

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Organizations in Rural China: From Autonomy to Governance

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Abstract

This article examines the government purchase of social services in China as a window by which to investigate the evolving relations between the party-state and social organizations. Going beyond the conventional focus on state–non-governmental organization (NGO) dynamics in urban areas, we explore the expanded role of social organizations in rural service provision under state-led campaigns of rural modernization. Engaging with institutional theory and the consultative authoritarianism thesis, we argue that NGOs initially operated in an emerging organizational field where they exercised considerable autonomy in setting agendas and designing services. As the party-state’s incentives to utilize and co-opt the social work profession grow, however, we observe a trend towards incorporation, wherein social workers now play a bigger role alongside the strengthening of state control over the sector. Through tracing the inception and eventual termination of a decade-long social service project in Guangdong, this article shows how state incorporation might undermine the future role of NGOs in rural development.

摘要

摘要 本文以政府购买社会服务作为视角，研究政府与社会服务组织之间不断演变的关系。在乡村振兴的政策背景下，社会组织在农村地区的福利提供和基层治理中扮演着越来越重要的角色。结合制度理论和协商威权主义理论，我们的研究探索社会服务组织的功能和定位如何发生变化。在农村社会工作发展的初期，社会组织在一个新兴的组织领域中运作，在决策、议程设定、服务设计等方面都行使了相当大的自主权。然而，随着政府利用社工行业的动力不断增强，我们观察到社会工作者在发挥更大作用的同时，政府对该行业的管制亦有强化的趋势。通过研究广东省内一个长达十年的社会工作项目的起始及终结，本文将分析社会组织在农村发展中可能被弱化的角色。

Keywords: government purchase; social service organizations; non-governmental organizations; social work; rural welfare; Guangdong

关键词: 政府购买; 社会服务机构; 社会组织; 社会工作; 农村福利; 广东省

Confronted with challenges arising from the deepening of market reform, the emergence of new social classes and actors, and waning authority at the grassroots, the Chinese party-state has sought to bolster its capacity in welfare provision by reforming its service delivery model, beginning in the early 2000s.¹ In particular, it has experimented with service contracting, an arrangement wherein the government outsources public goods provision to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private firms through a competitive bidding process. In 2012, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) and Ministry of Finance jointly published guidelines that set out the scope, target, procedure and regulatory mechanism for the government purchase of social work services (*zhengfu*

¹ Teets 2012.

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goumai shehui gongzuo fuwu 政府购买社会工作服务).² Following the adoption of the Government Procurement Law (*Zhengfu caigou fa* 政府采购法), governments at all levels began purchasing a wide range of services from civil society groups, including healthcare, education, rehabilitation and services for children and the elderly. As of 2020, the central government alone has injected a combined total of 1.58 billion yuan to support the purchase of services.³

Contract-based service purchase has transformed the relationship between the party-state and non-profits, especially social service organizations (*shehui fuwu jigou* 社会服务机构) that act as primary service providers under China's Charity Law.⁴ Moving away from the earlier approach of overt repression and later muted tolerance, the party-state has shifted towards a strategy of incorporation since the 2000s which involves relaxing restrictions on welfare-oriented NGOs while enlisting them in service responsibilities.⁵ This development raises important questions about how providing services for government agencies under contract arrangements might impact the autonomy and efficacy of NGOs.

Existing studies show a spectrum of outcomes. On the one hand, it is argued that service contracting enlarges the room for social organizations to participate in the policy process and paves the way for greater institutional pluralism.⁶ Some scholars found evidence of "collaborative governance"⁷ and "reciprocal engagement"⁸ where NGOs jointly make decisions with the state and play agential roles in policy advocacy. On the other hand, it is observed that although NGOs have gained some measure of operational autonomy, many lack the management capacity and resources to work with state agencies on an equal footing.⁹ The introduction of competitive contracting, and the discharge of administrative tasks to social organizations, has created a results-driven environment that leave many in a passive position.¹⁰ Because they are reliant on contracts to survive, NGOs are inclined to embed themselves in the local state and act as acquiescent service providers.¹¹ Building on the state corporatism thesis, Jessica Teets proposed the term "consultative authoritarianism" as a way of conceptualizing how social organizations in China have proliferated alongside more sophisticated forms of state control.¹² While empowering NGOs to build capacity, the government has at the same time achieved integrative control via Party-building and other coercive and persuasive strategies.¹³ The result of this dual approach is the growth of social organizations that are professionally capable but politically non-threatening.¹⁴

This paper examines a case of service contracting in rural China to probe the evolution of state-NGO relations over time. Existing research on government purchase has generally focused on urban areas, where innovation in public service delivery first began. In recent years, however, social organizations have played an increasingly prominent role in rural service provision. The National

2 Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Finance 2012.

3 Yuxin Zhao, "Shisanwu shiqi shehui zuzhi gongzuo zongshu" (A review of the work of social organizations during the 13th Five-Year Plan period), *China Society News*, 24 December 2020, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/xw/mtbd/202012/20201200031264.shtml>. Accessed 31 March 2021.

