assets and health in China: Evidence and policy implications" is an illustration of social workers engaging in empirical review of policies that have a direct impact on the social and physical well-being of millions in China (see also Guo, Huang, Zou

& Sherraden 2008).

Research should also be done on what works and what does not work with various

target populations, paying attention to rural-urban context, so as to facilitate evidence-based

social work (Sim & Ng 2008). Perhaps, some of this research are available in the Chinese

literature and if so, should be communicated to an international readership. The Editorial

Board encourages submission of manuscripts on social work response to the multi-faceted

problems relating to socio-economic development in China, not just to this journal but also to

other social work journals and in doing so, contribute to an international literature of social

work practice in developing nations.

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