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Strategic Resource Mobilization among Founder-CEOs of Social Work Organizations in Mainland China

Juan Wu^{1,2*} and Juan Chen³

¹ *POAI Social Work Service, Guangzhou, China*

² *Social Work Research Center, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China*

³ *Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China.*

*Correspondence to Juan Wu, Social Work Research Center, South China University of Technology, Wushan Campus, 381 Wushan Road, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, 510641, China. E-mail: jenny@gzpoai.com

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Abstract

Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with twenty-one founder-CEOs of social work organizations (SWOs) in Mainland China, this article develops the concept of “strategic resource mobilization” and investigates how founder-CEOs’ professional backgrounds influence their mobilization of resources in three areas—funding, human resources, and government relations. We find that founder-CEOs adopt different strategies in mobilizing resources, presenting distinct advantages and disadvantages according to their professional background. In particular, founder-CEOs affiliated with universities are viewed with trust and respect by the government and have social work students as human resources but report a lack of management skills; founder-CEOs from a business background have wider access to financial support and make good use of their management experiences and skills but are challenged by frontline social workers; and founder-CEOs with prior government experience rely on connections with officials to secure funding but face greater administrative constraints. The findings provide valuable insights for SWO executives to better assess their organizational capacity, leadership, and management. The research further suggests that, to ensure the sustainable development of SWOs in Mainland China, government policies could be introduced to help diversify the funding sources, and efforts should be made to improve the partnership between the government and SWOs.

Keywords: China, founder-CEO, professional background, social work organization, strategic resource mobilization

Teaser text

The emergence of social work organizations (SWOs) in Mainland China was only a recent phenomenon, but the number has grown exponentially. The first SWO was established in Shanghai in 2003. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of registered SWOs increased from 150 to 500; by 2020, the number has soared to more than 10,000. As the number of SWOs grows rapidly, who founded these SWOs? What kinds of background did they come from? What roles do they play? And what challenges do they face? Based on in-depth interviews with twenty-one founder-CEOs of SWOs in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou in 2018, our research reveals that founder-CEOs coming from different professional backgrounds—academia, business, and government—adopt different strategies in mobilizing resources. Our research contributes to the existing literature by integrating three essential aspects of human service management—funding, human resources, and government relations—in one analytical framework of strategic resource mobilization. The findings provide valuable insights for SWO executives to better equip themselves and manage their organizations. The study also has implications for the government and the social work profession in Mainland China: both need to create a suitable environment for the sustainable development of SWOs.

Introduction

The rapid growth of social work organizations (SWOs) in Mainland China is only a recent phenomenon. During the period of a centrally planned economy, social issues such as unemployment, poverty, and ageing were not acknowledged. The government was the primary welfare and service provider, and few SWOs existed. Since the 1980s, China's social development failed to keep pace with its rapid economic growth, leading to many social problems, the magnitude and seriousness of which kept increasing and gaining greater visibility (Li *et al.*, 2012). In 2006, the 16th National Congress officially recognized the urgent need for social services provided by the social work profession and a series of policies were set by the Central government (Liu, 2009). Contracting of services, in particular, was employed to tackle the government-operated ineffective welfare system and meet citizens' increasing needs. Because there were no religious or charitable groups to provide social services as was the case in western countries, such a change in the welfare delivery system created space for SWOs to develop and cooperate with the government (Kwan and Lei, 2017). As a result, the number of SWOs grew exponentially (Lu, 2018). The first SWO was established in Shanghai in 2003. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of registered SWOs increased from 150 to 500; by 2020, the number has soared to more than 10,000 (China Social Organization Platform, 2020).

Development of social work and SWOs in Mainland China

Professional social work was introduced in Mainland China in the late 1980s. Since then, social work education programmes have been flourishing. Due to the lack of social work academics and practitioners, university staff transferred from other disciplines to teach in social work (Law and Gu, 2008). Before 2000, it was not easy for students majoring in social work to find an appropriate agency for practicum and internship, and most social work students completed

their degree without substantial practicum training. Social work graduates either became civil servants or found jobs in the business sector (Tsang *et al.*, 2008).

