

# Democratic Social Practice and the Emergence of Social Work in China

## A Call for Dialogical Engagement

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Ce manuscrit établit un contraste entre le renouvellement démocratique des pratiques sociales tel qu'il est discuté dans les contextes européen et nord-américain et le développement des pratiques sociales en Chine, où des forces tant externes qu'internes influencent les conditions de travail des acteurs sociaux. D'une part, l'intervention sociale est limitée par la lenteur du processus de démocratisation et, d'autre part, les praticiens chinois sont aux prises avec l'« indigénisation » de concepts bien établis en Occident. Les auteurs tentent de problématiser les questions du renouvellement démocratique et de promouvoir la communication entre les travailleurs sociaux de différentes parties du monde.



# **Democratic Social Practice and the Emergence of Social Work in China**

*A Call for Dialogical Engagement*

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Ce manuscrit établit un contraste entre le renouvellement démocratique des pratiques sociales tel qu'il est discuté dans les contextes européen et nord-américain et le développement des pratiques sociales en Chine, où des forces tant externes qu'internes influencent les conditions de travail des acteurs sociaux. D'une part, l'intervention sociale est limitée par la lenteur du processus de démocratisation et, d'autre part, les praticiens chinois sont aux prises avec l'« indigénisation » de concepts bien établis en Occident. Les auteurs tentent de problématiser

les questions du renouvellement démocratique et de promouvoir la communication entre les travailleurs sociaux de différentes parties du monde.

*The paper contrasts the conference focus on the democratic renewal of social practices, an internal process particular to the European and North-American contexts, with the development of social practices in China, where both external and internal forces influence social workers' dealings with democratization and indigenization of well-established Western concepts. The goals of the authors are to problematize the questions of democratic renewal and to promote international communication among social practitioners.*

A recent social work discourse on the democratic renewal of social practices reflects the downward pressure of globalization which has led to political, economic and ideological tensions in many contemporary societies. In social work, these tensions, which limit the freedom of social workers and have deleterious effects on the clients and communities served by these professionals, are disguised under the neoliberal managerial mentality. Accent on accountability, centralized management practices and the general invasion of managerial vocabulary and “best practices” have pernicious effects on social actors who see their professional intelligence denied and their margin of creativity for attending social issues limited.

This paper decentres the current social work discourse, while also addressing the major theme of the conference, the re-creation of social work spaces around democratic principles. In it, we describe and reflect on the emergence of the social work profession in China and the particular challenges and contradictions encountered by our Chinese colleagues.

In China, the newly-minted social work professionals and scholars are devising the best ways to achieve a harmonious society facilitating well-being and happiness. They are doing it under vastly different historical, political and economic conditions and, not surprisingly, at least at the moment, arriving at conclusions that may be deemed jarring from a Western point of view. Democratic ideals and social interventions are not new to China. Both have a history that sometimes intertwined and, at other times, went their separate ways, if not at cross-purposes. At the moment, due to many converging forces, democracy and the social work profession seem to be swept together in a huge wave of change.

In this paper, we will firstly situate ourselves in relation to these developments. Secondly, we will describe the democratization of China. Thirdly, we will tie the social work profession to the democratization of China. Such presentation will lead us, in particular, to the question of relationships between Chinese and Western social workers. Finally, we will suggest some avenues to face the emerging contacts between these two groups.

We approach this paper from a reflective approach based on the personal and scholarly interaction and observations of the two authors who both are located in a Canadian context and have substantial transnational encounters. Miu Chung Yan is approaching this topic from an insider-outsider perspective. Being Chinese Canadian who grew up in Hong Kong and is fluent in reading and writing Chinese and speaking Mandarin and Cantonese, he engages in direct personal contacts with social worker educators in China and reads the Chinese literature not published outside China. As an outsider, he is a traveler carrying a Canadian lens to observe, understand and interpret the situations in China. Taking this insider-outsider perspective, he approached this issue based on his prolonged engagement in the development of social work practice and education in China which includes organizing three symposia on social work education and charity laws, conducting two studies on social work education, attending and presenting in more than ten symposia and workshops in China, and visiting and engaging in dialogue with social work teachers and students of more than 10 social work programs in China. He has published more than 10 manuscripts in scholarly journals on his observations and studies of the development of social work practice and education, some of which are used in this paper to substantiate our arguments.

