

Dual-Track Governance: Functional Complementarity and Efficiency Enhancement Between Social Work and Neighborhood Committees in the Process of Chinese-Style Modernization

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Abstract. The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly proposed the realization of Chinese-style modernization, in which social work, as a method of grassroots governance in China, plays a crucial role. However, in the process of achieving the modernization of social work, there have emerged ideological and cultural contradictions, incomplete system construction, and overlapping functions with neighborhood committees in practice. Domestic research on the modernization of social work mainly focuses on adhering to the leadership of the Party, integrating excellent Chinese culture to achieve the localization of theory, and modernizing the social work system and mechanisms. This paper, in connection with actual conditions, offers suggestions from three aspects. Firstly, it is necessary to strengthen publicity related to social work to ensure that the public fully understands it. Secondly, the responsibilities of social workers and neighborhood committees should be clearly defined to ensure each performs its own duties. Thirdly, relevant supervision and evaluation mechanisms should be improved. The aim is to promote a win-win cooperation between social workers and neighborhood committees, jointly providing better services to the people.

Keywords: Social Work, Neighborhood Committees, Grassroots Governance, Literature Review

1. Introduction

Under the background of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, innovation in grassroots social governance has become a crucial issue in the modernization of national governance. As two typical subjects of grassroots governance, professional social work and neighborhood committees complement and reinforce each other in practice. In recent years, with the shift of governance focus toward the grassroots level, the professionalization of social work has rapidly developed, forming a distinctive "dual-track governance" model alongside traditional neighborhood committees—a hallmark of Chinese characteristics. However, this model still faces numerous challenges in its implementation: overlapping functions leading to redundant services,

cultural and value differences causing adaptability issues, and the lack of collaborative mechanisms resulting in resource wastage, all of which constrain the efficiency of grassroots governance to varying degrees.

Current academic research on this issue exhibits three key characteristics: first, a focus on the theoretical construction of localized social work; second, an emphasis on the central role of Party leadership; and third, attention to the development of professional talent training systems. Yet, systematic research on how these two governance subjects can achieve complementary advantages and collaborative development remains insufficient. Particularly in practice, phenomena such as buck-passing due to unclear division of responsibilities and the applicability challenges of social work methods within China's cultural context urgently call for theoretical innovation and practical breakthroughs.

Based on a systematic review of existing literature, this study analyzes the issue from three dimensions: first, examining the value conflicts between traditional cultural concepts and modern social work principles; second, identifying shortcomings in the current institutional framework; and third, exploring the issue of overlapping functions in practical work. Building on this analysis, the paper proposes a "trinity" development pathway: fostering consensus through Party leadership, strengthening foundations through cultural integration, and providing safeguards through institutional innovation. By clarifying roles and responsibilities, enhancing public awareness, and improving evaluation mechanisms, this study aims to promote the organic integration and synergistic effects of the two governance models, thereby offering new insights for advancing the modernization of grassroots governance.

2. Literature review

Neighborhood committees, as unique grassroots governance organizations in China, play a significant role in promoting social harmony, maintaining stability, and resolving conflicts. Meanwhile, social work, as an "imported" discipline, has flourished in recent years, contributing greatly to social governance. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, deepening reforms and advancing Chinese-style modernization have been explicitly emphasized. However, in practice, neighborhood committees and social work—two core carriers of grassroots social governance—still face issues such as unclear division of responsibilities and insufficient service capacity, sparking widespread scholarly discussion.

The Central Committee's document *Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Policy Construction of Social Work* (October 2024) states: "Strengthening and improving the policy construction of social work is an important part of modernizing the national governance system and capabilities." This affirms that achieving Chinese-style modernization of social work requires policy guidance from the Party. Another document released the same year, *Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving the Institutional Construction of Social Work*, emphasizes: "Adhere to a people-centered approach, enhance the institutional development of social work, and elevate its role in social governance." This clearly highlights the importance of social work and its fundamental commitment to serving the people.

Recent domestic research on the Chinese-style modernization of social work has focused on the following areas. First of all, achieving the theoretical system's modernization by constructing a value system for social work that integrates Chinese characteristics [1, 2], while consistently adhering to Party leadership and a people-centered philosophy [3]. Secondly, accomplishing the modernization of practical approaches by focusing on talent cultivation as the central task, advancing the

legitimacy of professional entities [4], and establishing an innovative Chinese-style social governance system through the "Five-Society Linkage" mechanism [5].