4 The Charity Law, passed in 2016, defines three types of "social organizations" (*shehui zuzhi* 社会组织), namely social associations (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体), foundations (*jijin hui* 基金会) and social service organizations. Social service organizations were previously referred to as "civil non-enterprises" (*minban fei qiye* 民办非企业). They are institutions established with non-state funding that provide non-profit social services. The NGO studied in this paper is a type of social service organization.

5 Howell 2015.

6 Teets 2012.

7 Jing and Hu 2017.

8 Farid and Li 2021.

9 Ratigan and Teets 2019.

10 Jing 2012; Kang 2019.

11 Gong, Jiang and Leung 2019; Yuen 2020.

12 Teets 2013.

13 Jing 2015; Wang and Wang 2018.

14 Han 2018.

Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018–2022) (*Xiangcun zhenxing zhanlüe guihua* [2018–2022] 乡村振兴战略规划[2018–2022]), released in 2018, called for the development of rural social work (*nongcun shehui gongzuo* 农村社会工作) and the fostering of service-oriented charitable organizations in rural areas. Social organizations have been enlisted in targeted poverty alleviation (*jingzhun fupin* 精准扶贫) efforts, and in the governance of “new rural communities” (*xinxing nongcun shequ* 新型农村社区) under rural urbanization.¹⁵

Our research is based on a non-profit’s decade-long service contract in two villages in Guangdong province. Officially designated a “civil social work service organization” (*minban shehui gongzuo fuwu jigou* 民办社会工作服务机构), which is a type of social service organization, the NGO studied in this paper was contracted by the Guangzhou bureau of civil affairs to pioneer the provision of social work services for two rural communities between 2009 and 2019. Guided by the existing literature, we ask the following questions: What was the working relationship between the government purchaser and the organization? To what extent did the organization display operational autonomy in service delivery? How did state–NGO dynamics evolve over time, and in what ways are they similar or different compared with those observed in urban areas?

Drawing on fieldwork, interviews and participant observation over a ten-year period, our research reveals how and why relations between the state and NGO changed over the years. We find that, at the beginning, the government played a generally non-interventionist role. Social workers were given a high level of autonomy in developing programmes and setting targets that aligned with their organizational objectives. We argue that the novelty of rural social work services created room for agency. The absence of institutionalized practices provides an “ecology of opportunity”¹⁶ where social actors can negotiate rules and norms with the state and try out different strategies of engagement.

Over the course of the project, however, we observed an increase in regulatory control as the government imposed more demands on the NGO while subjecting social workers to tighter monitoring. To preserve its autonomy, the organization decided in 2019 not to renew the purchase arrangement with the government. We argue that the shift towards a more state-led approach in service delivery is indicative of the broader trend to reconstitute the party-state as the locus of grassroots governance and welfare provision under the Xi Jinping 习近平 administration. It is also evidence for how, as its knowledge of the sector increases, the party-state is likely to seek greater engagement with social organizations and the social work profession in a direction that implies strengthened control.

NGOs and Social Services in Rural China

Under the goal of building a “socialist harmonious society” (*shehuizhuyi hexie shehui* 社会主义和谐社会), the Chinese leadership pioneered a series of initiatives in the early 2000s to promote the development of the “social sector.” The demise of *danwei*-based welfare and the demand for better services drove innovation in service delivery models. The government purchase of social services and the development of the social work profession are parallel trends that unfolded in tandem under this policy context.

Contracting allows the outsourcing of certain state functions to civil society groups, and facilitates the re-articulation of state power through regulatory restructuring.¹⁷ There are two main types of government purchase: the purchase of social worker “posts” (*gangwei goumai* 岗位购买) and the purchase of social work “projects” (*xiangmu goumai* 项目购买). The former refers to the purchase of the services of individual social workers who are recruited to social service organizations on a

15 Kan and Chen 2022.

16 Hsu and Jiang 2015; Hasmath and Hsu 2014; Gäsemyr 2017.

17 Cho 2017; Teets 2012.

contract basis. The latter refers to the outsourcing of welfare programmes to social service organizations. For example, an NGO can be contracted to provide services to a particular social group in a neighbourhood. In some localities, government purchase extends to an entire service centre at the *shequ* (community) level, where the NGO is furnished with funding to develop programmes for different client groups in the community. In these cases, the service agencies are often directly involved in grassroots administration and community governance.

The expansion of government purchase facilitated the development of the social work profession in China. Social work was introduced into China as an academic discipline in the early 20th century. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, it was labelled a "bourgeois pseudo-science" and removed from university curriculums.¹⁸ The discipline was reintroduced in the 1980s to tackle the plethora of social issues arising from market reform. In 2008, MOCA took charge of coordinating the social work industry and expedited its professionalization by setting benchmarks for the training, examination and registration of social workers.¹⁹ Rather than being government workers, the earliest social workers are mostly employees of social service organizations, the number of which grew rapidly with the increase in service contracting by state agencies.

While the majority of social service providers can be found in urban areas, there was an emerging consensus in the early 2000s that the Chinese countryside was confronted with grave challenges that demanded policy attention. Under market reform, the out-migration of the able-bodied population from rural areas hollowed out Chinese villages and created large populations of the "left behind." The decline of agriculture and later rural industries created fiscal shortfalls and undermined the ability of rural governments to guarantee basic public goods. The rural welfare system – including the provision of basic subsistence assistance, cooperative medical care and rural old-age insurance – was at risk of collapse. The levying of heavy taxes and fees by cash-strapped local states further exacerbated the "peasant burden" and eroded relations between cadres and villagers, leading to a rise in peasant protests at the turn of the century.

