

The De-Professionalization of Social Work? A Qualitative Analysis of Subcontracted Social Workers in Shenzhen

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Abstract

Since 2008, public institutions in China increasingly subcontract social workers as service providers. This process, largely viewed as being innovative, is simultaneous with policy demands for ‘more social workers’. The experiences of the sub-contracted social workers are very recent and have been under-researched. This study is based on questionnaires and interviews with subcontracted social workers. Result of this research suggests subcontracted social workers experience dissatisfaction and frustration in regard to the low entry threshold, employment instability, an excessive workload, and little understanding or support from the public institution. The paper concludes that subcontracted social workers make a precarious group of employees.

Keywords: *sub-contracted social workers, marketization, social services, precarious workers, government procurement, China*

1. Introduction

Since 2008, China has been undergoing a gradual transformation towards a more market-based mode of social service delivery. Social workers are considered to be significant agents towards the central government’s pursuit of ‘social harmony’ (Chen, 2018; Han, 2009; Szto, 2015). Part of this process is for public institutions to subcontract social organizations and social workers as service providers. This is largely viewed as an innovative policy (Lu, 2012). In 2018 alone, local municipalities in China spent a total of 6.11 billion RMB (approximately 810.23 million euro) on procuring social work services, representing a 19.6% increase on the previous year (Xu et al., 2019). As many as 383,000 new social work positions were created in 2018 alone, with the majority being placed within community and public institutions (Xu et al.,

2019). This process has happened in tandem with an unprecedented increase in the number of university degrees in social work and a supposed demand for ‘more social workers’. With as many as 880 ‘subcontracted social workers’¹ in public institutions, Shenzhen is, by far, leading the way (Bureau of Civil Affairs of Shenzhen, 2018).

The recent developments in China’s social work have not lacked research. However, the perspectives have largely been structuralist in nature. Previous studies have centred on the models of government purchase, on the high turnover rate among social workers, on issues relating to the professionalization of social work and the ‘indigenization’ of western social work theories and education. The subjective experiences of the sub-contracted social workers (the so-called ‘subcontracted social workers’) have been under-addressed. This study sets itself the goal of examining this area. It is a small-scale, exploratory study that aims to understand the experiences of those subcontracted from social work organizations to work within public institutions under government procurement in Shenzhen (Guangdong, China). The empirical research is based on 31 questionnaires with open questions and 7 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with subcontracted social workers.

The research suggests that the relationship between the government and the so called ‘social organizations’ is heavily biased towards state influence. Whilst playing a leading role, the public institutions are spearheading the subcontracting process, with *de facto* non-negotiable stakes for the subcontracted social workers and the sending organizations. Their perspectives reveal dissatisfaction and frustration in regard to the low entry threshold, employment instability, an excessive workload, little understanding or support from their administrative superiors, as well as concerns over the trend towards the bureaucratization of social work. Several implications for the subcontracted social workers and for the profession are then presented.

2. Framing the Context: A Snapshot on the Development of Social Work in China

2.1. Building a New Occupational Group

From 1978 onwards, China embarked on a major reform with a stated focus on de-politicization and economic development. Efforts were put into re-establishing social work around the late 1980s, in order to alleviate the social problems brought about by urban unemployment and income inequality (Chen, 2003; Chen, 2018; Szto, 2015). Social work courses were set up at major universities. However, it was not until the late 1990s that the first degree in Social Work was re-introduced. At the time, the envisaged ‘spring’ of social services held high promise. Social work underwent a period of real

and rapid development in China during the so-called ‘Ten Years of Social Work Development’ (2006-2016). From a group with poor social visibility and administrative roles, social workers started to be considered as important agents in consolidating China’s ‘social harmony’, rooted in a highly valued Taoist tradition (Gao, 2017).

An ambitious governmental target (CPC, 2013) was that, by 2020, 1.45 million graduates would have gained a social work degree and would be ready to be employed. In 2018 alone, a total of 6.11 billion RMB (approximately 810.23 million euro) was invested by local municipalities into social work development. This represented a 19.6% increase on the previous year. Among those local municipalities, Shanghai and Guangdong alone have spent 1.4 billion RMB (185.6 million euro). Given the strong political will, backed by monetary incentives, there were 867 local associations of social workers and 9,793 social work organizations countrywide by the end of 2018; as many as 383,000 new social work positions were created in 2018 alone (Xu et al., 2019).