A former Québécois residing in West Canada, Paule McNicoll is a social work educator interested in international social development and social work education. She is conscious of the challenges of avoiding cultural imperialism while promoting the development of social structures to enhance human growth and social harmony in a new global era. She approached this issue not only based on her own experience of being a French-Canadian in an Anglophone world but also her long-term interest of the democracy development in China. Paule lived in China for one year in 1981-82 and in 2007, she taught a course on Teaching Social Group Work to a group of social work teachers coming from six social work programs of Shandong province. This provided her direct contact and exchange with this group of social work educators on various issues related to the development of social work and democracy in China. We both are interested in problematizing taken-for-granted Euro-American points of view regarding democracy and social work and in trying to examine it against an emergent Asian context.

We place our discussion at the juncture between universalism, a perspective reminiscent of logical-positivism and cultural imperialism, and relativism, which bring dangers of blind acceptance and nihilism. We take into account the imbalance of power between the Western articulation of democracy and social work and the yearnings of Chinese social workers who have to indigenize these notions in less than ideal conditions.

The international discourse on democracy is dominated by the Western world which, albeit inherently diverse, tends to adopt uncritically a Euro-American-centric version of democracy and social work largely based on a liberal-individualistic cultural understanding. The socio-cultural-political history of China is nowhere close to this Euro-American culture. Then the question arises: how can we understand the development of democracy and social work in China which are evolving in a completely different cultural context? Our goal is not to provide any concrete direction but to problematize the questions of the discourse of democratic renewal of social practices and to promote dialogue among the international social work community for more inclusive answers and approaches. By describing two radically different social work trajectories, we invite readers to reflect on the conditions for productive exchanges between Western and Chinese social practitioners about inclusiveness and universality.

## DEMOCRATIZATION OF CHINA

The expression “Chinese characteristics”, first proposed by Deng Xiao Ping to justify the market economy in a socialist regime (Yan and Cheng, accepted), signifies a scientific development model within a socialist form of democracy – people-democratic-authoritarianism (*renmin minzhu zhuanzheng*) – which means a form of democracy for the people under the control of the Chinese Community Party (CCP). Without doubt, the meaning of democracy in China is substantially different from the liberal-individualistic model in many Western countries. To attribute the establishment of the “Chinese democratic system” solely to the totalitarian mentality of the CCP may underestimate the influence of some crucial perspective of democracy inherited in the Chinese culture. Indeed, a similar version of “authoritarian” democracy was first articulated by the founding father of the Republic of China, Dr. Sun Yat Sen. Although their findings are inconclusive, political scientists have already pointed out, through their articulation of the so-called Asian model, that the traditional cultural characteristics of Asia, particularly the Confucian influence, may favour a certain kind of semi-authoritative type quasi-democracy, such as in Singapore and, previously, Taiwan and South Korea.

China is no longer a closed-doors country. As a result of pursuing an open economy, the communist ideology and Chinese cultural values are in constant negotiation with force of globalization. A popular Chinese saying, *jiegui* literally means “connecting the track with the developed world”, has become a guiding principle of what China call “modernization” (Yan and Tsang, 2008). As their predecessors of the May Fourth Movement – a social movement in the early 20th Century to modernize the Chinese society – contemporary Chinese understand modernization as science and democracy. However, China’s acceptance of these two perceived features of modernization is not symmetric. The recent national development policy set by President Hu has openly recognized the idea of scientific development (see <[news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-03/16/content\\_2704537.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-03/16/content_2704537.htm)>). In contrast, democracy has received a lukewarm attention from the leaders of the Communist China who, however, realize that to economically connect with the Western world they must also accept a certain level of political reform. This is particularly important when most Western countries have tied their trades with their demands of China’s political reform.

