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From Management to Governance: The Transformation of Social Work Education under the New Framework of the CPC's Social Work Departments—A Case Study of the "Social Work Administration" Course

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Abstract: This paper argues for reforming China's social work education, specifically the "Social Work Administration" curriculum, to align with the new governance context and the establishment of the CPC's Social Work Departments. Current curricula, based on Western theories, inadequately prepare graduates for China's policy implementation and administrative realities. The study proposes an indigenized approach, integrating local governance knowledge and practical policy execution skills. This includes reconstructing the core knowledge framework and adopting innovative teaching methods like localized case studies and field-based learning. The aim is to cultivate social work professionals who can effectively navigate the new governance ecosystem, translate policy into services, and contribute to social work with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Social work education; Curricular reform; China; CPC social work departments

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1. Introduction

The field of social work in China is currently navigating significant changes, notably influenced by institutional reforms such as the establishment of Social Work Departments within the committees of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This development signals an evolving context for the governance and practice of social work nationwide. Such institutional shifts place new demands on the social work profession and, consequently, on the educational institutions responsible for training future practitioners. Higher education programs face the challenge of producing graduates who not only possess foundational

social work skills but are also proficient in the core administrative task, defined within the Chinese context as transforming social policy into tangible social services. This requires graduates to understand the specific administrative framework and possess the capacity for effective policy implementation within the local governance environment.

However, this evolving administrative landscape highlights a potential gap between the required professional competencies and the existing curricula in undergraduate social work education. Courses focusing on Social Work Administration are particularly relevant to this challenge. The history of social work education since the Reform and Opening-up era shows a continuous process of evolution and adaptation [1]. Yet, traditional curricula in this area often draw heavily on universal principles of organizational management derived from Western non-profit contexts. While offering a valuable foundation, this established content may be insufficiently aligned with the contemporary Chinese context. Specifically, existing syllabi might not adequately address the operational realities of working within certain governance structures, may rely on models of state-society relations that do not fully capture current dynamics, and might not clearly prepare students for their roles as facilitators of state policy within specific grassroots structures. This potential curricular lag risks producing graduates less equipped to navigate the administrative realities of the social work field in China, potentially hindering their professional effectiveness.

Addressing this potential misalignment is crucial for the continued development of social work education. This research, therefore, explores potential directions for curricular reform to better align social work administration education with the demands of the current environment. The study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to developing a more indigenous approach to Chinese social work education by examining how core curricula can adapt to the unique national administrative context. Practically, its findings offer actionable insights for universities seeking to optimize their teaching content and innovate pedagogical methods. Ultimately, this study aims to ensure that social work graduates are better prepared to effectively transform policy into services and contribute meaningfully to the modernization of social governance [2].

2. The evolving governance context and implications for professional competencies

The establishment of the CPC's Social Work Departments reflects a broader shift in the governance approach concerning social work in China, which some scholars frame as a move towards "holistic governance" to overcome previous fragmentation [2]. This shift involves integrating social work more explicitly into the national governance system, with an administrative logic increasingly aligned with strategic objectives like modernizing grassroots governance. This necessitates a synthesis of professional social work ethics and skills with an understanding of, and the capacity to work effectively within, established administrative structures [3]. Consequently, the operational environment for social service agencies is evolving, characterized by clearer top-down guidance, a stronger emphasis on policy execution, and an expectation of close collaboration with grassroots administrative bodies and other state-affiliated actors [4].

This evolving governance context directly translates into a need for enhanced or newly emphasized competencies for social work administrators. It is useful to distinguish between the "state management attribute" of the new administrative bodies and the "professional technical attribute" of social work practice. The curriculum must prepare students to navigate the intersection of these two domains. Given that a core

task of social work administration in China involves transforming policy into services, the requisite skills must align closely with this function. Graduates now require an advanced ability not only to understand social policies but also to analyze the specific context in which they operate and strategically implement them in alignment with stated objectives. They need the capacity to coordinate professional service delivery with existing administrative mechanisms, potentially leveraging these structures as resources for community engagement. Furthermore, administrators must excel as coordinators within a multi-agent governance network, adeptly mobilizing resources from diverse public and private stakeholders under the overarching guidance of the administrative framework. This demands high proficiency in administrative communication and coordination, including official reporting and navigating inter-agency processes. Essentially, the contemporary social work administrator in China operates as a professional who combines the core values of social work with the administrative capabilities necessary to function effectively within the public administration system.