In light of these issues, some NGOs and social workers began organizing services for rural communities. Notable examples include Pingzhai 平寨 village in Yunnan province, where academics and social workers partnered with a Hong Kong university to support development in an ethnic minority village.²⁰ Using a capacity-building approach, the Pingzhai project emphasized the mobilization of community resources and the development of social economy through the creation of rural cooperatives and fostering of rural–urban networks. In Xiangxi 湘西, Hunan province, social workers from Changsha Social Work College pioneered the establishment of a community service station, developed rural cooperatives and organized welfare programmes for the "left-behind" population.²¹

Three developments accounted for the party-state's enlarged role in rural social service provision and the expansion of government purchase from urban to rural areas. First, the launch of the New Socialist Countryside (*Shehuizhuyi xinnongcun* 社会主义新农村) campaign marked a new stage in the government's involvement in rural modernization and urbanization. In its "No. 1 Central Document" for 2006, the central government lay down key directions for moving rural areas towards modernity and "moderate prosperity in all aspects" (*quanmian xiaokang* 全面小康).²² "Rural community building" (*nongcun shequ jianshe* 农村社区建设) was promoted, along with the development of "new-type management and service systems" for these neighbourhoods.²³ In 2007, MOCA selected 304 counties as pilot sites for new rural construction. These initiatives not only saw the extension of urban planning principles to rural areas, they also remodelled city-based systems of social work and service provision in the new rural communities. Wanzai 万载 county in

18 Ku, Qi and Zhang 2019.

19 Tsui and Pak 2013.

20 Ku and Kan 2020.

21 Shi and Jiang 2014.

22 Central Committee of the CCP and State Council 2006.

23 Kan and Chen 2022.

Jiangxi province, one of the pilot sites selected by MOCA, serves as an example. The Wanzai government played a direct role in supervising the building of rural social work stations through issuing work plans, providing funding and setting performance targets, while social service organizations were mobilized to play a supportive role as service providers.²⁴

Second, the need to build capacity for disaster relief – following a series of devastating natural disasters including the 2008 Wenchuan 汶川 earthquake – helped expedite the extension of social work services to rural areas. Prior to the Wenchuan earthquake, social work training in China did not include intervention in disaster-affected communities.²⁵ The role of social work in post-disaster reconstruction has evolved rapidly thereafter. In the 2013 Ya'an 雅安 earthquake, for example, state agencies worked extensively with NGOs to carry out joint relief missions.²⁶ The involvement of social workers and social organizations in relief work not only increased official recognition for their role in rural construction, it also strengthened organizational ties between the government and welfare-oriented NGOs.

Poverty alleviation provided the third policy context for greater engagement between state agencies and social workers in rural development. In 2013, President Xi Jinping coined the term “targeted poverty alleviation” to highlight the importance of social assistance reaching households and individuals in need. The government then issued a document entitled “Decisions on Winning the Battle of Poverty Eradication” (*Guanyu daying tuopin gongjianzhan de jue ding* 关于打赢脱贫攻坚战的决定) in 2015, which spelled out the goal of lifting 70 million rural residents above the poverty line by 2020. The document called for the extensive mobilization of “social forces” (*shehui lilian* 社会力量) to participate in anti-poverty efforts, specifically volunteers and professional social workers.²⁷

The Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization (2018–2022) represents the latest initiative in which the extension of social work services to rural China was emphasized. Local governments were encouraged to purchase services from NGOs and create more positions for professional social workers in rural areas.²⁸ These developments augur the state's enlarged role in rural social work and welfare provision. In the rest of the paper, we examine how this restructures relations between the state and NGOs through a longitudinal case study.

Case and Methodology

Guangdong is one of the leading provinces in social service innovation. Its provincial capital, Guangzhou, began experimenting with the government purchase of social services as early as 2007. Between 2008 and 2016, the Guangzhou municipal government spent over 1.7 billion yuan in the purchase of social work services. Most of these contracts were taken up by social service organizations in the city, whose number stood at 417 as of 2016.²⁹

Our case study represents the first case of government service purchase for rural communities in Guangzhou.³⁰ In 2009, the municipal bureau of civil affairs launched a purchase programme that included 33 projects in Guangzhou. While the rest of the projects were based in urban areas, our case study involved servicing two impoverished villages located in the mountainous north-eastern

24 Chen 2014.

25 Ku, Qi and Zhang 2019.

26 Peng and Wu 2018.

27 “China vows to win battle against poverty,” *Scio.gov.cn*, 24 November 2015, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/32618/Document/1456438/1456438.htm>. Accessed 14 April 2021.

28 Central Committee of the CCP and State Council 2018.

29 “Guangzhou banian touru shiqi yi goumai shegong fuwu” (Guangzhou spent 1.7 billion yuan over eight years to purchase social work services), *Ccgp.gov.cn*, 8 November 2016, http://www.ccg.gov.cn/gpsr/gdpt/201611/t20161108_7544520.htm. Accessed 23 September 2022.