As social work education programmes continued to expand in the country in the 2000s, the social work profession was required to raise its professional standards (Wang and Yuen, 2009). Well-trained social work graduates meeting professional standards were expected in order to better tackle the growing social needs (Law and Gu, 2008). Because China has a different historical, social, political, and ideological structure from those of other developed countries where the social work profession was rooted in civil society, and social work in Mainland China was rapidly developed by a series of government top-down initiatives and actions (He and Chui, 2016), the consensus between the government and social work educators about the mission of social work is to address social problems and contribute to social governance while maintaining political stability and supporting economic development (Bai, 2014). Although principles of social work ‘professionalisation’, ‘indigenisation’, and ‘values and ethics’ are still being formulated, social workers in Mainland China have played an important role in providing services for populations such as juvenile delinquents, people with substance abuse problems, and the elderly through counselling, rehabilitation, training, family support, and community building as the profession continues to build its identity and reflective capacity (Bai, 2014; Lu and Chen, 2021).

One unique phenomenon during the initial development of SWOs in China was the encouragement of social work faculty members in universities to establish their own organizations. With their quickly acquired knowledge and expertise, university teachers took the bold step of setting up SWOs (Yi *et al.*, 2018). While serving as important platforms to deliver government-purchased services to vulnerable and underserved groups, SWOs founded by university faculty members provided social work students quality field placements that can fulfill the requirements of accredited practicum courses with standards and guidelines and

under faculty mentorship. These SWOs also offered employment opportunities for social work graduates. SWOs founded by university faculty members thus fostered social work education and advanced professional development during the initial period (Wang, 2013; Yi *et al.*, 2018).

In the effort to build a harmonious society, social work continues to be vigorously developed in China. In October 2011, the Central government released “The 2011-2020 Medium- and Long-term Strategic Plan on the Development of Social Work Professional Manpower Team,” which outlined a series of policy goals and quantifications, including the training of 1.45 million social workers and 80,000 social work organization managers by 2020. As a result, an ever rising number of SWOs were formed throughout the country (Lu, 2018). In addition to academia, the founders of SWOs also came from business and government backgrounds and, most recently, experienced frontline social workers. Many of the founders of SWOs assumed the role of CEO. According to statistics from the Guangzhou Social Work Association, 60 percent of current CEOs in Guangzhou founded their SWOs.

The roles and challenges of founder-CEOs of SWOs

SWOs are non-profit, service-oriented organizations, which are difficult to operate (Weinbach, 2011). Although it was emphasized in a classic textbook that “all social workers are managers” (Coulshed, 1990), recent scholarship reveals that professional social workers tend to focus on services provided to clients and do not dwell on their limited resources or the precarious survival of their organization. As Patti (2003) notes, if you happen to utter the word “management” to a social worker, you might well be admonished that the word was used in business but “never” in social work. Frontline workers in human services rarely consider administrative management to be essential to the welfare of their clients (Healy, 2002). There is a general consensus in social work literature that the profession lacks leadership at the

individual, organizational, and inter-professional levels (Peters, 2017), and the best executive directors of SWOs are often not social workers (Patti, 2003).

Because of social workers' grounding in humanitarian values and the complexities of service delivery, leading a SWO is inevitably value-driven and labour-intensive (Healy, 2002). CEOs of SWOs constantly confront moral dilemmas and responsibilities and must grapple with unpredictable conditions and uncertain outcomes. Although often marginalized from the realm of management, CEOs of SWOs are still expected to be knowledgeable about creating opportunities to seek funding and mobilizing resources to ensure their organization's continuing operation and development (Lawler and Bilson, 2010; Patti, 2000).

Founder-CEOs are further markedly different from professional CEOs because their identity is tightly linked to the organization they established (Wasserman, 2003). In the early stages of SWOs' development in Mainland China, government funding was limited. Contracting public services was adopted as a new welfare strategy in the recent decade. Local governments outsource public services to SWOs through a bidding procedure, which is very competitive (Kwan and Lei, 2017). It also involves complicated tasks requiring "technical skills, relational skills and conducive governance systems" (Zaidi et al., 2011, p.145). The SWOs need to participate in the competitive bidding process in order to obtain government funding (Kwan and Lei, 2017). As social work manpower was still inadequate in Mainland China, the SWOs lacked both the economic and human resources to meet the growing service demands. Moreover, when social work was still in its infancy, its professional status was often challenged by various stakeholders (Wang, 2013). Founder-CEOs of SWOs thus must meet the challenges created by their relatively new position. These challenges were not only external (e.g., government, clients, and donors) but also internal (inadequate resources, weak management, etc.). To ensure SWOs' survival and continuing development, the founder-CEOs faced the daunting task of mobilizing resources.