Against the above backdrop, there has been an unprecedented growth in social work education at tertiary level. There are now 348 universities offering a BA in social work education (ISCED 6), 150 universities and research institutions providing Master’s degrees in social work (ISCED 7), and 17 doctoral programmes in social work (ISCED 8). The latest annual report of China’s Association of Social Workers states the number of social workers² as being 1.35 million in total (in social work positions, regardless of educational background or qualification status) and 439,000 of them are qualified social workers, who have passed the national examinations required to obtain the qualification (Xu et al., 2019).

2.2. An ‘Over-heated’ Development?

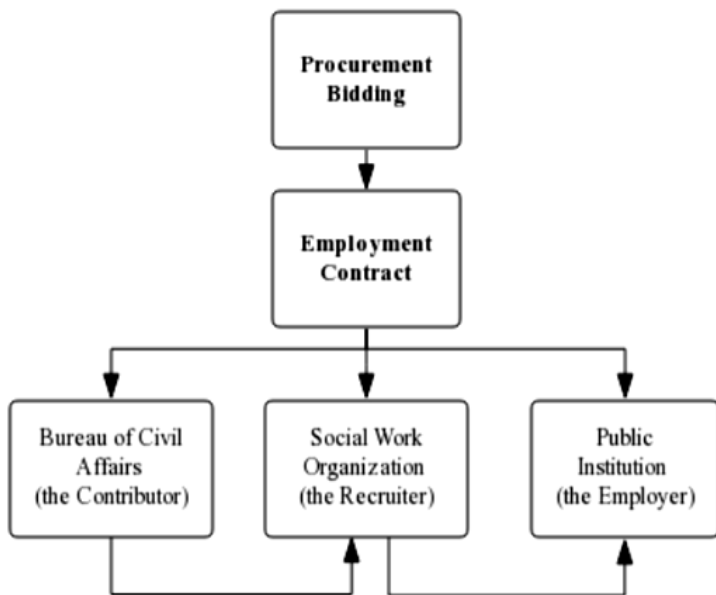
But the above expansion of and enthusiasm for social work is not without its dilemmas. From 2017, the national policy started to emphasize social goals. Institutional missions, plans and priorities were tailored in ways that placed a focus on social welfare. Yet surprisingly, at odds with the stated ambition of achieving social harmony, and after four years of a continued emphasis on supporting social work, the Chinese central government no longer mentioned social work or social workers in its annual report released in March 2019. These very recent policy choices have placed social work at a point where the maturity of the field has started to be brought into question. Several Chinese scholars have expressed their concerns regarding the ‘over-heated’ development of social work in China today. With as few as 19% of university staff in social work departments holding a degree in social work (Chen, 2018), the quality of education has started to be thrown into doubt.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the number of social workers at the expense of the quality of their education has been considered problematic. Large numbers of new social workers have entered the field, but the turnover rate has also been high. Studies carried out in 2014 showed that the turnover rate in two leading cities – Shenzhen and Beijing – was 22.2% and 25% respectively. Moreover, as many as 50% of front-line social workers in another leading city, Dongguan, expressed their intention to resign (Du, 2015; Jiang et al., 2019; Tian and Jing, 2014). However, the above transformations cannot be analyzed in isolation from the broader process of the marketization of public services. This will be discussed at length in the next section.

2.3. Marketization of Social Services

By and large, ‘marketization’ refers to the process through which the public sector contracts out the responsibility of delivering public services to private entities, such as non-governmental organizations, by offering public grants, while, at the same time, supervising those services (Brown and Potoski, 2003; Bhatti, Olsen and Pedersen, 2009). In Shenzhen, the procurement process of subcontracted social workers involves three parties: the Bureau of Civil Affairs, social organizations, and the public institutions in which the social workers are to work (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Procurement Process for Subcontracted Social Workers’ Services



Source: Generated by the authors.