30 Pseudonyms are used for the names of the NGO and the two villages.

part of the city. The bureau purchased services from an NGO called Centre for Sustainability (hereafter CFS). Formally registered in 2009 under the Guangdong provincial department of civil affairs, CFS has worked extensively with rural communities in Yunnan and Sichuan since the early 2000s with an emphasis on fair trade, rural–urban cooperation and sustainable development. The NGO gained nationwide recognition for its collaboration with the Guangdong government in providing post-disaster relief in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

As a pioneering case of government purchase of social services for rural communities, the civil affairs bureau signed a three-year contract with CFS wherein it provided an annual funding of 1 million yuan to the NGO for developing welfare programmes. The contract was subsequently renewed twice at three-year intervals, until 2019 when the purchase arrangement was terminated. Our research period covers eleven years, from 2009 when the service contract began, to early 2020, when social workers were wrapping up their project at the end of the decade-long engagement.

Field visits and interviews were used to collect data. A total of 22 visits was made by the authors to the villages between 2009 and 2020, with each visit lasting approximately five days. The visits provided opportunities for data collection through interviews and informal conversations, as well as direct participant observation through taking part in activities and work meetings. We observed the interaction between social workers, villagers and local officials to make sense of the evolving dynamics. The interviews cited in this paper were conducted between 2019 and 2021 with social workers from CFS ($n=7$) and villagers ($n=20$). We also collected documentary data in the form of annual reports published by CFS and reflection reports written by social workers.

Developing Social Work Services in Two Guangdong Villages

The CFS project was carried out in two impoverished rural communities at the north-eastern fringe of Guangzhou. Fairydale and Sunshine are natural villages (*ziran cun* 自然村) about 2.5 hours by car from Guangzhou city centre. Located in a mountainous region, the villages have no direct access to public transportation. The nearest township is a 45-minute car ride away. Fairydale has a population of 400 while Sunshine has a population of 750. The majority of the population engage in non-agricultural employment in nearby towns or in Guangzhou city centre. Only a quarter of the population normally resides in the villages.

A total of twelve social workers were involved in the CFS project between 2009 and 2020. Most of them took up residence in the villages and stayed for three to four years. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, many of the social workers were non-local migrants who had moved to Guangzhou for study or work. Some were raised in rural areas while others grew up in cities. Their employment with CFS was their first or second job after graduation. They were paid a monthly salary of 2,700 yuan, with annual incremental raises based on performance and experience.³¹ Senior social workers were paid around 5,000 yuan per month.³² Approximately 40 per cent of the project's 1-million-yuan funding was used to support social workers' remuneration, while the remaining 60 per cent was spent on operational expenses.³³

Compared to urban areas where social services often target specific groups, rural social workers commonly station in one community for an extended period where they are expected to serve multiple groups and address a broad range of issues. Living in the village meant that there were no clear boundaries between work and personal space.³⁴ Rural residents tend to be less familiar with what social work is about. At the beginning of the CFS project, villagers in Fairydale and Sunshine were

31 Interview with a social worker, 11 January 2020.

32 Interview with a social worker, 13 March 2021.

33 Ibid.

34 Interview with a social worker, 23 February 2021.

unsure of why social workers had come to live in their village. Some thought they were university students doing research in the community, while others saw them as government workers on assignment from the civil affairs bureau. “When the project began, villagers did not understand who we were. They might adopt a very simplistic view and saw us as either being on the government’s side or on their side,” one social worker remarked.³⁵ Another challenge stemmed from the complex social relations and interpersonal dynamics at the village level. Social workers – being recent university graduates – often had to navigate intricate family ties and kinship dynamics on their own.

Social workers pursued a number of strategies in building relationships with the villagers. They conducted regular home visits and interviews to assess community needs and identified villagers who could be potential clients. They then worked with these villagers to develop programmes that were tailored to the needs of specific groups.

Social workers credited the autonomy they were given as an important factor for their efficacy. Although the project was undertaken under a government purchase arrangement, social workers were given few instructions or guidelines from the government in terms of how the programme should be run. As one staff member remarked, “Nobody had done rural social work before. The government gave us a lot of freedom to develop this project because they did not know what could be achieved. We designed the content of the service contract based on the developmental goals of our own organization.”³⁶ This autonomy allowed social workers to create welfare programmes that aligned with CFS’s values: promoting sustainable rural development through capacity building, grassroots empowerment and rural–urban partnership.

One of the first initiatives CFS piloted in Fairydale targeted “left-behind” women – women whose spouses are regularly away for work for an extended period. Many of them had no work in the village and were dependent on their husbands’ remittances for a living. The social workers found eight interested women and organized them into a mutual aid group in 2010. Observing that traditional village houses could be refurbished and developed into accommodation for visitors, social workers helped coordinate the renovation and started a guesthouse business. The women were responsible for preparing meals and lodging for visitors, who were charged 130–150 yuan per night of stay. Using their contact networks with local NGOs and universities, social workers helped organize group tours to Fairydale which generated 180,000–250,000 yuan in annual revenues for the mutual aid group. On average members received a monthly income of 1,000–2,000 yuan, which was a significant amount for the women and their families.³⁷ One member indicated that earnings from the group gave her greater financial security and autonomy as she no longer relied solely on money sent by her husband.³⁸