The present study

Despite the large number of SWOs established in Mainland China in the past decade, scant research has been devoted to the founder-CEOs—the difficulties they face and overcome, the strategies they employ for survival, and the resources they manage to mobilize. In particular, as most founder-CEOs come from other professions during the early stages, how does their professional background influence the mobilization of resources for SWOs? To fill the research gap, this article explores how founder-CEOs with various professional backgrounds mobilize and integrate resources. Based on interviews with twenty-one founder-CEOs with backgrounds in academia, government, and business, we examine how founder-CEOs of Chinese SWOs obtain government support and mobilize resources to develop and maintain SWOs and provide quality services. Given their various professional backgrounds, we further investigate how founder-CEOs adopt different strategies in mobilizing resources and demonstrate advantages and disadvantages accordingly. Founder-CEOs' active participation in social service provision has brought fundamental changes to the welfare delivery system in Mainland China (Kwan and Lei, 2017). The performance of founder CEOs will influence the well-being of service users; it will also affect the government's views on the new service model and the amount of resource allocated to welfare services. Through the research, we aim to understand a range of perspectives on the mobilization of resources by founder-CEOs for SWOs, identify strengths and weaknesses, and recommend improvements based on research evidence.

Strategic resource mobilization

Resource mobilization theory refers to “a process whereby both financial and non-financial resources are mobilized either externally or internally to support organization activities” (Batti, 2014, p.57). It defines the term “resource” broadly, including both tangible assets such as funds,

facilities, and personnel, and intangible assets such as ideology, leadership, organizational skills, and legitimacy. The theory holds that combined resources are the key determinant of the success or failure of the organizations. The higher the number of resources and the degree of resource mobilization, the higher the likelihood of success (McCarthy and Zald, 2001).

Existing literature on resource mobilization in non-profit organizations is still fragmented and lacks a clear focus. Most studies adopt a process perspective: resource mobilization as an organizing process is critical for the emergence of a new venture (Delmar and Shane, 2004) and the continued success of established ones (Chandler and Hanks, 1994). During this process, non-financial resources such as personnel and leadership are as crucial as financial resources, and some resources can be generated by the organization internally rather than acquired externally (Batti, 2014). As CEOs engage in the resource mobilization process, they must recall, develop, and apply knowledge, sometimes under conditions of extreme duress (Moorman and Miner, 1998). Adegbile *et al.*, (2018) claim that this knowledge underpins the capabilities that sustain the resource mobilization process.

The social networks of the founder-CEOs also play an important role in facilitating resource mobilization processes and outcomes (Bowey and Easton, 2007). Resource mobilization thus is an activity arising from interactions in relationships and networks (Drummond *et al.*, 2018), and can be conceptualized as an interaction undertaken to obtain access to resources and co-create values (Adegbile *et al.*, 2018). Resource mobilization can emerge from prior and new relationships which are important for ensuring inter-organizational linkage (Hite, 2005). Studies of “social embeddedness” further highlight the importance of social ties in constructing an organization’s base of financial, physical, human, and other resources, especially when these resources are difficult to access (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003).

The major weakness of non-profit organizations is often a lack of marketing and financial expertise on the part of top management (Healy, 2002). Norburn and Birley (1988) claim that

the combination of three factors—outside experience (in marketing, sales, research and development, or finance), a broad educational background, and previous employment in at least two organizations—give CEOs a great advantage. They particularly draw attention to the important role played by a CEO’s educational background and work experience: CEOs with previous business experience and broad educational backgrounds are more likely to mobilize resources, and CEOs with international and cross-industry experiences are better able to maintain good relationships with stakeholders.

SWOs in Mainland China are non-profit organizations with limited resources. Still, they are required to deal with personal and family problems embedded in complex social issues and environments through individual-centered, family-focused, and community-based service provision (Bai, 2014). In order to promote new initiatives, founder-CEOs must have excellent entrepreneurial skills that allow them to overcome the structural constraints of a complex environment and limited resources (Sullivan, 2016). In addition to individual leadership characteristics and strategic behaviours, founder-CEOs must also gain the support of their colleagues and organizations (Peters, 2018). They must be innovative and capable of embodying the organization’s mission, creating valuable services, and seeking new opportunities (Dees *et al.*, 2001).

Building on the above theoretical review, we develop the term “strategic resource mobilization” and use it as a conceptual framework to analyze the founder-CEOs of SWOs in Mainland China. We focus on three main areas: funding, human resources, and government relations. Funding is a basic necessity for the development of a SWO, human resources (i.e., personnel) are its greatest wealth, and maintaining a good relationship with the government is the most daunting task. We speculate that the founder-CEOs of Chinese SWOs will employ strategies acquired from their professional backgrounds, connections, and social networks to secure funding, manage human resources, maintain government relations, and maximize the

benefits to their organizations. We further hypothesize that founders-CEOs coming from different professional backgrounds will face different challenges in managing their organizations and possess distinct advantages and disadvantages when mobilizing resources.