This paper argues that achieving Chinese-style modernization of social work requires not only theoretical and practical advancements but also coordinated efforts with neighborhood committees—a deeply rooted Chinese grassroots governance model. Clear division of responsibilities and mutual complementarity are essential. This paper explores how to promote their collaborative development through three dimensions: improving talent cultivation mechanisms, localizing knowledge systems, and adhering to Party leadership and people-centered governance.

Social work, as a Western-originated governance model, has developed in China for decades and achieved certain results. However, in practice, many people confuse it with neighborhood committees, a native governance model. Due to overlapping functions, inefficiencies such as buck-passing often occur, undermining governance effectiveness and failing to address public issues. A review of existing literature reveals three major research focuses: first, upholding Party leadership and implementing a people-centered service philosophy; second, connecting with China's local culture to construct a cultural system compatible with social work; third, improving the institutional mechanisms for social work talent cultivation by learning from China's experiences and engaging in Chinese practices.

In the new era, higher demands are placed on China's grassroots governance capabilities, necessitating the accelerated modernization of social work. This paper explores the challenges faced by social work in this process and proposes pathways for Chinese-style modernization from the perspectives of ideological construction, theoretical system development, and talent cultivation.

3. Challenges in achieving Chinese-style modernization of social work

3.1. Ideological and cultural contradictions

First, the influence of traditional Chinese thought: as a civilization with millennia of cultural history, China's traditional values exert profound influence, notably exemplified by the adage "family scandals should not be publicized," which emphasizes resolving domestic issues privately rather than seeking external help, potentially deterring individuals with family problems from seeking professional social work assistance. Equally significant is the pervasive "face culture" in Chinese society, where seeking help is traditionally viewed as exposing personal vulnerability and lack of resilience, damaging both individual and familial reputation - a major psychological barrier to client engagement. Second, insufficient public understanding of social work: introduced to China in the 20th century, social work experienced fluctuating development before gaining momentum in the 21st century. As an imported concept, most citizens possess limited or no knowledge about social work services, instinctively turning to self-reliance or kinship networks when encountering problems. These dual factors significantly impede both the development of social work in China and its progress toward Chinese-style modernization.

3.2. Incomplete system construction

The current challenges in China's social work development manifest in three dimensions: institutional disconnection, talent cultivation deficiencies, and flawed evaluation mechanisms. Scholar Li He notes that the Code of Ethics for Social Workers issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs lacks clear application scenarios for ethical guidelines [6], reflecting broader systemic issues including an incomplete policy framework, inadequate protection of social workers' rights, and

ambiguous professional status. Compounding these problems, China's higher education system overemphasizes theoretical training while providing insufficient practical fieldwork opportunities, resulting in graduates lacking hands-on experience and facing subsequent employment difficulties. Furthermore, as researcher Wang Hongguang identifies, the evaluation system suffers from compromised assessor independence, insufficient bidirectional performance reviews, and inconsistent assessment metrics [7], necessitating enhanced transparency to facilitate public understanding of evaluation processes. These interconnected institutional shortcomings collectively hinder the professionalization of social work in China.

3.3. Practical dilemmas

The development of social work in China faces dual institutional and cultural challenges. First, functional ambiguity persists between social work - a Western-originated governance model introduced in the 20th century that gained momentum in the 21st century and China's indigenous neighborhood/village committees, with overlapping responsibilities leading to inter-organizational buck-passing, diminished governance efficacy, and unresolved public issues. Second, the transplantation of this Western model inevitably encounters cultural dissonance; as scholar Li He observes [6], the Chinese collectivist ethic of subordinating individual interests to collective welfare conflicts with Western emphasis on personal autonomy, manifesting in practical barriers like social workers being excluded from family interventions due to cultural incompatibility. These systemic and value-based obstacles collectively constrain social work's localization in China.