In 1998, China had officially implemented democratic election in the rural villages. However, a decade later, democratic elections in China are still confined mainly in the grassroots level and, more importantly, the control of the government in selecting candidates and the election process is still largely intact. Although candidates who do not receive a majority of the popular vote are not going to be supported again by the party, they still get to serve their terms. Thus, in such cases, there’s a significant delay in heeding to people’s expressed desires. On the other hand, China is cautiously and programmatically strengthening the role of civil society by socially engineering a massive community construction movement (Yan and Gao, 2007). Local cadres are encouraged to develop experimental community development programs. When these programs are deemed successful, the initiators are recompensed by higher positions and other Chinese communities are encouraged to emulate the exemplary schemes. Grassroots initiatives, creativity and community construction are thus promoted. The goal of this movement is to allow the government to download its social welfare and care responsibilities to the civil society. The desire for new professional community and social care agents to support these experiments is partly what gave the impetus, in the early 1980s, to the establishment of four social work training programs in China.

## **SOCIAL WORK AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIAL PRACTICE : A TALE OF TWO CONTEXTS**

Social work in the West tends to self-proclaim as an agent of change. With a strong commitment to social justice and strategically situated between the civil society and the state, social work has assumed a role in defending democracy in many Western social work discourses. For instance the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) clearly states that social work is a profession that upholds “humanitarian and democratic ideals” (IASSW, 2008). At least two main methods of social work claim to promote democratic participation as one of their major purposes. *The Standards for Social Work Practice with Groups* (AASWG, 2005) explicitly promotes the “democratic process” and “democratic principles of equality and autonomy” (p. 4-5). Social group work texts (Toseland and Rivas, 2009; Steinberg, 2004, Glassman, 2008) cite preparing members for democratic participation in society as one aim of practice. Community and social developments, similarly, have been tied with democracy, social justice and human rights (Elshtain, 2001; Ferguson-Brown, 1996; Shepard, 2005). The influential *Handbook of Community Practice* (Weil, 2005: 9) grounds community practice in the values of “democratic process, citizen participation, group determination, empowerment, multiculturalism, and leadership development” (Weil, 1994: XXVII, in Weil, 2005). In reality, social work practice has often strayed from the democratic high road (Andrews and Reisch, 1997).

Still, the links between democracy, group work and community development, two methods of practice likely to become the mainstay of social work practice in China, may lead us to surmise that the development of the social work profession in that country will also support the advancement of democracy. However, it may be problematic to expect so. The creation of the social work profession in China was a means to modernize the social helping system, to deal with the emerging social problems caused by economic reforms and, as seen before, stimulate grassroots initiatives. With the economic and political ebbs and flows in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of schools of social work in China passed from 4 in the early 1990s to more than 200 at present. In June 2008, the Chinese government formally conducted the first national social work registration examination and thousands of social workers passed the examinations to become registered “social workers” (Yan and Tsang, 2008). The reemergence of social work in China is indeed a government initiation.

Two qualitative studies based on interviews with social work scholars (Yan and Tsang, 2005) and students (Yan *et al.*, 2009) conducted respectively in 2000 and 2007 indicated that the social work community in China has a very consistent understanding of the nature and functions of social work pro-

fession in China. In a nutshell, both groups of participants agree that social work in China is a scientific means, such as case, group and community work methods, to help people to help themselves. Its role is to provide help to the marginalized groups who are suffering from the undesirable consequences of the economic reform. It is widely accepted that social work in China aims to keep the society stable so that prosperity can be sustained. Concurring with both the literature and government documents, it is clear that stakeholders of this new profession tend to accept that the *raison d'être* of social work in China is to serve the economic reform and growth in China (Tsang and Yan, 2001; Yan *et al.*, 2009). In other words, its role is to maintain social stability in a rapidly changing society.

Other than this socially assigned role, social work in China is also facing numerous challenges that may jeopardize its existence. The first and foremost challenge perhaps is the lack of social work positions. It is until very recent that a small number of social work positions were established in a few economically well-off cities such as Shanghai and Shenzheng. Meanwhile, only a very small percentage of social work teachers are trained in or practiced social work. Textbooks contain largely second-hand information copied from translated English materials. Field placements are not standardized (Yan and Tsang, 2005). Therefore, to survive and grow, the social work community in China needs the support from the government in terms of recognition and resources. To justify their existence, social workers in China also need to demonstrate the compatibility of the values, knowledge and techniques of this imported Western social construction – social work – with the Chinese cultural and ideological contexts.