Data and methods

The research adopted a qualitative approach, focusing on understanding people and their circumstances, and the ways in which they see the world and make sense of it (Baden and Major, 2013). One of the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative methodology is symbolic interactionism, which deals with people's ability to convey images and implications in their correspondence with others (Hall, 2007). In other words, it is a frame of reference to better understand how individuals interact with one another to create a world of shared meaning, and, in turn, how this world shapes individual behaviors. According to symbolic interactionism, the roles and functions of founder-CEOs of SWOs can be regarded as a series of interactions with external forces (policy, government) and internal factors (existing resources, personnel, and organizational goals). Following the perspective of symbolic interactionism, we examined founder-CEOs during the early stages of SWOs: how they interacted with different stakeholders and mobilized resources, both within and outside their organization, thus enhancing the development of SWOs and the social work profession in Mainland China.

Research participants

Although many SWOs have been established throughout China, they are not evenly distributed—most are located in large cities (Shao, 2012). Beijing, the capital of China, represents a litmus test of the development of social work. Shanghai was the first city in which social work practice was inaugurated. Guangzhou provides the most social work funding and is greatly influenced by Hong Kong social work practices (Law, 2014). We therefore chose

these three cities to recruit our research participants. The SWO had to be registered with the Civil Affairs Bureau of the local government and the CEO had to be the founder of the SWO and fully responsible for the organization's survival and development.

We recruited founder-CEOs of SWOs from three professional backgrounds—academia, business, and government. A purposive sampling method was employed. In each city we invited at least two CEOs with a university background, two CEOs with a business background, and two with a government background (so at least six CEOs were recruited to represent each background). Some participants whom we already knew received the invitation for interviews directly. Others were introduced through our connections with local government agencies, social work associations, and professional and personal networks.

A total of 21 founder-CEOs were included in the analysis: eight from Beijing, six, from Shanghai, and seven, from Guangzhou. Appendix I outlines the participants' key characteristics. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face on a one-to-one basis in the participant's office or preferred location (coffee shop or restaurant). All participants provided written consent. Pseudonyms are used and all means of identification have been removed to ensure confidentiality. Ethics approval was obtained from the authors' home university.

Data collection and analysis

The study relied on three sources of qualitative data for analysis: in-depth interviews; the organizations' archives, newsletters, brochures, and websites; and national and local government policy documents. The interview guidelines are included in Appendix II. The recordings of in-depth interviews were converted into verbatim transcripts which were coded following the methods of close coding and open coding into various categories—challenges, strategies, funding, human resources, government relations, project development, internal management, etc. A second round of coding was conducted to check the transcripts and the

codes to ensure consistency (Manning, 1997). These coded data formed the basis of a content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). They were re-categorized by the research team to identify the themes and the commonalities under each theme. Measures including peer debriefing and member checking were employed to ensure the credibility of the research.

Findings

Founder-CEOs with an academic background

With the introduction of social work education in the 1980s, college and university teachers were quickly pressed to become familiar with social work theory, develop education programs, and then set up social work organizations. They were the first group of founder-CEOs of SWOs in Mainland China.

The effect of a university background on securing funding from government

All participants from an academic background believed that their university experience provided a good platform for mobilizing resources. Their status as academics provided an advantage when they attempted to gain recognition and forge relationships with the government. The government holds academics in high regard, making it easier for them to gain trust, secure projects, and obtain funding. As Professor Jiang explained:

To obtain government resources, the most important thing is to establish a relationship with mutual trust. This process, I think, is easier for me because of my identity. When you are a university teacher and communicate with the government, they regard you as an expert and believe what you say. (GZ16, 24/7/2018)

According to Professor Wan, however, a university background only provides an initial advantage. An SWO's continued development still depends on its actual strengths and abilities:

Teachers, in fact, only have initial advantages, that is, advantages arising from their identity. ... As a teacher and scholar, you are trusted and respected. ... But I think what a university teacher's identity gives us is an initial advantage, ... because the decision to work with people for a long time depends on their character, professional prestige, and professional productivity ultimately. (SH10, 2/8/2018)

Founder-CEOs with a university background certainly had unique advantages in the professional field. Their professional status also allowed them to mobilize and integrate resources for the SWOs. Professor Jiang shared her experience:

When mobilizing resources, I think I may have an advantage, that is, I provide the local government (the purchaser of my services) with two free training sessions every year to train community officers. This training helps the officers gain an awareness of social work. Through this kind of professional training, they learn what social work is and how to perform needs assessments. Many community officers consider themselves my students. They think we are very helpful. (GZ16, 24/7/2018)

Social work students as a human resource

Many university professors were prompted to establish an SWO in order to provide their students with an opportunity for internship. As students obtained practical experience, they also provided inexpensive labour for the new organization. When asked about the advantages of setting up an SWO as a university faculty, Professor Huang in Beijing admitted that all of the first group of employees and core members of her organization were students. Their willing labour solved two serious problems during the early days of development—lack of human resources and shortage of funding:

There is a natural connection between me and them [the students]. I teach them, and they continue to follow my lead when working in the organization. I provide them with special training, as well as opportunities for academic exchanges and so on. (BJ1, 24/12/2018)

Founder-CEOs of SWOs from other backgrounds, however, were critical of this practice. They believed that social work professors needed to devote a great deal of time and energy to setting up organizations to the detriment of their teaching. They were also unhappy with unpaid or minimally paid students providing front-line services, which created unfair competition. Mr. Tang expressed a typical view:

I don't agree with the front-line services provided by university teachers. They utilize student and internship resources to do front-line services. Because of the low cost of labour (or even a free labour force), they acquire many projects. This is actually unfair competition. They will ruin the social work industry. (SH11, 2/8/2018)

Lack of management expertise

All the academic staff interviewed noted that their lack of experience in management presented challenges during the initial stages of establishing their SWO. In particular, they were often unable to promote team building and cooperation. Professor Jiang reflected on this:

If I could go back, I would attach greater importance to the team at the beginning, not just push myself forward. During the initial stage, I was really one person rushing along. ... Although there was a team, the team only listened to me—I ran forward and they habitually followed behind. If at first we could have a clear understanding of how each member would grow in the organization, it would probably not be so painful. (GZ16, 24/7/2018)

Professor Wan concurred:

I didn't know much about management during the early days. If I could do it again, I would definitely do it differently—not be as bookish as before. I would be able to handle many problems better. ... I would make good use of my professional advantages. I would set standards of management with my staff. (SH10, 2/8/2018)

Founder-CEOs with a business background

Compared to founder-CEOs with a university background, those with a business background had wider access to funding sources from their networks established during their years in business. Our data also reveal that founder CEOs with a business background possessed good communication skills and were adept at maintaining existing projects and establishing long-term co-operative relationships. The challenges they faced mainly arose from employees' perceptions of their lack of professional expertise.

Wider access to funding sources and support from business networks

Founder-CEOs with a business background were less likely to be trusted by the government than university professors and, therefore, were at a disadvantage when seeking initial government funding. Ms. Yuan described the difficulties she experienced in securing funding and projects from the government when establishing her organization:

It was very difficult for us to get government funding in the early days of the organization. We couldn't get funding information in time and the government didn't trust us as much as university teachers. They even doubted our motives in starting SWOs. (SH12, 2/8/2018)

Still, these founder-CEOs were able to tap into the rich resources of their past business networks. Once their SWOs are established, founder-CEOs with a business background have

an advantage in obtaining working capital to maintain the operation of the organization when government funding is not in place. Mr. Huang was one of them:

Government funds sometimes cannot be paid in time, particularly in the early stages. As founder-CEOs, we need to be responsible for mobilizing funds to ensure the normal operation of the organization. As former business people, we have some savings. In the meantime, it is easier for us to borrow money from our friends, entrepreneurs, or banks compared to university teachers. I heard that some teachers even sold their houses to run the organizations, which would be too stressful. (GZ18, 16/5/2018)

Prior management experience an advantage in securing government co-operation

Participants with a business background believed that their past work experience helped them in dealing with government. They considered themselves easier to get along with than professors as they “don’t take themselves too seriously” (GZ18, 16/5/2018). Ms. Han was engaged in trade before she set up her organization in Guangzhou. She emphasized that her good communication and social skills helped her gain access to projects from local government and maintain good relationships:

Mobilizing government resources is not a big problem for me personally, mainly because my previous work experience is still helpful. In the context of government relations, with some business experience, you are able to communicate relatively easily by giving them full respect. In the eyes of us business people, it's normal to lower our position a little. (GZ17, 6/12/2018)

Founder-CEOs with a business background spent more time cultivating relationships with government. Mr. Tang set up his organization four years previously in Shanghai. He believed that maintaining a good relationship with government requires constant communication and solid performance:

Because I was a business person, the government didn't trust me very much at first. I spent a lot of time trying to earn their trust. I constantly communicated with them to understand their requirements for the projects and continuously express my serious intention to co-operate with them. As a result, we became friends. Now when they have projects, they think of me. (SH11, 2/8/2018)

Challenges arising from a lack of specialized social work knowledge

Due to their lack of academic training in social work, founder-CEOs with a business background were not confident about their grasp of social work. They were often challenged by people from both inside and outside the organization. Ms. Han maintained that the main problems she encountered were professional challenges from her employees:

The biggest difficulty in the initial phase of the launch was my own professional ability. You feel that you can't find strength in your team, you know? You are very helpless. ... Although I don't know much about the profession, I think I still have more social experience than them, but if you have no professional credentials, you can't communicate with them. (GZ17, 6/12/2018)

Several founder-CEOs with a business background argued that social work is less academic than other disciplines and that social workers exaggerate their professionalism. They overcame the challenges by acquiring more social work knowledge. Ms. Yuan observed:

When I first arrived, I asked two social workers in the community: what is the professional working method of social workers? They couldn't explain it clearly; they just said they have social work methods. I don't know social work, so I went to study it. I have read many theories and methods of social work, but did not find them to be very professional. What are its advantages? I think social workers cover everything but do not go into depth. It's not a big challenge for me to start a social work organization, but

there may be some challenges in terms of so-called professional language of social work, though it's not difficult to learn. (BJ4, 23/12/2018)

Founder-CEOs with a government background

Of the six founder-CEOs with a government background, two set up their SWO following retirement, two transitioned from the government to their SWO (they resigned from the government and founded the organization), and two remained employed by the government (the SWOs they founded were affiliated with state-owned enterprises). Their previous work experience and connections in the government provided them with both benefits and constraints in their tenure as CEOs.

Familiarity with the government system

Founder-CEOs who had previously worked in the government shared certain advantages: they knew the government system very well and they were familiar with the government culture, which helped them secure projects and communicate with service users. Ms. Jiang previously worked in a sub-district office in Shanghai and considered her experience an advantage:

I have my own experience in the system, and then I took the leap of leaving the system and set up a social work organization outside the system. My advantages are obvious—I have been dealing with the government since I graduated from college. I have a good relationship with the government, and I know how to work with it. (SH13, 1/8/2018)

Ms. Han was once a community officer in a sub-district in Beijing and started her own organization in 2017. She described the advantages she enjoyed in project implementation due to her past work experience in grass-roots communities:

Because we have experience in the community, we can well understand the needs of local residents. It is easier to get them involved in projects and achieve the goal. (BJ6, 23/12/2018)

Some SWOs were directly affiliated with government departments or state-owned enterprises. When asked about the advantages of such relationships, Ms. Liang responded:

It is not difficult for us to get project funding because of our network. In terms of mobilizing resources, our relationship with government is obviously an advantage in dealing with some of the difficulties in operating the organization. (GZ20, 18/12/2018)

Greater administrative constraints

SWOs established by or affiliated with government departments or state-owned enterprises were subject to greater administrative interference than those founded by individuals. The founder-CEOs were required to follow instructions from above. For instance, Ms. Liang's organization was set up by a public institute affiliated with the government; she recognized that although she was the founder, she needed to satisfy a number of stakeholders:

As the administrators of our organization, we should not only do a good job in professional management but also take into account all kinds of relations—the relationship with the service purchaser [the government] and clients, the relationship with our various superior departments, etc. This is very important. (GZ20, 18/12/2018)

Although Ms. Liang was no longer a civil servant, she was still obliged to follow the rules and regulations governing civil servants because of government backing for her SWO.

Ms. Liang and her colleagues felt that they were subject to many constraints:

Executives at each level all have their own opinions. We must sacrifice what we want to do if the leader does not agree. We have to listen to them. When my peers compare themselves with those in other social work organizations, they wonder, why are we so

strict? We are not civil servants. Why should we abide by the rules of civil servants?
(GZ20, 18/12/2018)

Lack of professional and management skills

Some founder-CEOs with a government background encountered difficulties because they lacked adequate knowledge of social work, as Ms. Liang explained:

I experienced difficulties in the professional area and had to go through a learning curve. The organization may run into different difficulties in different phases. For me, I may be weak in understanding the social work profession, which remains a challenge throughout the whole process. But in terms of management, labour policy, and personnel management, I have some advantages. (GZ20, 18/12/2018)

