

The Blue Book: Social Assistance in China

Dominique Tyl SJ

In April 2009, the Social Sciences Academic Press (China) published *Reports on the Development of Social Work in China (1988-2008)* [henceforth referred to as the Blue Book]. This opened a new phase in the famous and valuable collection of annual blue books regarding various aspects of the country's situation. The editorial committee of the publication, produced by the China Association of Social Workers, comprised the most senior staff of the association, government agencies and academia, which undoubtedly underlined the political and social importance of the endeavour. Although many other books and articles, as well as websites, on social assistance are now available to a wider Chinese public, the first Blue Book on this topic appears to have a special objective: to stress the importance, and probably the urgency, of a vigorous national development plan of social assistance to meet the needs of a rapidly evolving society under pressure from reforms desired and promoted by the government, and generally accepted by the population.

Confirmation of the deliberate intention of the government can be found in the final report of the sixth Plenum of the sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2006. In fact, the instruction reads as follows, social assistance should expand and be staffed by a large battalion of professional social workers, capable of carrying out the tasks confided to them.¹ The plenum sets as the principal objective to examine means of promoting harmony in society, namely to deal with new social problems, conflicts or contradictions. Reflection on the theme of a harmonious society had already begun well before the plenum, confirming the need to produce concrete action. Rather than offering theoretical dissertations on desired harmony, the Blue Book offers practical presentations on the new and very useful role filled by social workers in facing such challenges. Included is a summary of the work undertaken by sector and profession, indicating the positive outcomes achieved and the issues which need to be addressed.

The table of contents indicates the amplitude of the task. After a lengthy general report, "Analysis and Forecast on China's Social Work Development over 20 Years,"² covering the principal themes of the publication, come the "Reports on Special Subjects." The first sub-section addresses "Practical Expansion." Although it appears banal at first glance, it is very interesting to list out the areas of professional activity, giving an indication of the scope: older people, youth, the physically challenged, women, districts, rural zones, enterprises, schools, families, health, deviance, mental hygiene, drug dependence, family planning, ethnic minorities and religions. It is not

¹See http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-10/18/content_5218639.htm

²The titles and other terms or expressions are those used in the "Abstract" and "Contents" of the English version of the Blue Book

surprising to find birth control in the aforementioned list. However, the presence of social workers, whose work principles of respect for human dignity are found in many pages of the book, could lead to improvements in the implementation of an authoritarian population policy. The abuse of harmful substances merits a chapter apart, which indicates the gravity of the problem, ranging from smoking to taking hard drugs. The fact that religious affairs are dealt with in the same chapter as ethnic minorities calls for an explanation... This is not at all clear.

The subsequent sub-section, "Special Studies," does not seem to be particularly special, after flicking through the pages. The traditional domains, Social Relief, Employment Service, Disaster Mitigation Relief and Adoption can be found in this section. The chapter, "Social Work, Preferential Treatment and Job Placement" deals with assistance to former soldiers and their families. Two studies examine the situation of "Charities" and "Charity agencies," also known as "Charitable Undertakings" and "Public Welfare Undertakings," the Chinese term for the latter could also be translated as "common good" or "of public interest." As can be seen, these domains are still largely underdeveloped. The next sub-section, "Human Resources Development," comprising four chapters, explains the steps taken to establish and regulate the profession. It also mentions the need for "innovative systems," as well as pointing out the obstacles encountered, which we will return to below. Two subsequent articles tie in well with the title of the heading "Laws, Regulations & Policies," an inventory without a lot of commentary. One observes, just in passing, the pages "Cooperation and Exchanges," which report, in two chapters, on contacts with Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and the rest of the world.