Notwithstanding claims about ‘innovation’, the relationship between the three is still heavily biased towards government influence which aims, for instance, to ‘lead the development’ of the ‘NGO sector’. It also predetermines the status and roles of the subcontracted social workers before procurement. Social work organizations are heavily reliant on governmental funds. For instance, as much as 83.56% of the revenue of social work organizations in Shenzhen comes from service-provision on behalf of the government, with another 7% of the income being government subsidy (Li, 2019). Based on stated criteria such as reputation in the field, or past cooperation experience, the government chooses a number of organizations that are then directly selected or invited to bid for various tenders. Or, as is the case in Shenzhen, the government directly procures services with limited competition.

The marketization of social services calls for an examination of China’s non-governmental sector. To have a legal identity in China, organizations have to register with the Department of Civil Affairs. Under current laws, an organization may be registered as: social group, private non-enterprise unit and foundation. However, the evaluation of the applications is closely controlled. Having leaders with the ‘appropriate’ political background, a high number of employees and considerable funds are key selection criteria. Consequently, many organizations³ as well as international NGOs register as private enterprises rather than ‘non-governmental organizations’, or even stay unregistered.

As a matter of practice, these organizations carry out social work projects at community level. In their contracts with public institutions, many see a strategy for covering other administrative costs. The organizations which win the bids receive a management fee amounting to 20% of the salary package of the subcontracted social workers. Empirical studies (Han, 2017) show, however, that in real practice, the level of governmental control in the procurement of public services is extremely strong, with social organizations having very low bargaining power, if any at all. In extreme situations, for instance, the government cuts the budget for every project to 50,000 RMB (6,441.34 euro) after bidding, and some local governments failed to provide organizations with the amount initially agreed. Small organizations are especially vulnerable.

Against the above backdrop, the relationship between the social organizations started to become more competition-driven and less cooperation-based. Moreover, the procurement process unleashed a wave of opportunistic behaviours among enterprises and organizations managed by individuals who have a privileged relationship with government officials, such as high-level university members. Various entities increasingly started to change their registration status into ‘social organizations’, in order to pursue the profit opportunities that opened up. It goes without saying that complying

with governmental policy is essential in being selected as a subcontracted organization and maintaining this status. In political terms, upon signing the contract, the social organizations become government stewards or actors, working for the ‘maximum benefit of the government’ (Cooper, 2004; Jing, 2011; Ju, 2017).

2.4. Subcontracted Social Workers

Upon winning government bids, social organizations rely on subcontracted social workers. Unlike elsewhere, where outsourced social services take place within the premises of the contracted organization, this is very much not the case in China. The subcontracted staff actually work *on behalf* of the organization which won the bid, yet *within* the very public institutions that called for the ‘outsourcing’ of their services (i.e. local government departments, subdistrict offices, hospitals, schools, drug rehabilitation centres, residents’ committees). This dispatching arrangement allows the state to benefit from the work contribution of qualified staff based on a short-term contract (one to three years), without the legal obligations derived from the regular dismissal of permanent employees. Moreover, during the contract period, the leadership of the public institution has the right to replace the subcontracted social workers at any time, without further obligations.

A formal employment contract for subcontracted social workers is signed by the three parties. The Bureau of Civil Affairs (the Contributor) provides the grant to the social work organization (the Recruiter) according to the number of subcontracted social workers procured. The Bureau pays for a fixed salary amount for each subcontracted social worker, regardless of the work to be carried out, the seniority level, or the working hours. The social work organizations would then dispatch their social workers, or recruit new ones, to the posts in the relevant public institution (‘The Employer’). The subcontracted social workers are supposed to follow the rules of both the public institution they work in, and the social work organization they belong to. As will become evident later on in the paper, the obligation to comply simultaneously with the requirements and tasks of two organizations (social work organization and public institution) is often loaded with tensions and irreconcilable dilemmas that can even compromise professional integrity.

There are many ways in which the status of subcontracted social workers in China is different from that of social workers elsewhere. Subcontracted social workers in China have their employment contract (permanent or temporary) with social work organizations, and the procurement contract mentioned above is temporary, varying from one year to three years, depending on the regulations and wishes of the local government. Also, it is not absolutely mandatory for those applying to be subcontracted social

workers to have a ‘social worker’ qualification certificate, or to have an educational background in social work, all of which makes the job entry threshold rather low. Although the procurement calls give preference (and increased salaries) to those holding a certificate, many of those applying for social work vacancies are unqualified.