Another initiative targeted farmers in the villages. There are small areas of farmland in Fairydale and Sunshine and some villagers made a living from cash crop cultivation. Due to the lack of scale, however, villagers seldom made enough from farming alone and had to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Social workers from CFS mobilized a group of green plum farmers to form a producer cooperative. The cooperative provided a platform for farmers to divide their labour and distribute their products more efficiently through a uniform channel. Social workers used their social media skills to market the products and tapped into their own networks to identify buyers and outlets. The cooperative successfully generated 220,000 yuan in annual revenues in its third year of operation, which further peaked at 470,000 yuan in 2018. Our interviews found that income from the cooperative allowed some villagers to leave their jobs in the cities and move back home.³⁹

35 Interview with a social worker, 27 January 2021.

36 Interview with a social worker, 9 February 2021.

37 Interviews with villagers, 10 and 11 January 2020.

38 Interview with a villager, 12 January 2020.

39 Conversation with a group of villagers, 12 January 2020.

The agential role of CFS in designing the content of the service contract not only enabled it to address the community's specific needs, it also allowed the NGO to practise and promote its organizational mission. Through training and education, villagers came to gain identification with the values of mutual help, community support and sustainable development that CFS champions. In 2018, for example, a group of villagers started a field school out of their own initiative and formed a partnership arrangement with another NGO.⁴⁰ Members of the cooperatives also agreed to form a charity fund to support community welfare. Ten per cent of each cooperative's profits accrued to the fund, which was used to subsidize village-wide celebrations, the building and repair of public facilities, and ecological initiatives such as tree planting. In 2018, the charity funds in Fairydale and Sunshine accumulated a combined total of 32,000 yuan.⁴¹

The autonomy afforded to CFS meant that social workers were more than service providers. The staff interviewed described themselves as a "bridge" between the community and external networks and as "change makers." From bringing in visitors to identifying distribution channels for farm products, social workers made use of their own networks and skills to support the initiatives. More than just implementing welfare programmes, they also promoted their visions and invested time and effort in training up core villagers to take over leadership responsibilities. Following the dictum of "helping people to help themselves," CFS gradually shifted from playing a leading role in community welfare to playing a supportive role.⁴² For social workers, the success of the project lay precisely in the bottom-up empowerment of the community.

State-NGO Relations in Rural Areas: Comparisons with Urban Areas

The autonomy enjoyed by CFS in the early stages of the contract stood in contrast to findings in the literature that suggest a much lower level of agency on the part of service providers. Existing studies generally found that while government purchase expands the room for social organizations to participate in service provision and grassroots governance, many remained constrained by refined tactics of state control.⁴³ Strategies deployed by the government include registration requirements, financial regulation, soft co-optation through legitimacy-sharing initiatives, and the fostering of fiscal dependence through competitive bidding.⁴⁴ Local governments have also introduced ranking and auditing to measure NGO performance as a way of incentivizing compliance.⁴⁵

In our case study, the novelty of social work services for rural areas created a unique context for policy flexibility and professional input. As Hasmath and Hsu point out in their study of state-NGO relations in Beijing and Shanghai, epistemic awareness on the part of the government is directly related to its ability and desire to interact with non-profits.⁴⁶ In an emerging organizational field where rules and restrictions are still evolving, social actors have more space to proactively pursue opportunities and even circumvent restrictions within relatively flexible institutional settings.⁴⁷ This can be observed when we compare the state's regulatory role in supervising service providers in urban and rural areas.

In urban areas, the city of Guangzhou pioneered the establishment of community service centres at the street or sub-district (*jiedao* 街道) level to provide targeted social work services for the local neighbourhood. Known as Integrated Family Service Centres (*Jiating zonghe fuwu zhongxin* 家庭综合服务中心) (hereafter IFSCs), these centres usually involve the purchase of services from social

40 Interview with a social worker and a villager, Guangzhou, 9 January 2020.

41 Centre for Sustainability 2019.

42 Interview with a social worker, 11 January 2020.

43 Teets 2013.

44 Jing 2015.

45 Ibid.

46 Hasmath and Hsu 2014.

47 Gåsemyr 2017.

organizations by the street-level government, with funding provided by municipal and district finance bureaus. As of 2014, there were 79 different social service agencies operating 171 IFSCs across Guangzhou.⁴⁸ To strengthen its managerial role as the service demander, the municipal government has developed a standard repertoire of assessment criteria by which service providers are appraised. Many of these involve quantitative performance indicators that are uniformly applied to all neighbourhoods across the city.⁴⁹

Studies on IFSCs have found that government officials often treat service providers as “foot soldiers” and “servant[s] of government departments,” rather than as independent organizations.⁵⁰ The provision of professional services by NGOs has been disrupted both by the discharging of administrative work to NGOs and by ill-designed evaluation standards that do not reflect the needs of communities. Street governments tend to outsource administrative duties to service providers, who find it hard to resist demands imposed from above.⁵¹ The extensive use of quantitative performance indicators also work more to the advantage of government officials in terms of showcasing their achievements, rather than to facilitate genuine community impact.⁵²

The NGO in our case study enjoyed a much higher degree of autonomy in its provision of rural social work services. CFS was not free from government monitoring. Like service providers in urban areas, the NGO had to submit monthly work reports to the district civil affairs bureau. Social workers were required to make in-person visits to the bureau every three months to report their work.⁵³ Officials from the civil affairs bureau carried out site visits at Fairydale and Sunshine every six months to evaluate work progress. Aside from monitoring by the government, CFS was also assessed by a third party identified through competitive bidding, in this case professionals from Guangzhou University’s Department of Social Work.