The section "Experts' Forum" is more stimulating as it illustrates the tensions and adaptations of social assistance in China. It deals with the ethical values of the profession, obligatorily drawing on the "traditional" values of Chinese culture. Without denying the ongoing reflection necessary for the indigenisation of social work in the country, it is recognised that most of the insights, concepts and methods come from abroad. In practice, the problem is the conflict between civil service offices, cogs of central government and all levels of administration, and the profession. Why were two articles on methodology, "case work" and "group work," inserted into this section? This is undoubtedly because these are new methodologies used in China, as opposed to the way of dealing with cases and people until the 1980s, and still used in many state offices and institutions for social assistance. Without any apparent logical reason, a report on NGOs is to be found among the chapters on methodologies. This bravely develops what is referred to later on in the section on non-public associations. The latest study, "Contemporary Chinese Social Work and Party Mass Work," rather short and vague, is preceded by a few pages on other research undertaken. It contains a chronological list connecting everything together in a useful, though incomplete, index. It would

have been useful if the details and website addresses of social work organisations had been added, completing references in the text and endnotes.

More than ever before, understanding the mission, officially entrusted to social workers, undoubtedly requires qualified personnel. Nearly every chapter of the Blue Book points to two interconnected inadequacies, a lack of both personnel and quality in the training courses. Although the book lacks quantitative data, it appears as if social assistance organisms are largely staffed by personnel accustomed to the official procedures of public agencies. Their age, position and experience could be obstacles to initiatives required by the new social context. This is not explicitly mentioned, but implied here and there. It is understandable that the authors do not go into detail on the subject, and therefore avoid offending those who would feel threatened with the loss of their job, or just being subject to reasonable criticism. The writers choose to emphasise the training of a new generation of social workers. In this way, it would be easier to foresee a gradual replacement of personnel. Over the last twenty years, endeavours like this have already produced positive outcomes, the report adds.

More than 200 universities now offer comprehensive courses of varying duration, producing approximately 10,000 graduates per year.³ Certainly, as the "Human Resource Development" section of the Blue Book explains, not all the problems in the field have been resolved. As is the case of other countries, not all young social work graduates, actually only thirty percent, pursue careers in the profession. Some regional authorities have even been forced to suspend the recruitment process due to a lack of candidates. Although it is unjust to blame the trainers, it is also true that they are not all qualified. This is hardly surprising considering that the work of training trainers only really took off towards the end of the 1990s. In cooperation with Hong Kong, Taiwan and other universities, the work of training teachers is ongoing. Even though there is still a lack of trainers, their quality has certainly improved, generally characterised by an open mind and a manifest interest in their profession. Largely thanks to them, programmes have been standardised, training manuals produced and significant advances made in research.

In order to establish the profession and give it a certain social status, the government decided to register it in the list of officially recognised professions. As in the case of jurists and accountants, certificates for social workers and assistant social workers are granted to those who pass national examinations. In 2008, the first time the examinations were held, 50,813 and 60,907 students respectively took the two tests, of whom 4,105 received the highest certificate and 20,086 the second highest.⁴ In 2009, more than 70,000

³Blue Book, p. 396, and China Social Work Education <http://www.chinaswedu.com/>

⁴Many websites give information on the 2008 and 2009 examinations. See, for example, <http://sw.mca.gov.cn> of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, or, for Beijing see <http://www.beinet.net.cn/sydh/wbxx/200906/t401391.htm>, or see http://www.huiling.org.cn/html/xyxw_553_1043.html, of the private organisation Huiling which also has an English version of its website

students registered for the examinations. This considerable drop doubtlessly stems from a reflection on the issues at hand, followed by a decline in enthusiasm. A document by the Ministry of Civilian Affairs in April 2009 spelt out registration procedures for qualified social workers. It is certainly a positive step towards the recognition of the profession which should promote long-term stability and encourage recruitment. However, as seen elsewhere, they will have to avoid “graduates” being absorbed by other public sector organisations offering better salaries for more easily found positions.