4. Pathways to Chinese-style modernization of social work

4.1. Uphold party leadership and a people-centered service philosophy

The advancement of social work in China necessitates a dual adherence to Party leadership and people-centered principles. Primarily, the development of social work must be policy-driven under Party guidance, as explicitly mandated by the 20th CPC National Congress which articulated the modernization of governance systems as integral to Chinese-style modernization. As a crucial modality of grassroots governance, social work's efficacy fundamentally depends on maintaining the Party's leadership position, where its policymaking not only provides strategic direction but also cultivates an enabling institutional environment. This Party-led framework allows for optimal utilization of the Party's institutional advantages to maximize modernization outcomes. Secondly, the operationalization of social work must consistently implement a people-centric philosophy, wherein all interventions are designed for the people, depend on the people, and follow the mass line. This approach demonstrates remarkable congruence between the CPC's fundamental people-oriented stance and social work's humanistic professional ethos, synergistically enhancing service responsiveness to public needs while ensuring practical problem-solving. Furthermore, incorporating grassroots wisdom facilitates the essential localization process of social work practice, creating an organic integration of professional methodologies with indigenous socio-cultural contexts.

4.2. Build a Chinese-style social work knowledge system rooted in local culture

The theoretical development of social work in China requires a tripartite approach to value integration. First, essential elements should be extracted from China's traditional cultural heritage, particularly the Confucian concept of "ren" (benevolence) and Buddhist compassion [6], which

demonstrate significant conceptual alignment with social work's core principle of "helping people help themselves." The systematic incorporation of these indigenous philosophical resources into social work's value framework can enhance practitioners' contextual understanding of Chinese clients' issues and socio-cultural realities. Second, contemporary socialist core values must be synthesized, necessitating social workers' conscientious implementation of professionalism while operationalizing values of freedom and equality in client interactions, all within a legal framework that ensures equitable service delivery. Third, selective adoption of relevant Western paradigms remains imperative, particularly the universally applicable principles of client confidentiality and the sanctity of life that underpin modern social work practice globally. This multidimensional value integration facilitates the development of a culturally-grounded yet professionally rigorous social work paradigm suited to China's developmental context.

4.3. Improve institutional mechanisms for social work

The institutional development of social work in China necessitates a three-pronged strategy for systemic integration. First, embedding social work mechanisms into public service systems requires governmental leadership to clarify departmental responsibilities, despite the Ministry of Civil Affairs' 2008 establishment of the Social Work Department currently facing functional ambiguities and insufficient professionalism. This involves creating effective linkages between social work organizations and communities to ensure substantive participation in public service delivery. Second, a multi-stakeholder approach involving government, academia, and civil society must strengthen professional talent cultivation - governments should refine training regulations and qualification standards, educational institutions must adopt differentiated pedagogy integrating Chinese contextual knowledge, while partnerships with social organizations can enhance field practicums for competency development. Third, comprehensive policy and legal frameworks need development, including welfare provisions and rights protection for practitioners, complemented by robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to balance professional interests with effective public problem-solving. This tripartite institutionalization strategy addresses structural gaps while advancing professionalization within China's unique governance context.

5. Conclusion

Existing research on the Chinese-style modernization of social work has made progress in ideological, theoretical, and institutional dimensions. However, studies on the coordinated development of social work and neighborhood committees remain limited. This paper offers the following recommendations:

5.1. Enhancing social work awareness

The challenges facing social work development in China stem partly from limited public understanding of the profession. To address this, comprehensive efforts are needed to promote awareness of social work fundamentals. Digital platforms—including short videos and public service announcements—should be leveraged to introduce social workers as professional helpers. For digitally excluded populations like elderly residents, traditional outreach methods (e.g., village broadcast systems or community theater) can bridge information gaps. A hybrid approach combining modern and traditional communication channels is essential to dismantle knowledge barriers.

5.2. Clarifying divisions of labor for governance efficiency

Functional overlaps between social work and China's indigenous neighborhood committees often lead to accountability avoidance ("kick-the-ball" syndrome), resulting in unresolved public grievances. A clear delineation of roles is imperative: committees should handle broad-based governance ("surface-level" services), while social workers provide specialized interventions ("targeted-point" services) for vulnerable groups. This complementary "surface-and-point" integration optimizes their respective strengths.

5.3. Strengthening evaluation and oversight mechanisms

As social work is still emerging in China, uneven service quality remains a risk. To safeguard public interests and ensure sustainable professionalization, the government must establish robust evaluation frameworks with multidimensional performance metrics, alongside transparent supervision systems. These mechanisms must balance practitioner protections with accountability, ensuring both service efficacy and client rights.

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