Ms. Jiang thought her shortcomings in resource mobilization resulted from her lack of management experience. To overcome her shortages, she had tried to expand her network beyond the government:

My disadvantage is that I have never worked in an enterprise and do not know management. So now I am also learning, attending training workshops, making some friends with business backgrounds, etc. In the future, I will certainly not just collaborate with the government. What's more important for me is to get out of my comfort zone of dealing with the government and try to work with other systems, such as foundations.
(SH13, 1/8/2018)

Discussion

Based on in-depth interviews conducted with twenty-one founder-CEOs of SWOs in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou in 2018, our research shows that founder-CEOs coming from different professional backgrounds adopt particular strategies for mobilizing resources in three

major areas of human service management: funding, human resources, and government relations. Moreover, the strategies adopted are in accordance with the founder-CEOs' professional backgrounds, connections, and social networks, which present certain advantages and disadvantages. As summarized in Table 1, founder-CEOs affiliated with universities are assumed by the government to be worthy of trust and respect, and have the advantage of access to social work students, who provide human resources; founder-CEOs from business backgrounds have more channels to obtain financial support and can make good use of their management experiences and skills; and founder-CEOs with prior government experience can rely on connections with officials to secure funding and projects.

Table 1. Strategic Resource Mobilization among Founder-CEOs of SWOs

CEO's background	Funding	Human resources	Government relations
Academia	Funding and projects mainly from the government	Students as human resources Lack of team-building and management skills	Initial trust and respect from the government Promotion of social work through training government officials
Business	Wider range of funding sources from prior business networks	Good communication and management skills Challenges from social worker employees	Collaboration with the government facilitated by adopting a respectful attitude
Government	Government connections help secure funding and projects	Lack of professional and management skills	Familiar with the government system and culture Greater administrative interventions and constraints due to government oversight

Our research contributes to the exiting literature by integrating three essential aspects of human service management—funding, human resources, and government relations—in one analytical framework of strategic resource mobilization. Such an integrated framework helps us gain a comprehensive understanding of a range of perspectives concerning the mobilization of resources in SWOs. Founder-CEOs not only need to mobilize resources to ensure the survival and development of their SWOs; in an environment of limited resources and strong government control, they also need wisdom to dialogue with the government, voice out the needs of vulnerable groups, advocate for policy adjustments, and promote the well-being of service users. Our findings particularly emphasize the decisive role of founder-CEOs during the organizations' initial stages. The more resources a founder-CEO can mobilize, the more likely the organization will survive and succeed, and the more clients will benefit from the services. The competitive advantages of founder-CEOs rest on their previous work experience, social networks and ties, and pertinent organizational knowledge.

The study further confirms that symbolic interactionism is an appropriate perspective for analyzing the mobilization of resources by founder-CEOs for SWOs. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the interaction between people and the environment. In a highly resource-constrained and government-dominated environment, the mobilization strategies of founder-CEOs are greatly constrained. Nonetheless, the founder-CEOs actively participate in social service provision, and influence how the government allocates resources. The more resources the founder-CEOs strive for, the more funds the government allocates in social services, and the more benefits the vulnerable groups will receive.

The study limitations shall be noted. Our research participants were recruited from Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Although the three cities signify the trending development of Chinese SWOs, we need to be cautious about the research generalizability: the findings cannot be assumed to reflect the situation of the entire social work profession in Mainland

China. During the course of research, we also interviewed two CEOs in Beijing who were experienced frontline social workers and had recently established their own organizations. However, as it is still not common for frontline social workers to start their own SWOs, we were unable to find founder-CEOs with similar backgrounds in the other two cities for comparison. Therefore, in this article, we did not cover founder-CEOs with backgrounds in social work practice. Future research should pay attention to this potential group of founder-CEOs and their development in Mainland China.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for SWO executives, which will better equip them to manage their organizations. For instance, we found that founder-CEOs with university and government backgrounds struggle due to their lack of management experience and expertise. The quality of management determines whether an organization can survive and develop. Establishing and maintaining a sound internal management system is a prerequisite for the development of SWOs. Founder-CEOs need to hone their management skills and methods in order to gain the required expertise. We therefore suggest that a series of training programmes should be designed and organized. For founder-CEOs with university and government backgrounds, management courses (in financing, marketing, human resources, and information management) could be offered. Reciprocally, for founder-CEOs with government and business backgrounds, courses in social work knowledge, skills, and values should be available, so they can learn about the social work profession, be able to share in their employees' concerns, and lead the organization to achieve its service goals.