The Blue Book and other sources clearly highlight the fact that average salaries are too low. Even in the big cities, they are not very attractive, between 1,400 and 1,500 renminbi per month. A document issued by Hubei Province points out that the salaries of social workers in Hong Kong are such as to promote competition among jobseekers in the profession. This is not the case in China, it adds.⁵ Yet, as some consider, employment offers corresponding to needs would potentially be capable of absorbing a large number of young people. In fact, the salary, a clear recognition of value, would assert the position of the profession in the society. Moreover, the career profile, still poorly designed, and the management of social work organisms discourage energetic young people. In other words, this dysfunctionality hinders the growth of the profession. Examples provided come mainly from the pioneer cities of Shanghai and Shenzhen. We know almost nothing about the smaller towns and rural areas. The authors of the Blue Book merely say that professionally provided social work is disproportionately present in the country. Ganzu is disadvantaged while Yunnan is better off, partly due to cooperation projects with institutions in Hong Kong. Decisions taken by the higher echelons are inadequate and the profession is still seeking its place in the system and a *modus operandi*, both approved and supported by the grassroots.

What does the man on the street think? A study, published in 2009, gave the following responses – districts should be the principal field of activity for social workers, followed by orphanages, older people and children ...eleven percent said they know practically nothing about the profession.⁶ Nevertheless, there is no lack of work to be done. For example, very few hospitals offer social assistance, according to the Blue Book. Another study indicates that more than 83 percent of those interviewed believe that China urgently needs social workers. Yet, social workers often highlight the fact that their professional services have not received the recognition their work in society deserves. The Blue Book confirms and justifies their complaint,

⁵See www.hbmzt.gov.cn/upload/file/03社会工作者评价制度研究.doc, or http://www.socialwork.hku.hk/news_and_events/past_events.htm for a simple and clear presentation in English by Joe C.B. Leung, “Professionalisation of Social Work in China: The Shenzhen Model”, 6th April.

⁶<http://www.jianghuaisw.com/bbs/viewthread.php?tid=14840>
<http://www.022net.com/2009/3-24/446666342431320.html>
<http://www.edu-sp.com/static/html/20090331/16306.html>

although here and there the authorities acknowledge its merits while seeking to remedy the situation by introducing more appropriate regulation. However, it appears increasingly difficult to escape the administrative red tape. The purchase of services by the government from non-government institutions, according to the Blue Book, is a step towards the diversification of roles. Unfortunately, it neither elaborates on the details of the approach nor on the contract partners.

Indeed, as mentioned above, one study in the Blue Book was dedicated to “Public Welfare Undertakings” and another to NGOs. They portray a somewhat promising situation, as the authors recognise. They point to the vast development potential in this area, however, they also raise a wide array of obstacles, none of which have really been analysed. The experts are debating, as demonstrated by the series of articles, the definition of social assistance in China.⁷ The fact remains that, despite a growing number of various forms of “non-government associations,” civil society or community activism remains underdeveloped in the country. The Chinese General Social Survey Report (2003-2008), after putting forward ideas on the importance of community activism to social stability, with reference to Tocqueville, expresses misgivings about the poor level of social participation by non-government actors. The Blue Book acknowledges that too many mutual assistance campaigns rely on the workplaces or schools to mobilise the public.⁸

The connection between the setting up of associations and social assistance is, of course, not immediate. However, it is easy to imagine considering the reasons why associations have been established, to open channels for social dialogue and undertake tasks which the government, and even the family, are unable or will never be able to carry out. The Blue Book reflects a policy decided from the top, even though, over the last twenty years, a considerable amount of work has been undertaken by the grassroots to reach this point. What has happened to the grassroots now? Is the work of promoting social assistance complete just because the government, using the means at its disposal, more administrative than legislative, has taken up the baton to promote social cohesion? Without dedicating a chapter to the problem, the Blue Book says enough, this would be a chimera. How then can these initiatives be fostered? Even though the growth of civil society is not a panacea – and the concept itself deserves to be expanded beyond certain definitions – full

⁷A debate, in the International Journal of Social Welfare, was instigated by the article by A. Hutchings and I. Taylor “Defining the Profession? Exploring an international definition of social work in the China context” (online on 20 March 2007); Jia Cunfu wrote a critique on it later (online on 22 September). The first two authors responded in kind (online on 6 December 2007) and finally, Sheng-Li Cheng put “A Response to the Hutchings and Taylor Debate and Jia on Global Standards in China” online on 18 July 2008.

