

## **EDITORIAL**

### **Rising tide in China: Migrant families, older persons, grassroots NGOs, and social enterprises**

**China Journal of Social Work, Volume 5, Number 2, pp 105-107**

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There is a saying in the West, “A rising tide lifts all boats” meaning that general economic growth will benefit all people in the economy. Five papers in this volume indicate the rising number of migrant families, older persons, grassroots NGOs, and social enterprises in China, and make us question if they are the benefactors, beneficiaries, or castaway of China’s impressive economic growth in the past 30 years or more. The papers provide a social work perspective on subject matters that are often dominated by other disciplines. The sixth paper (Yan, Tsui, Chu, and Pak) addresses a broader issue on maintaining a dual focus in social work practice, which is of relevance, not only to the development of social work in China but other countries as well. In China, it seems more compelling to adopt a social development approach, given the enormous size of its population of 1.3 billion people and the small number of professionally trained social workers (annually about 10,000 graduate with a bachelor’s degree in social work but few social work positions are available). However, it is important not to lose sight of the necessity for social work with individuals and families “keeping afloat” in fast swirling waters of modernization, industrialization, urbanization,

economic liberalization, and environmental destabilization.

A case in point is that of migrant workers, whose contributions to China's economic growth are well documented. Unlike most scholarly work that is focused on the infringement of the labour rights and floating population status of migrant workers, Chen, Wu, and Sung-Chan re-direct the spotlight on the lack of family and social services for migrant parents and their children. Drawing on a family strengths perspective, they portray migrant families as survivors, rather than victims of economic development. They make a provocative challenge, not to target migrant families in social policy or social work practice interventions, but to reform the fundamental problem of the divisive and discriminatory *hukou* (household residency) system. It was originally designed to control internal migration (subject to approval of the authorities at the destination place) and to link state-provided benefits (e.g. housing, employment, education, access to medical care) to residency. But it was relaxed in the 1980s to allow rural labourers to find non-agricultural jobs in towns and cities requiring cheap labour. Calling for a reform of the hukou system is not new; just that social workers are adding their voice to the call. In spite of what Chen and co-authors said about not targeting migrant families, they still advocate government support in providing child care services so as to reduce the stress of migrant parents and prevent them from leaving their children behind in the villages, for lack of affordable and quality child care services in urban areas. As statistical trend suggests that there is an increasing number of young migrants settling down

in the urban places of work, rather than returning back to their hometowns, providing family support services could help to keep families together.

As most migrant workers are young and many have small children it is rightly so that public attention is directed to improving their current labour and social welfare. The paper by Lin however draws our vision to a longer term need for old-age security, in examining the institutional barriers to participation in old-age insurance. Notwithstanding policy reforms in pension schemes, including loosening of the hukou restrictions in urban areas, problems of low-level insurance participation and lack of awareness of pension schemes persist. Hence, Lin calls for an abolishment of the hukou system, which is contentious, as others have questioned the limited impact of such a policy change. In her paper, Lin also briefly mentions the efforts of international NGOs and Chinese grassroots associations in advocating for and helping migrant workers to improve their work conditions and redress their labour rights. She concludes, however, that the civil society in China is weak and the contributions made by these types of NGOs are limited.

The papers by Li and by Wen and Cheng offer more optimistic insights into the recent development of NGOs, which is growing in strength and diversity. NGO development in China has caught the attention of China watchers. However, much of the Western scholarship on Chinese NGOs tends to focus on government-NGO relationships, particularly harping on the concepts of autonomy from government control and corporatism. Consequently, there is

much debate as to whether NGOs in China are really NGOs (as compared to other countries or Western conceptualization of what NGOs should be), or are they more rightly GONGOs (Government-Organized NGOs). China indeed is an interesting country to “watch,” as it develops social organizations (*shehui zuzhi*), a term that the Chinese prefer to use, in response to their own social, cultural and political context.

Li (see policy update) makes a positive statement about the societal importance of social organizations, meriting a chapter in China’s 12th five-year plan (2011-2015) for national economic and social development. Li also highlights a change in government financing of public services: the purchase of welfare and education services from NGOs. In response to the policy change, new-style enterprises (referring to themselves as NGOs) have sprung up in bigger cities such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, where NGO development was limited in the past. However, many of these new welfare-type NGOs provide minimal direct services. They function more like a social work employment agency, recruiting social workers from different parts of China, deploying them to work in government units and organizations, and providing professional supervision of their work (see Chan, Ip and Lau 2009), unlike say Jinde Charities (in Hebei), which is traditionally involved in welfare work with children, disaster victims, and the poor.

Wen and Cheng introduce us to yet another new type of social organizations, which is termed “supportive organization”: the NPI Initiative and its spin-offs such as the Shanghai

United Foundation and the Corporate Citizenship in Action. The speed in which NPI launches one innovative venture after another is dizzying. It reflects the dynamism and spirit of a new wave of Chinese NGOs. Though NPI is the first of its kind, there is report of local government support for more of such non-profit incubators to be initiated in different parts of China (see Chen, 2011).

Despite the proliferation of NGO activities in China—international, local, and cross-border from Hong Kong and Taiwan—the role of NGOs in the delivery of welfare services in China and the employment of social workers by welfare NGOs in its delivery of services are largely understudied and not well known. Hence, Poulin and Deng's paper on the informal social support—from family and friends—of older Chinese help to fill a knowledge gap for social workers working with older persons. With an ageing population and 4:2:1 family structure of family care, China would do well to consider developing more formal social support for older persons who are living alone or with spouses only, especially in the rural areas, and for sandwiched families with caregiving responsibilities.

In conclusion, there are many opportunities for more social workers and NGOs, including grassroots associations and social enterprises, to be involved in working with migrants and their families (including left-behind children, parents, and grandparents), older persons and their family caregivers, in various parts of China, and not just the boomtowns and metropolises.

## **References**

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