After a decade of having subcontracted social workers in China’s public services, opinions on this occupational group are mixed. On the one hand, some argue that subcontracted social workers meet a very practical function in China, where social work has a weak tradition and where the welfare system is highly bureaucratic (Li, 2013). Some believe that subcontracted social workers can enhance local governments’ understanding of social work and ultimately highlight the need for actual employment in this area (Li, 2013; Han, 2017). These views are substantiated by the shared idea that subcontracted social workers have both the capacity to move within policy and administrative environments, and a close understanding of clients’ needs, be they people with drug addiction, those facing mental health problems, young people, etc. (Lu, 2012).

On the other hand, subcontracted social workers have been severely criticized for being overly administrative. Indeed, they are subcontracted directly to work inside public institutions, without specific job requirements, distinct goals or objectives. Nevertheless, most tasks delegated to them would be administrative (Ma, 2014; Lu, 2012). In addition, the sending social work organizations often have a hard time making ends meet, and are unable to offer subcontracted social workers the support and training they may need. Indeed, a reduced sense of commitment, a sense of loneliness in the workplace, an absence of long-term relationships with clients and difficulties in carrying out professional social work were highlighted as some of the main problems (Li, 2013).

3. Aims and Methods

Previous research has focused on the development of social work as a field and the implications of the government procurement processes for organizations, clients and society at large. Attention was drawn to the insufficient preparedness of university staff (Chen, 2018; Cai, 2013), to the degree to which western theories could or should be incorporated into Chinese social work (Yan and Tsang, 2005), and to how to establish social work as an independent industry and its professionalization (Cui, 2013; Xiong and Wang, 2007). However, there was little on the actual experiences of the social workers who work within the procurement structure.

This research departs from the structuralist approach, which examines the dynamics and new roles of government, public institutions, social work

organizations, etc., by exploring the perspectives of those actually involved in such processes. Using a qualitative approach, this research attempts to fill a gap in the scholarship on the procurement of social services provision in China, by asking how those directly involved experience the process. How do subcontracted social workers perceive themselves, compared to other social workers, and compared to staff employed in public institutions? What are their views and interpretations of the recent administrative transformations? Ultimately, what can their perspectives tell us about the broader institutional environment in China today?

This research has triangulated a review of government documents about subcontracted social workers, the results of an online questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews with subcontracted social workers in Shenzhen. Eleven individual social workers and 108 organizations (social work organizations, charity foundations, local social work associations) were invited to fill the online questionnaire. From a total of 63 completed questionnaires, 31 were filled in by subcontracted workers. As well as demographic information, the questionnaire included open questions related to the type of work, level of satisfaction, plans for the future and proposals for improvement. Respondents were balanced in terms of gender. The majority were between 25 and 39 years old. Out of the subcontracted social workers, 67.7% held a social worker certificate (N=22). Over half (N=18) had a Bachelor's or a Master's degree, 12 had a junior college diploma, and one respondent had a high school education.

Respondents had the option of self-selecting themselves for interview. In addition, snowball sampling was used to locate further respondents. This strategy was helpful, due to the fact that subcontracted social workers can be hard to find. They work separately in different public institutions. Also, there is no public contact information for subcontracted social workers, apart from the name of the public institution they work for. To add to the complexity, some are explicitly forbidden from giving interviews without the formal approval of their superiors, or they anticipate such limitations. The interviews included questions regarding the participants' experiences as subcontracted social workers, their thoughts and attitudes about their status, their tasks, and their aspirations and dilemmas. The duration of the interviews varied from 30 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. They were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, transcribed *verbatim*, then coded in NVivo 12. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper, in order to protect anonymity.

This is a small-scale, exploratory study that does not aim towards generalization or representativeness. It emerged as a need to reflect – based on disparate and anecdotal evidence – insights that are qualitative in nature and which escape the mainstream understanding of the recent transformations in China's social work. More analysis is needed into what the procurement actually entails and its implications for the social workers involved, for clients

and for the social work field at large. The following part will examine several of the themes that emerged, based on coding the narrative data from the questionnaires and the interviews.