In contrast to service agencies under the IFSC model, however, social workers at CFS had a greater say in determining how their work should be appraised. They were directly involved in the setting of performance targets in their evaluation. As one social worker remarked: “There hadn’t been any other organization providing rural social work services before us. We enjoyed a substantial level of autonomy in terms of setting targets and plans based on what we wanted to achieve and what we could feasibly achieve... There were no established standards to follow so we created them.”⁵⁴ In designing the evaluation, social workers avoided the output-oriented approach that characterizes the IFSC model. “We seldom include quantifiable targets like those adopted by IFSCs, which require social workers to form a certain number of small groups, organize a certain number of activities, or develop a certain number of cases,” said one social worker. “Our targets have more to do with organizing and training villagers, such as providing learning opportunities for them.”⁵⁵ The freedom to tailor their performance criteria to the values and missions of CFS facilitated their goal of improving livelihoods through capacity building, grassroots empowerment and sustainable rural–urban partnership.

At the village level, social workers also reported a generally non-interventionist attitude on the part of the village government. In both Fairydale and Sunshine, social workers did not encounter pressure to perform administrative duties, although they were asked to provide assistance to rural cadres in implementing certain policy initiatives, such as state-led campaigns to improve village sanitation and demolish illegal buildings.⁵⁶ In Fairydale, CFS was approached by the villagers’

48 Chan and Lei 2017.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 1343, 1353.

51 Gong, Jiang and Leung 2019.

52 Chan and Lei 2017.

53 Interview with a social worker, 23 February 2021.

54 Ibid.

55 Interview with a social worker, 8 February 2021.

56 Interview with a social worker, 1 March 2021.

committee with a request to be allocated a portion of government funding for implementing parts of the project. The village government was given 150,000 yuan to assist in the refurbishment of lineage halls and some traditional houses. Following this initial engagement, social workers did not have much interaction with rural officials except in activities organized by CFS, which the officials were invited to attend. In Sunshine, social workers had more frequent interactions with the village government. The election of a young village leader facilitated communication. The two sides agreed to convert part of the villagers' committee building into a public space for CFS to host communal activities. CFS paid a rental fee to the villagers' committee to use the space. Social workers also established good rapport with members of the village government, including the vice-chairperson and women's representative, who were frequent participants in activities organized by CFS.⁵⁷

The non-interventionist attitude of the village government can be explained by two factors. First, because the service purchaser was the municipal government, rather than the township or village government, the lower-level authorities played a smaller managerial role in the case of CFS. In some contracting arrangements, township and village governments were the direct purchaser of services. In those cases, township and village officials tended to discharge more administrative tasks to NGOs and supervise social workers more closely because they were the party paying for the services.⁵⁸ Secondly, compared with their counterparts in urban areas, village governments in more remote rural areas tend to be of smaller scale and have fewer resources. The villagers' committee and village Party branch in Fairdale and Sunshine had only a small number of staff, with around five active members who also had side jobs in the city and were not around in the village every day. Because they themselves had a smaller administrative workload, rural officials were less likely to have to request support from social workers.⁵⁹

Overall, social workers from CFS believed that they were given more independence and were evaluated by relatively "relaxed" standards when compared with NGOs in urban areas.⁶⁰ The comparatively small role played by the local state at different levels allowed social workers to set their own assessment criteria and generally freed them from the pressure to perform administrative duties. As the next section shows, this opportunity structure was to shift towards the later stages of the project.

Changing Approaches in Service Delivery: Towards State Incorporation?

From the mid-2010s, following the signing of their third contract with the civil affairs bureau, social workers at CFS observed a number of changes that indicated the government's shifting approach in monitoring service providers. To begin with, assessment by the government took on a more standardized (*guifanhua* 规范化) format that was directly appropriated from IFSCs in Guangzhou's urban areas. The adoption of the urban-based model imposed new measurements and targets that social workers felt were not applicable in the village context. "Government evaluation became much more regularized in the last three to four years of our project," observed one social worker. "We found it difficult because there are many differences between the provision of social work services in urban and rural areas."⁶¹

There was also growing pressure from the government for social workers to assist in Party-building (*dangjian* 党建) efforts.⁶² Starting from 2018, social workers in the CFS project were expected to include Party-building in their work, and would lose points in their appraisals if this was not carried out. The inclusion of the new requirement was part of the government's

