EDITORIAL: **Social work with Chinese characteristics**

China Journal of Social Work **(2011), Volume 4(1), pp. 1-3.**

Guat Tin Ng, Managing Editor

In 2010 the *China Journal of Social Work* published two special issues, one on social security and development in East Asia (volume 3, number 1) and the other on productive ageing and China: perspectives from East Asia and abroad (volume 3, numbers 2-3). This volume is a return to an eclectic mix of papers, written by scholars from different disciplines: philosophy, anthropology, political sciences, social work, and social gerontology. The papers cover wide geographical areas, spanning mainland China, Hong Kong, and Chinese communities in the United States of America. Discussion of cultural values is inevitable and the authors question, in varying intensity, the applicability of Western values, practices, and approach to social problems, social welfare, and social-economic development.

In this editorial, I will first highlight the theses of various papers and then offer my own perspective of social work in China.

In this volume, Chui and Ko write cogently about the plight of older persons in Hong Kong and argue that their well being has not improved, despite its immense wealth, and the change of regime, from the British colonial government to the current Special Administrative Region government. Hong Kong is an interesting case study of big business and small government and pursuit of a conservative welfare ideology. Chui and Ko advocate a balanced approach between economic development and social equality in providing for the economic security and social welfare of its aged population and cite Asian examples of aged care policies to emulate, rather than those of Western welfare states.

Ku reports on various stories of experiences of domestic violence in the lives of Miao women, an ethnic minority in mainland China, and explores the different factors that account

for wife battering in rural ethnic minority region. Social workers and scholars in the field of domestic violence will no doubt find the stories of physical, emotional, and financial abuse familiar. The social work response to their plight, however, has to be cognizant of the social context of a Chinese patriarchal family structure, Chinese preference for male children, rural poverty, and female illiteracy. Ku argues that legal response alone is inadequate and many women remain in abusive relationships. Much work is required to address social structural problems of gender inequality, land distribution, poverty, and illiteracy.

Tsui and Cheung write about intimate partner violence (IPV) in the United States of America, highlighting the plight of Chinese American men and examining their reluctance in seeking formal help. They recommend a gender inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to address the problem of IPV among Chinese Americans. In doing so, they elucidate various dimensions of Chinese culture, including a Confucian heritage, that values masculine dominance, family harmony, conformity to social norms, and the use of family or informal support. As they strive to live up to cultural expectation of being the men in the house they have to hide their experiences of violence. For those who seek help they find service providers biased and not helpful. Hence, Tsui and Cheung suggest that one area for social work intervention is that of public awareness and community education.

Pun and Yuen-Tsang take us to a different segment of mainland Chinese society, that of migrant workers. They write about social work involvement in collaborating with international and Chinese organizations (multiple stakeholders) to design and implement a corporate social responsibility training programme, in three factories in Shenzhen special economic zone. In presenting their case study (based on one of the factories), they invoke the concepts of corporate social responsibility, good governance, stakeholder participation, labour welfare, and labour rights. Their lofty aim is to offer an alternative model of

occupational social work that is appropriate for mainland China, as opposed to the Employees Assistance Programme adopted by the United States and other Western nations.

Dai looks at the process of political participation, comparing two neighbouring villages, and its implications for community development. She draws some lessons for training of community organizers in rural China and cautions against imposing Western conceptualization of democracy, empowerment, political involvement, community participation, and social development.

Wrapping up the papers in this volume is the paper by Cheng. He questions philosophically whether the development of an indigenous perspective on social work values is justified, considering the influence of social work, as practiced in the West. He explores the confusions arising from a positive morality perspective versus a normative morality, facts versus values, and social explanations versus normative evaluation, and concludes that there may not be a need to develop an indigenous value base for social work practice.

Whilst it is debatable whether there is a universal set of values and principles to guide social work practice everywhere, the social issues and problems to be tackled in China are similar to other nations and societies: child welfare, youth delinquency, family breakdown, aged population, domestic violence, labour welfare, poverty, social inequality, and rural-urban divide, etcetera. China has its own ways of dealing with these issues, including that of social and economic development. In pointing to its distinctive approach, Chinese government leaders, civil servants, citizens, and social workers like to invoke the expression, our policy, our programme, or our approach has special Chinese characteristics (中国特色).

My own observations suggest that social work in China indeed has Chinese characteristics; it is not and will not be the same as social work practiced elsewhere, whether in the West or East, North or South. There are many factors, one of which is the form and

development of social work education, which is mostly taught by those without social work qualifications or field experience. Furthermore, in view of the urgency in developing a sizable number of social workers, given the size of its vast population, the government has put in place a social work certification process that enables those without formal social work education to sit for two levels of national qualifying examinations (initiated in June 2008). The first level is for those without a bachelor's degree in social work to be certified as assistant social workers. After a few years of practice they may go on to take the next level of examination and be certified as social workers. Those with a bachelor's degree in social work plus five years of work experience (not necessarily related to social work) may directly sit for the social worker's level of examination and be certified as social workers. Consequently, those with social work certification include people with and without formal social work education. The procedures for certifying senior social workers have not been determined though the current regulations have a provision for a higher level social work position. As far as I know, no other country in the world has in place certification of senior social workers. Overall, the professionalization of social work is government led, rather than by an association of social workers. Social work in mainland China is set on a different trajectory, in the particular context of its geographic size, ecological climate, cultural heritage, economic reform, socialist principles, and political aspirations.

Just as much has been written about China being a dominant player in the economic world order, it is incumbent upon us to gather and disseminate knowledge of Chinese social policies and social work practices in resolving social problems, as developments of "Chineseness" and lessons to be learnt, rather than to keep using Western values and conceptualizations as the frame for reference.