4. Data and Analysis

4.1. The Entry Threshold: Crisis of Talent, 'Political Will' or Something Else?

The entry threshold of a profession determines who will be part of that professional group. According to the general contract model of the Bureau of Civil Affairs of Shenzhen, a minimum of 80% of subcontracted social workers under procurement should have a social worker qualification certificate. However, from the questionnaires and interviews, it was found that the entry threshold for subcontracted social workers is rather low. Four interviewees even mentioned that – in practice – there are no professional requirements, and a considerable number of subcontracted social work vacancies are actually filled by unqualified staff. The low entry threshold was attributed to a crisis of talent and an abuse of power:

They (the employer and the social work organizations) don't care about educational background. There are many who are not from this profession [social work], the social work industry itself is lacking a labour force.... I'm the only one who graduated in social work [...] a girl from our team was put in because her father has a good relationship with our employer, so she was designated to be in this post even before our procurement contract was signed ... a man in my team is here because he's a relative of the [social] organization's boss. He never works but surfs on the Internet and flirts with girls.... (Liu, 25, subcontracted social worker, BA in social work, certified as a social worker)

Another interviewee, Tan, similarly described the phenomenon, this time with the subcontracted social worker colleagues coming from a labour dispatching company, rather than a social work organization:

Many subcontracted social workers are not graduates in social work, or they are here because of private relationships. Only one or two subcontracted social workers are really doing the work. There are many, really many people of this kind [laughs]. I think in general every workplace has one or two.... Dispatching is an easy excuse and disguise for the workplace leader to bring in these people who are not able to get into a public institution with formal contract. If you go and ask them, they don't even know that they are social workers! (Tan, 27, subcontracted social worker, BA in social work, certified social worker)

It is uncertain why entry thresholds are so low, given the increasing numbers of graduates in social work. A general agreement among interviewees was

that they are ‘cheap labour’, easily replaceable. Indeed, subcontracted social workers often earn half the salary of their civil servant colleagues, yet more than the other social workers in social organizations. On the other hand, social work is a feminized occupation in China, as elsewhere. Unlike professions with a high social standing (medical doctors, lawyers), which have structures in place meant to protect entry into that profession, this is very much not the case with social workers. Associations are now emerging and their professional standing is now being shaped. But leaving the occupational criteria loosely structured right at the beginning of building a new professional group, may carry longer term implications for social workers’ public image.

4.2. ‘This is not Social Work Anymore’

The difference between subcontracted social workers and other local social workers was a recurring theme. Shenzhen governmental offices decide which social work organization to work with, and which subcontracted social workers should be hired or fired. The social workers already employed in an organization, however, apply for grants for projects that are to be carried out on behalf of the organization, for a governmental assignment.

The tasks of the subcontracted social workers are usually aimed at serving a particular group of clients or fulfilling department tasks. For example, in a public hospital, a medical subcontracted social worker is supposed to assist patients and console family members of patients; in a subdistrict office, there might be a drug-control subcontracted social worker who is responsible for helping drug addicts recover and avoid a relapse. Yet in reality, subcontracted social workers seem more likely to carry out administrative and propaganda tasks, of the kind usually attributed to civil servants. These are often perceived as remote from the social work field. Whilst bureaucratic duties appeared disappointing to some, there seemed to be a broad consensus that this was inevitable:

Liu: The biggest headache is that you need to prepare speeches and summaries for the leaders when there’s a meeting.

Q: That sounds like a civil servant, not a social worker.

Liu: No, we don’t look like social workers anymore (Liu, 25, BA in social work)

By and large, a sense of insecurity permeated the interviews. This was attributed to workplace environments characterized by high pressure and unreasonable demands, as well as contractual arrangements that allow for unpredictability and dismissal at short notice. These processes generate a sense of disillusionment in relation to the prospects of social work as an occupation: ‘Just the other day, my boss and colleagues mentioned that

social workers are the same as labour dispatch. This is the trend in the social work industry. We can't help it' (Lenny, 24, BA in Film, subcontracted social worker). Or, as another interviewee argued, because of being 'short of money', subcontracted social workers are easy to hire when the need arises, and easy to dismiss. A change from below is seen as impossible, as 'if some don't want to do it anymore, they will recruit again' (Chen, 27 years old, BA in social work).