The study findings also have implications for the government and the social work profession in Mainland China: both need to create a suitable environment for the sustainable development of SWOs. Most SWOs still rely on government funding and projects for survival,

which is limiting. When government funding is the main revenue stream, it creates dependence and managerial challenges, and brings onerous levels of oversight (Lu and Zhao, 2019). The founder-CEOs of SWOs interviewed in our study were aware of the risk of relying entirely on government funding and hoped to expand their funding sources to businesses and foundations. Diversifying their organization's funding revenue will improve the prospects of survival during turbulent economic times (Lu *et al.*, 2020). Some founder-CEOs informed us that they had recently received corporate funding to carry out social work projects. It is likely that an increasing number of enterprises will collaborate with SWOs to demonstrate social responsibility and build a corporate image. The government should introduce preferential policies, such as tax reduction, to encourage enterprises to establish funds for social work services. If such policies were in place, SWOs would be able to diversify their funding sources and achieve greater financial stability.

While more sources of funding support are being sought, efforts should also be made to improve the partnership between the government and SWOs. The development of SWOs in Mainland China relies on the support of the government. While this support is strong, SWOs are still regarded as subordinates rather than partners by some local government officials, who treat NGOs as lower-ranking semi-government units instead of independent social service providers. To improve the partnership between the government and SWOs, it is important to enhance the management capacities of welfare bureaucrats when processing the contracting-out of social services (Kwan and Lei, 2017). To ensure SWOs' sustainable development, the policy environment could be further improved. In particular, the project bidding processes should be made fairer and more transparent. Meanwhile, a self-regulating system to monitor social work services could be established by the social work profession. This would result in improved service quality as well as provide SWOs the added advantage of professional oversight when cultivating partnerships with the government and other potential donors.

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Appendix I. Participants' Demographics

Location	Interview No.	Pseudonym (gender)	Background	Years in the organization	Service areas of the organization	Interview date
Beijing	BJ1	Prof. Huang (F)	Academia	9	Judicial service	24/12/2018
	BJ2	Prof. Yang (F)	Academia	9	Integrated service	25/12/2018
	BJ3	Ms. Liang (F)	Business	9	Elder service	25/12/2018
	BJ4	Ms. Yuan (F)	Business	1	Community service	23/12/2018
	BJ5	Mr. Liang (M)	Government	15	Volunteer service	25/12/2018
	BJ6	Ms. Han (F)	Government	1	Community service	23/12/2018
	BJ7	Ms. He (F)	Social Worker	9	Integrated service	25/12/2018
	BJ8	Ms. Qian (F)	Social Worker	10	Elder service	26/12/2018
Shanghai	SH9	Prof. Ling (F)	Academia	9	Family service	1/8/2018
	SH10	Dr. Wan (M)	Academia	8	Integrated service	2/8/2018
	SH11	Mr. Tang (M)	Business	4	Service for teenagers and elderly who lost their only child	2/8/2018
	SH12	Ms. Yuan (F)	Business	8	Integrated service	2/8/2018
	SH13	Ms. Jiang (F)	Government	10	Family service	1/8/2018
	SH14	Mr. Qian (M)	Government	10	AIDS patients service	1/8/2018
Guangzhou	GZ15	Prof. Lian (M)	Academia	10	Integrated service	19/12/2018
	GZ16	Prof. Jiang (F)	Academia	12	Integrated service	24/7/2018
	GZ17	Ms. Han (F)	Business	8	Integrated service	6/12/2018
	GZ18	Mr. Huang (M)	Business	10	Integrated service	16/5/2018
	GZ19	Mr. Yan (M)	Business	7	Integrated service	20/12/2018
	GZ20	Ms. Liang (F)	Government	8	Integrated service	18/12/2018
	GZ21	Mr. Fang (M)	Government	6	Integrated service	18/12/2018

Appendix II. Interview Guidelines

The following questions were asked during the interview:

1. How long has your organization been established? What is its main service and source of funds at present?
2. Could you please summarize your educational background and working experience?
3. What are the roles and functions of the CEO in your organization?
4. What are the difficulties and challenges of resource mobilization for your organization? Which is the most difficult or challenging?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of your educational and employment background in terms of your ability to mobilize resources?
6. If we divide the development of an SWO into three phases – the creativity phase, the expansion phase, and the mature phase – what phase is your organization in? Are there differences in resource mobilization depending on the developmental phase? What differences?
7. How have policies influenced resource mobilization of your organization?
8. What are the values, code of ethics, strategies and wisdom of CEOs of SWOs in your opinion?