57 Interview with a social worker, 11 January 2020.

58 Ibid.

59 Interview with a social worker, 23 February 2021.

60 Interview with a social worker, 28 February 2021.

61 Interview with a social worker, 14 March 2021.

62 See also Kan and Ku 2021.

initiative to enlist NGOs to participate in Party work. In 2018, Guangdong province issued a three-year action plan to strengthen Party-building in grassroots organizations.⁶³ The document called for reinforcing the political leadership of Party cells in social service organizations, and for mobilizing social forces to participate in rural revitalization, targeted poverty alleviation and grassroots governance in a way that would buttress the organizational capacity and leadership of the Party. Following the publication of the action plan, the Guangzhou municipal government incorporated Party-building as a standard requirement into its performance assessment of all social service organizations. All service providers were rated on whether they had Party members in their staff, and if they had established an internal Party cell and organized activities that promoted the Party such as study sessions. Social workers in CFS found the requirement “unreasonable” and did not engage in Party work. As a result, points were deducted from their evaluation.⁶⁴ The NGO did not have an internal Party cell to begin with, and because the purchase arrangement was coming to an end CFS did not feel compelled to comply with the new requirement.⁶⁵

Aside from imposing new standards and requirements, the government’s overall approach towards rural welfare provision was beginning to change. Whereas projects in the early stages of development involved mainly small-scale pilot schemes in villages and townships, higher-level authorities are now coordinating policy campaigns on a larger scale. The most prominent example was the *shuangbai* scheme (*shuangbai jihua* 双百计划), launched by the Guangdong provincial department of civil affairs in 2017. The campaign involved building social work service stations in 200 townships across the province, with the aim of creating 1,000 new positions for professional social workers and incubating 200 social service organizations. *Shuangbai* was later expanded to 407 townships, targeting less developed areas such as Shaoguan 韶关 and Qingyuan 清远 in the north, Meizhou 梅州 and Heyuan 河源 in the east, and Yunfu 云浮 and Maoming 茂名 in the west. Some townships in the Pearl River Delta cities of Dongguan 东莞, Zhongshan 中山 and Zhuhai 珠海 were also included.

The CFS project in Fairydale and Sunshine became a training base for social workers who were recruited under *shuangbai*. Starting from 2017, government officials, project coordinators and social workers affiliated with the campaign conducted regular study tours to the villages and attended sharing sessions prepared by social workers and villagers on CFS’s work in Fairydale and Sunshine. Although the CFS project was held up as a pioneering model of rural social work services, *shuangbai* in fact adopts a very different approach in service delivery in terms of the role of the state and social workers.

First, unlike earlier pilots which involved lower-level authorities, *shuangbai* was directly supervised and managed by the provincial government. It was described as *minsheng gongcheng* 民生工程, a campaign led by the state aimed at improving people’s livelihoods.⁶⁶ Under the leadership of the provincial department of civil affairs, coordination centres were set up at the municipal level, which in turn oversaw welfare programmes in townships under their jurisdiction. Funding for *shuangbai* came from civil affairs bureaus at the provincial, municipal and county levels, with the provincial department providing an annual budget of 17 million yuan for social work training and 12 million yuan for programmes implemented by social work service stations.⁶⁷

Shuangbai also diverged from the practice of service contracting via NGOs by directly hiring social workers on a contract basis. This restructured the relationship between the state, NGOs and social workers in service delivery. Under earlier contracting arrangements, the government purchased social services from a particular organization which then coordinated its own staff to carry

63 Guangdong Provincial Party Committee 2018.

64 Interview with a social worker, 23 February 2021.

65 Interview with a social worker, 11 January 2020.

66 Interview with a social worker, 27 January 2021.

67 Guangdong Provincial Department of Civil Affairs 2020.

out services. In the CFS project, for example, the NGO made its own decision regarding the design of programmes and deployment of personnel, while the government, as the service purchaser, was mainly involved as a regulator and evaluator. Under *shuangbai*, the state plays a direct role in hiring and programme design. The township government of each project site is responsible for recruiting social workers to staff the community service stations. Rather than being employees of existing NGOs, these social workers work for the government on a contract basis and report immediately to government agencies. They are also required to go through a standardized training programme designed by the provincial department of civil affairs.

The top-down nature of *shuangbai* is further reflected in the adoption of standardized practice models across the hundreds of service centres being built. Instead of a case-based (*zhuan'an* 专案) approach, where social workers develop tailor-made programmes based on the specific needs and assets of the communities, *shuangbai* is more concerned with innovating a comprehensive system (*tixi* 体系) for carrying out rural social work services that can be replicated in villages and townships across the entire province.⁶⁸ It adopts what a social worker described as an “administrative-led” approach where the thousands of social workers employed under the scheme received uniform training and instruction on how to engage with the different neighbourhoods they are stationed in.⁶⁹

Shuangbai projects are characterized by a uniform emphasis on service provision. In social work projects where the government purchases services from NGOs, the involvement of different social service organizations with distinct organizational values implies greater diversity in terms of how services are designed and carried out. In the CFS project, for example, the NGO’s capacity-building method and emphasis on rural–urban sustainability directly shaped its work in Fairydale and Sunshine, as seen in the establishment of rural cooperatives and promotion of eco-farming. By contrast, *shuangbai* is more singularly focused on improving service delivery and enhancing grassroots governance, objectives that are in line with the portfolio of the civil affairs department.⁷⁰ Social workers are usually tasked with performing more administrative duties for the village government.