4.3. The Loneliness of Subcontracted Social Workers

For non-subcontracted social workers in project or community services, the job content is highly structured: the number of cases and events is clear, as well as the methods/approaches to be used: casework, group work, community events per year, etc. What is more, working in a group of professional social workers has positive effects in terms of relieving work-related stress and loneliness, enhancing motivation, and providing a sense of commitment and belonging (Lu, 2012). Conversely, subcontracted social workers usually work separately in different institutions, with very few peers from similar backgrounds. Most of the time, they find themselves working alongside colleagues who have a limited understanding of what social work entails.

Every half month, a ranked result of drug control publicity would be announced in a group chat of all district and subdistrict leaders. This rank is only about profile-raising, and my office head doesn't want to lose face in front of so many other leaders, so he pushes me hard to do drug control propaganda, regardless of its quality ... it's a competition without limit. Being the only subcontracted social worker in this office, I have to compete with other subdistrict offices, which have 4 to 7 subcontracted social workers. But once my office head finds out that we rank at the bottom again, he would simply scold me and order me to work harder and harder. It's only me, how can I compete with so many people? (Tan, 27, BA in social work)

In general, subcontracted social workers do not have a social work supervisor to turn to for support. The monthly meetings with a supervisor, who has no background in social work or related disciplines, are hardly a replacement. The situation of their peers in organizations running social work projects and community services is very different; there, junior social workers are teamed up with more experienced colleagues, and specialized training is often provided.

4.4. Serving Two Masters

Working as a subcontracted social worker may not always entail a clear separation of tasks between the public institution and the social organization.

Sometimes competing demands may arise, leading to dilemmas and unresolved tensions. Two interviewed subcontracted social workers, Tang and Lenny, complained that their workplace employer sometimes did not understand why they needed to spend their working hours meeting with people from the social work organization, and why they went on training courses that bore no relation to their administrative duties. Tang discussed how her superior influenced her training experiences:

Of course, the department head doesn't want me to go [to meet social worker supervisors or for training]. Who will have to take over my tasks? Everyone has work to do, they're not going to be happy seeing me not in my seat, even if there's nothing to be done. He [the department head] said: 'As long as you're here, you're one of us. You should focus on the tasks of our department, not other people, or the social work organization'. He's not going to let me have professional training, join organization events or meetings, or even meet clients in working hours. I can only do these things after work, or at the weekend if I want to. (Tang, 35, junior college)

In a similar vein, Lenny spoke about her employer discouraging her in her search for professional support and self-improvement:

They just completely can't understand ... all my training and professional activities are taking away my free time and weekends. It's like I don't need to have free time to rest, no need for family, for friends, just work, work, and social work! (Lenny, 24, BA in Film)

When working under two organizations, subcontracted social workers often find themselves caught between administrative and professional social work activities. Chen claimed that she was not satisfied at 'having to do everything' demanded by two different organizations, and that 'none of them are good enough'. Keeping the right balance between the demands coming from the social organization and the public institution became close to 'walking on thin ice':

I have to complete tasks from the workplace, and from the social work organization. The workload is doubled.... Even at the weekend, I need to catch up with the training hours required by the social work association,⁴ to participate in organization activities. My whole life is sacrificed to work, no social life, no personal emotion, no family at all! ... It's actually really frustrating to be pulled between two organizations.... My next goal is to work purely for one organization. Never want to be in such an embarrassing dilemma ever again! (Lenny, 24, BA in Film)

4.5. Evaluation and Control

Evaluation of performance sits at the centre of a major debate. Unlike the social workers employed in organizations that run projects, and who are

assessed annually according to the goals, objectives and other indicators written into their contracts, the subcontracted social workers undergo poorly-structured evaluations. The new form of their contracts has no specific indicators, whilst stipulating their duty to comply with the general requirements of the work unit. It is increasingly becoming the practice for them to be evaluated based on the same criteria as their colleagues in the administrative sector.