Therefore, there is an urgent concern among social work educators/researchers in China regarding the issue of indigenization of social work. Remarkable efforts are made to generate local knowledge that is relevant to social work practice through active research activities. Experiments have been initiated to develop local and modify foreign social work techniques. However, debates on the social work values, which are perceived as Western, Christian, liberal and individualistic, are still occupying the classrooms, conferences and online discussion rooms. The central issue is whether China can import and *selectively assimilate* (Yan and Tsang, 2008) the Western technology without importing the Western values. It is the century-old *Zhongti Xiyong*, literally meaning “Chinese corpus and western application” debate (Tsang and Yan, 2001). So far, there seems to be a consensus that social work in China should bear its Chinese characteristics, a common official slogan, the meaning of which is very much ideological rather than substantial (Yan and Cheng, 2009).



Under these political conditions and in face of numerous challenges, today's social work scholars in China do not operate in a free and dynamic intellectual environment. The political ideology is limiting and restrictive. Like many values of the Western social work, such as social justice, human right, individuality, just to name a few, it is hard to articulate the idea of democracy in the exact same way as it is done by many social workers in the West. Nonetheless, the notion of democracy is no stranger to social work scholars and students in China. In one of the standardized Chinese textbook of social group work, the democratic principles are highlighted. However, it will be naïve to propose that social work in China will have a major role in the democratization of the socialist regime when the profession is still struggling for social recognition. The social control function of social work profession is widely accepted at least in the current state of development. As an insider, Jia (2008), a social work scholar in China, has cautiously pointed out that, after a decade of painstaking and politically sensitive efforts, the emerging social work profession has contributed to many social policy changes in China which itself is gradually opening up.

The desire to *jiegui*, “connect the track”, has led social work scholars in China not only to use the same language but also to adopt similar articulations to communicate with their colleagues outside China. Such adoption will surely induce new ideas and creative actions. Our Chinese colleagues are ready, prepared and yearning for dialogue (Cheng, 2008; Jia, 2008). However, the insider perspective disclosed by Jia inevitably raises a critical issue of this dialogical engagement, i.e., the validity of the universality of some values and principles the international social work community have taken for granted. Jia (2008) puts forward a challenge: “Relying on taken for granted and *a priori* concepts and notions and inferring from them do not do justice to the complex realities in a country like China” (p. 101). This begs a question: How can we engage our colleagues in China who have a different understanding and ways of articulating these values and principles such as democracy?

## DEMOCRATIC SOCIAL PRACTICE: DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES

Apprehending hugely different versions of a core cultural concept such as democracy raises uncomfortable emotions and some distrust as exemplified by the following reaction: “The possibly non-individualistic experience of democracy outside America must be treated circumspectly.” (Kateb, 1992: 77.) Western practitioners may be dismayed by the above descriptions of democracy and social work in China. They likely fear that collaborating with professionals and regimes on a different democratic page will lead to cooptation and regression instead of a democratic renewal of social practices.

Learning from what is happening in China, we inevitably ask ourselves: what is the moral supremacy of the Western version of democracy? A first consideration might be a humbling realization of the rather morally weak authority of the Western model of democracy. Democracy, as we know it, is a relatively recent product of the West. Most Western nations acquired extended suffrage during the 20th century. It is a fragile thing; once-democratic countries sometimes return to authoritarian rule. Those who have lived through the October '70 crisis in Québec know that some taken-for-granted liberties can be abolished overnight. In sum, Western democracy is a work-in-progress and shows many discrepancies between the ideal and the achieved form (Ife, 2001b).

Democracy means “ruling by people”, we all agree on that. Democracy implies a complex, transparent and regular mechanism through which citizens make their voices heard through elections and civil participation. To function at its best, according to the current Western-based consensus, democracy requires access to information and freedom of expression, communication, and association. The research on the assessment of democratic systems focuses on three factors: political competition, political participation, and civil and political liberties (Sørensen, 2008: 14). Democracy is deemed to be in place when these elements are both formally adopted and operative in practice.