Discussion

All in all, *shuangbai* signals a change in approach to rural social service delivery. While the government continues to discharge some service responsibilities to NGOs through contracting, it is at the same time expanding its direct involvement in welfare provision by co-opting the social work profession. By employing social workers on government contracts, the state is building its own team of service providers without needing to go through NGOs and service agencies. These developments point to the party-state’s enlarged presence in grassroots welfare provision, which can be seen as part of a broader attempt to reinforce party-state leadership in community governance under the Xi administration.⁷¹

Where this leaves NGOs and other service-oriented organizations is a question with important implications for state–society dynamics. The incorporation of the social work profession by the party-state could ultimately marginalize NGOs and limit their space for participation. The innovation in service contracting in the 1990s and 2000s has been understood as “part of a larger process of political reform in China, namely the ‘small state, big society’ reforms which sought to withdraw the state from society and encourage societal actors to fill that void.”⁷² It was this reform that created the context for NGOs like CFS to be involved in designing social work services for rural

68 Interview with a social worker, 27 January 2021.

69 Interview with a social worker, 23 February 2021.

70 Interview with a social worker, 1 March 2021.

71 See also Kan and Ku 2021.

72 Teets 2012, 16.

communities in need. The expansion of NGO participation in public goods provision has bolstered not only societal agency but also pluralism, as seen in the autonomy afforded to CFS in promoting values of sustainability and rural cooperation amongst villagers.

Do campaigns like *shuangbai* herald a reversal or suspension of such reforms? Two preliminary observations can be made based on the latest developments in Guangdong. First, while NGOs still have a role to play via purchase arrangements, they are now subject to more interventionist forms of supervision and management effected by the government through standardized assessment criteria and requirements like Party-building. At the same time, the government has also expanded its own involvement in service provision through state-orchestrated campaigns like *shuangbai*. The direct recruitment of social workers by local governments to support state-led initiatives sidesteps NGOs and diverts fiscal resources away from the purchase of social services, which has been a crucial source of funding for social organizations. In the case of CFS, the redirection of funding was one of the reasons contributing to the termination of the project in 2019. According to social workers, the decision not to renew the service contract was mutual. For the government, the small-scale operation of the CFS project no longer fit the type of service provision it was looking for. Funding was reallocated to support a nearby *shuangbai* project site, which was part of the province-wide campaign. On the part of CFS, social workers found it increasingly difficult to work with the new assessment criteria and organizational requirements. To preserve their autonomy, the NGO decided to look instead for private sources of funding. Whether these dynamics that precipitated the demise of the CFS project might begin to affect other NGOs and contracting arrangements demands further research.

Conclusions

This paper examines the government purchase of rural social work services in contemporary China and uses it as a window to explore changing relations between the state, NGOs and social workers. The scholarship on social organizations in China has often adopted a state-centred perspective that regards NGOs as largely passive agents.⁷³ In this paper we observed how, operating in an emerging field of practice where institutionalized rules are yet to be established, the organizations and individuals engaged in rural service provision have initially demonstrated agency and autonomy in setting agendas, designing intervention models and putting forward evaluation criteria that are aligned with their organizational goals. These findings lend support to the literature on institutional theory and NGO development in China, which argues that an emerging organizational field provides opportunities for social actors to negotiate rules, circumvent restrictions and develop a robust presence even under an authoritarian context.⁷⁴

Our longitudinal study also reveals the limits of NGO agency, however. As we tracked the changing dynamics over a ten-year period, we found a trend towards state incorporation where the government imposed increasing demands on social workers while subjecting NGOs to more regularized and quantitative forms of performance appraisal. The shift towards a state-directed approach to rural service delivery also strengthened the supervisory role of local governments, with the possibility of reducing social workers to mere implementers of policies and service providers. The very condition that initially enabled NGOs to play a bigger role in rural development – that is, the perceived usefulness of the social work profession – has also constrained its autonomous development as the party-state co-opts the profession for its own purposes. It has been argued that as its epistemic awareness of the sector increases, the government will have stronger incentives to interact with NGOs with the desire to utilize the latter's material power.⁷⁵ Our study provides a

73 See similar critique in Gåsemyr 2017.

74 Hsu and Jiang 2015; Gåsemyr 2017; Yang 2005.

75 Hasmath and Hsu 2014.

case in point for how the party-state's increased engagement with the social work profession could give the latter a bigger role to play at the same time that control over the sector is strengthened.

Looking ahead, social service organizations in China face two possible directions of development. The first involves further incorporation by the state, wherein governments furnish NGOs with funding and resources but where social workers will likely have to provide services within frameworks set out by the state. The second involves looking for alternative sponsorships to support their initiatives. This was the task facing CFS in 2020 at the end of their decade-long government purchase arrangement. Despite the lower level of funding stability, social workers believed that private sponsorship provided by charitable foundations would give them more room to pursue what they hoped to achieve. Their view was shared by local villagers. Over the course of the decade, villagers have built cooperatives, revived agriculture and initiated new activities to benefit the collective. Members of the cooperatives are now reaching out to charities and other communities with plans to establish an inter-village alliance that would provide mutual support networks for eco-farming and eco-tourism. Whether they succeed in doing so might well indicate the extent to which bottom-up initiatives by NGOs and communities can operate independently in contemporary China.

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