The absence of clear evaluation criteria, together with the political priorities of the moment, make subcontracted social workers move from direct contact with clients, towards a focus on the public image of the bureaucratic apparatus, sometimes coming close to propaganda. A research participant describes how her new contract terms influence her actual work: 'There are no professional indicators in my contract, I only have to do what my department head asks me to do'. In an attempt to shape the public discourse in ways that reflect the anti-drug policy commitment, subcontracted social workers may be involved in propaganda-type work, rather than casework:

It's temporary [the contract], but it will always be with our organization if nothing seriously wrong happens.... Most of my work is administrative, and I have to plan my work based on the *Drug Control Project* released by the central government, for example sending government announcements, uploading articles ... there are requirements for professional social work, but my department head said it's not necessary, and we just fake some case reports when it's time for evaluation.... (Liu, 25, BA in social work)

The dispatching of social workers has practice implications for the sending organizations as well. The procurement process opened the way to governmental control over the organizations, including, at times, the politicization of social work practice. Interviewees confessed that the nature of social work had changed for their colleagues back in organizations, where increasingly, publicity and propaganda activities are replacing direct work with clients. Many social workers lamented this mission drift. For the organizations that shifted their registration in order to meet the eligibility criteria for procurement, the risk of instrumentalizing social workers and clients in order to achieve business goals was high (Han, 2017). Social work knowledge and professional methods did not seem to carry more weight in the evaluation of work at the public organizations, and it was also not a major factor in the external assessment of the social organizations. It is no surprise that over half of the subcontracted social workers who responded to the questionnaire (N=22) thought that their employers did not understand social work. Moreover, as many as 65% agreed that as subcontracted social workers, they did not have permission from their employer to carry out client-related social work.

4.6. A Sense of Insecurity

Previous research on job satisfaction (Origo and Pagani, 2009) suggests that it is ‘perceived employment stability’ (and not actual employment stability) that makes a difference to employees’ satisfaction. That is, a ‘temporary but secure job’ is preferable to the ‘permanent but insecure job’ combination. Similar phenomena were occasionally found in this research too, with some interviewees linking their level of satisfaction, not necessarily with the type of contract, but with the social dynamics at their workplace:

I feel pretty good here, like this; in this office it will always be us four, as long as the contract remains. No one in my organization is competing for our posts, we are the only ones doing this.... But I still feel insecure in this job, especially in my department. You can see a distinct difference between position and power, temporary workers and permanent employees. I saw an old temporary worker who was scolded very harshly by his superior, who was quite young. He looked pitiful and was only able to say: “sorry, it’s all my fault”, regardless of whether he’s guilty or not. This worried me and I decided to find another job.... (Liu, 25, BA in social work)

However, one cannot easily overlook the structural sense of insecurity conferred by a temporary contract. Chen, for instance, described her precarious situation as shaped by a short-term contract and the unreasonable demands of her boss:

The most difficult thing in being a subcontracted social worker is that you have to obey every word uttered by your employer. If not, you get fired.... Two of my subcontracted social worker colleagues left ... several days ago, my department head scolded me very harshly, and told me that I’m incapable and have to get out. But the next day he told me to ‘go back and do your job!’ He has the ultimate power over my life or death. (Chen, 27, BA in social work)

Lenny, another interviewee, highlighted that anxiety and a sense of instability were common among subcontracted social workers, also because the renewal of their contract may depend on the ability of the social organization to renew its agreement with the public institution:

It doesn’t matter how much appreciation you got from your employer, you have to roam with your organization and be subcontracted to another institution if they can’t renew the contract.... It’s really unstable, you have to change your workplace at least once every three years. (Lenny, 24, BA in Film)

Against the above backdrop, it should come as no surprise that the turnover rate among social workers in China is rather high, and that Shenzhen is climbing fast, from 8.2 % in 2008 to 22.2% in 2014 (Du, 2015). In our

research, the questionnaire results showed that 19.4% of respondents (N=6) intended to quit within half a year, and 32% of respondents (N=10) intended to resign within the next five years. However, the percentage of resignations was much higher among the interviewees. Four out of seven subcontracted social workers interviewed expressed their wish to resign, with the fifth interviewee having resigned already.

The reasons for leaving as selected by the questionnaire respondents were: 'lack of understanding from the workplace leader' (N=3); 'a desire to do more professional social work' (N=3) and 'too many administrative and publicity tasks' (N=2). The top three issues that were upsetting subcontracted social workers who wished to remain (n=17) were: 1) low pay (N=13), 2) excessive workloads (N=7), and 3) too many administration and publicity tasks (N=7).