However, the above liberal democratic model is a contextual and cultural product; it was shaped by historical events and ideas. For instance, the custom of opposing two main parties is a legacy of European historical alliances between labour and a left party, on one side, and big business with a right party, on the other (Friedman, 2003: 110). Is there any reason for Asian democracies to emulate this particular model?

There is extensive literature on how China may or may not be on the road to democratic rule. There seems, however, to be a divide between writers from Europe and North-America (Dalh, 1989; Freedom House, 2006; Vanhanen, 1997; Welzel, 2002) and those from Asia (Fukuyama, 1995; Kim, 2007; Lee and Shamsul-Haque, 2006; Wang and Yao, 2007). The former seem busy in extracting “universal” basic factors, conditions for and ways to measure democracy, while the latter are problematizing the concept and working toward an “indigenization” of democracy within their particular cultural context. There is thus a tension between a universalist view of the phenomenon and a relativist vision. Rather than contrasting and isolating these dimensions, which would force us to choose among them, we emulate the example of Kim (2007) and Sewpaul (2005) in adopting a dialectical synthesis of central tensions, individualistic/collective orientation in the first case, and universalist/relativist contributions in the second

one. This leads us to view that there is individualism/collectivism (and vice versa) in all cultures and that theorizing based on only one term can lead to normalization of the privileged vision to the detriment of the one rendered invisible. Dichotomy is thus a central process of oppression.

In the same way, universalism/relativism becomes a notion much richer than the sum of either term. It permits us to develop the proper balance of openness and skepticism to critically appraise current theories about democracy. It gives us the flexibility to accept ideas that pass the test of validity at both the universal and particular levels and to capture particularities that are rendered invisible in a purely universal discourse.

If social work is a social construction, then the autonomy of its practitioners is contextually defined. The autonomy of Chinese practitioners is restricted by the political reality and materialistic limitations. It is internationally accepted that social work in many sectors (e.g., child welfare, justice system and mental health system) is associated with social control. In China, this is even truer. The people who traditionally served the people and the country were Communist Party cadres. Social workers are seen to continue that tradition and, therefore, they have an explicit mandate of social control and very little professional autonomy. What are the implications of that situation, and how ought practitioners intent on renewing social practice along democratic lines relate to their Chinese peers who are caught between their resistance to outside conceptual pressures and the ideological constraints they are experiencing in their own country? Ignorance and neglect will not be possible for much longer. Imposition of our own Western value is not acceptable. Then, one possibility would be for Western social workers to recoil and deny that what passes for social work in China has anything to do with their own practices. A less obscurantist approach would involve opening dialogical exchanges at the global level, opening breathing space for indigenous conceptualization of social action and providing challenging viewpoints unlikely to arise and be explored in authoritarian contexts. Some air, and some fire. Our Asian colleagues are ready to talk. An optimistic view of such exchange would be that it may lead to greater understanding and an increase in creativity. We are not proposing blind acceptance, but a joyous and vigorous battle. It will be uncomfortable at times; there are likely to be monumental debates and word fights about the role of social workers with respect to the State. This is not a problem as long as all hold a similar attitude of respect and openness toward the other side.

## CONCLUSION

There is an implicit contradiction in willing the democratization of other people's country. If democracy is real, it has to fit the wants and decisions of the citizens it serves. The democratization of China and the emergence of social work are affected by the dynamics of European-American domination, on the one hand, and State-imposed limits, on the other. It is possible to promote the development of democratization and social work by

- Acknowledging the cultural, ideological and historical limitations of the current Western knowledge
- Creating dialectical terms that enlarge our field of vision and help us to grapple with apparent contradictions and paradoxes
- Opening dialogical communication between professionals from both hemispheres about their democratic and social work experiences, keeping the goals of enhanced personal and community well-being as a litmus test, and
- Keeping a critical approach to evaluate the above developments.

However, we recognize that it is easier said than done. Somewhere and sometime, someone must take the initiative to engage. We look forward to this initiative.

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