⁸The *Chinese General Social Survey Report (2003-2008)*, edited by Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Diaocha yu Shuju Zhongxin, Zhongguo zonghe shehui diaocha (CGSS), was published in March 2009. Work written by civil society researchers in China can also be found on <http://www.nporuc.org/html/achievements/20081007/123.html>

development of this can only be of benefit to welfare in China. Other studies in the same collection of blue books provide suggestions on areas for further examination.⁹ But, again, why is so little said about initiatives inspired by ethics and the professionalism of social workers?

Yet they exist, and among these initiatives are those of religiously motivated groups, mentioned once in the Blue Book (p. 368). These are known and generally considered positively. It is less evident how current legislation and administrative practices can assist them to deliver the services they offer. That these social assistance and other associations are sometimes used for unstated political purposes is obvious. It is equally obvious that competition is disagreeable to those who benefit from clear official support and enjoy a quasi-monopoly in practice. But it is increasingly accepted inside China that the government cannot and should not do everything. Of course, it is the duty of the state to place civil society initiatives in an appropriate legislative framework. It is also generally recognised that current laws and regulations do not meet the need to develop social assistance in the country. There is a lot of important work still to do which should facilitate the decentralisation of projects, control of activities and finance, respect for codes of conduct and assessment of field results. The authors of the Blue Book are aware of this although they appear more hesitant in their proposals to meet these challenges.

Private initiatives, including those religiously motivated, although they enjoy significant autonomy, have no difficulty in accepting the legal and ethical criteria which, with increasing precision, govern the profession of social worker.¹⁰ Security and competence requirements mentioned in the Blue Book and elsewhere appear in general to be reasonable. However it is true that their interpretation varies, in line with the principle that government and Party "leadership" is exercised within imprecise boundaries. It must also be added that the criteria are not always respected, even in government institutions, partly due to the realities faced by this evolving profession. The distribution of available money and the collection of funds are not presented in detail in the Blue Book while ongoing discussions demonstrate, it is insinuated, that satisfactory methods have yet to be found. In relation to the social workers' code of ethics, even though still not clearly approved at national level, there is frequent allusion to the fact that the norms must be respected as professional guidelines, and considered a reference in cases of misconduct. There is strong emphasis on the standards relating to the person as an individual and worthy of respect, regardless of his physical or psychological condition or ethnic and religious differences. The book explains that the role of social workers consists in using personal skills, which are not

⁹*Annual Report on Chinese Philanthropy (2009); Emerging Civil Society in China (1978-2008); Annual Report on Chinese Civil society (2008)*...

¹⁰See <http://www.ngocn.org/batch.download.php?aid=10174> for information on NPOs. For information on the ethical norms of the social work profession see, among others, <http://www.cncasw.org/txsg/sgkp/>

efficient if not stimulated by a spirit of benevolent service, helping others to help themselves, thus regaining an autonomy which promotes the contribution of each individual to the common good.¹¹

The Blue Book on social work, briefly summarised here, does not attempt to be exhaustive. Another one should appear in 2010. It would be good if it contained more statistical data, but also examples of good practices between government responsibility and civil society proposals. Since personal service should, primarily, be the driving force in social work, it would be interesting to show that initiatives are not, by right or de facto, the sole property of trained professional or public officials, even if professionalism is becoming increasingly important and a legally constituted yet flexible framework is necessary to ensure the quality of services rendered. In truth, none of this is very new, neither today throughout the world nor in history over the centuries. In China, there have been frequent references to explicitly foreign experiences, while concurrently seeking the “indigenisation” of social work. Recent studies confirm there has been no lack of creativity in this area throughout the history of the country and this could be a source of inspiration in reflection and practice regarding the challenges present, described with stimulating honesty by the contributors to the Blue Book.

Dominique Tyl SJ
China

*Original French
Translation by James Stapleton*

¹¹One of the most recent: *The Art of Doing Good, Charity in Late Ming China*, by Joanna Handlin Smith, University of California Press, 2009.