5. Conclusions

Overall, 20 years after social work gained an academic home, the professional prospects for those holding a degree are rather uncertain. Despite China's stated interest in building up professional social work in ways that resonate with western developments in the field, this paper suggests that subcontracted social workers differ from social workers employed in public institutions elsewhere, and also from social workers in China's social organizations. In a nutshell, the differences are: 1) the subcontracted social workers have temporary employment contracts that are not signed with the public institutions where they work; 2) they work for two employers at the same time; 3) they are under the direct supervision of the public institution employer; 4) a social worker qualification certificate is not strictly required; 5) they work in isolation from other social workers, with major identity implications; 6) tasks are often administrative in nature; 7) the opportunities to learn – either by competent supervision or training – are limited; 8) the evaluation criteria are uncertain and context-specific. This situation leads to employers abusing their power, to a low level of respect towards subcontracted social workers, and to de-professionalization and a sense of frustration among professional subcontracted social workers.

This paper has built up the argument that – in many ways – subcontracted social workers meet the characteristics of what Guy Standing described as *The Precariat*. They have: (i) distinctive labour relations (i.e. insecure employment, *de facto* agency work and incomplete contracts); (ii) distinctive relations of distribution (that is: fewer benefits than permanent employees, such as being without paid leave, without maternity leave, without comprehensive insurance and without the Wuxian Yijin allowance usually paid by the employer); (iii) distinctive relations with the State: fewer and

weaker civil, cultural, social, political and economic rights (i.e. promotion, unionisation, the right to vote in their institutions). Subcontracted social workers have weaker professional identities, and a limited ability to plan their careers and enjoy professional growth. Their status confirms that work across the entire employment spectrum poses the risk of becoming precarious (Standing, 2011).

But de-professionalization exists among subcontracted social workers in Shenzhen because policies allow it to happen, and even create the circumstances for it occur. It happens because the political priorities of the moment move the space for social intervention away from direct, client-oriented settings. The interviewed subcontracted social workers said they found it hard to use the professional knowledge and methods they were trained in during their university studies. Moreover, they experienced a demoralising organizational culture that prioritized administrative and political goals over client-focused actions. These dynamics need to be interpreted against a general political context that prioritizes economic development at the expense of social welfare policies.

The situation is also maintained by the precarity of the organizational sector itself. Faced with a structural inability to rely on multiple funding sources, social organizations cannot live up to the expectation that they are genuinely ‘non-governmental’. This significantly reduces their bargaining power and, ultimately, the necessary autonomy to act in ways that they may consider socially meaningful. Hiring social workers that are subcontracted in public institutions has become a survival strategy. The reliance on the management fee taken from the subcontracted social workers’ salary packages, as well as the possibility of transferring part of the salary towards organizational administrative costs, are expressions of this structural dependence. Besides, although subcontracted social workers are experiencing dissatisfaction and frustration, they are paid more than social workers in social organizations.

In the final analysis, however, it has to be admitted that the marketization of public services, and the government procurement of social work services, is a new trend in China, which has heavily contributed towards the rapid development of social work as a field. If the government were not involved in the procurement of subcontracted social worker services, the demand for social workers and the visibility of the field would not have been that high. Yet this does not help in resolving other dilemmas and open questions on what it means to be a social worker in today’s China, given the politicized shift in tasks, status and the level of external control. The issue of the extent to which China could or should adopt/adapt western theories and practices in social work (Chen, 2018; Gao, 2017), remains an unresolved tension. What are the implications for China’s non-governmental sector, given its heavy reliance on government funds and the high level of governmental control exerted via

procurement? As this paper suggests, for the time being, the choice of having subcontracted social workers in public institutions is far from providing a response.

Notes

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1. The paper will use the terms ‘sub-contracted social workers’ and ‘subcontracted social workers’ interchangeably.
 2. Whilst the term ‘social worker’ is used to refer to people who hold particular qualifications and come from particular backgrounds, in Shenzhen, there are 5 levels and 13 sub-levels of social workers, with different levels of occupational prestige and salary.
 3. This paper will use the term ‘social organization’ in order to denote the organizations that have contractual relationships with public institutions. Their large majority are non-profit or private, established by individuals who have privileged relationships with the government.
 4. A total of 80 hours of training is required for the Social Worker Association of Shenzhen, as an indicator of professional performance and for future applications for a higher level certificate.

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