3. A critical review of the existing curriculum

To substantiate the need for reform, a careful examination of the conventional Social Work Administration curriculum is essential. Analyzing mainstream textbooks reveals a curriculum often influenced by Western non-profit management theories. Mainstream textbooks frequently show a curriculum shaped by Western non-profit management theories. Pedagogical approaches frequently emphasize efficiency, accountability, and market-oriented strategies rooted in the principles of New Public Management (NPM) and managerialism. This model, designed to cultivate a professional manager for an internally-focused, third-sector organization, has been critiqued in the Chinese context as a form of "administration-led neo-managerialism," where marketized means are used to achieve administrative ends [5]. While providing a necessary foundation in general management principles, the theoretical premises and practical applications of such an approach are increasingly insufficient for the primary task of social work administration in China – transforming policy into services within a specific state-led context. This disconnect stems from fundamental misalignments in perspective, content coverage, and practical application.

3.1. The challenge of theoretical bias

A significant challenge lies in the pervasive theoretical bias towards a Western civil society model, which often assumes a clearer separation between state, market, and society than may exist in the Chinese context. This perspective struggles to adequately theorize or explain the administrative reality where social organizations frequently function as partners or extensions of the state's service delivery system and operate within a distinct governance framework. The historical academic context of social work in China has long grappled with defining its relationship with state functions, famously summarized by the phrase "civil affairs work is social work with Chinese characteristics" [1]. Current textbooks may lack the specific conceptual tools needed to analyze these complex "state-society" interactions or the role of specific administrative structures unique to China. This theoretical orientation, while valuable in other contexts, leaves students potentially ill-equipped to understand the power dynamics, resource flows, and accountability structures they will encounter.

3.2. Critical content gaps and omissions

Perhaps the most significant flaw is the omission or inadequate coverage of content directly addressing the operational realities of policy transformation within the current governance architecture. Students may graduate with critical knowledge blind spots concerning the very systems and processes central to their future work. For instance, as seen in the structure of conventional textbooks, curricula might offer limited discussion of the practical mechanics of grassroots governance models, such as grid management, or the specific functions and operational protocols of key administrative bodies like Sub-district Offices or Community Party-Mass Service Centers. Understanding these structures is vital for social workers acting as "collaborative brokers" at the community level.

Similarly, while traditional fundraising techniques might be covered, the complex political economy and administrative procedures of government procurement—often the primary funding source—are frequently given insufficient attention. Studies on government purchasing of social work services have highlighted the tensions that can arise between administrative goals and professional practice, which students must be prepared to navigate [5]. Students may not learn how to interpret policy-laden project guidelines, write proposals that align with government objectives, navigate multi-stage application processes, or manage public funds under strict auditing requirements.

3.3. The issue of decontextualized application

Finally, the practical application elements of the curriculum, such as case studies and examples, are often outdated or decontextualized. They might portray scenarios involving small, independent NGOs securing foundation grants, which differs significantly from the contemporary reality where many organizations operate as partners within government structures, executing state-funded projects requiring extensive bureaucratic coordination. These traditional cases fail to prepare students for the scale, complexity, and administrative intricacies of much current social work practice in China. They do not adequately illustrate the processes of inter-agency communication, policy alignment, and demonstrating public value that are now paramount for successful administration.

4. An optimization path for the curriculum

Addressing these deep-seated inadequacies requires a systematic re-engineering of the Social Work Administration curriculum. The optimization path proposed here is holistic, encompassing a revamped guiding philosophy, a restructured knowledge framework, and innovative pedagogical strategies designed to prepare students for the realities of practice in the contemporary Chinese context.

4.1. Reorienting the guiding philosophy: Towards indigenization

The reform must begin with a fundamental philosophical reorientation, moving decisively from a model primarily based on theoretical "transplantation" from Western contexts to one centered on "indigenization" and "domestication." The curriculum needs to be authentically rooted in China's specific national context, cultivating professionals who understand the development trajectory of "social work with Chinese characteristics." This involves framing administrative expertise not merely as a set of generic management techniques, but as a crucial competency for effectively participating in and contributing to the modernization of the national governance system. As Zhang (2025) argues, the value, content, and methods of social work

must undergo a transformation to adapt to the new era, with a "people-centered" discourse enriching its public value [6]. The goal is to produce graduates who see administration as the practical means by which social policy is translated into effective services that meet societal needs within the established framework.

4.2. Reconstructing the core knowledge framework

The curriculum's content must be substantially reconstructed to equip students for the primary task of policy transformation. This requires strategically integrating essential new knowledge domains while thoroughly overhauling and re-contextualizing existing administrative topics.

4.2.1. Integrating foundational knowledge domains

Two foundational knowledge domains, often underrepresented currently, must be woven into the fabric of the curriculum. The first is a sophisticated understanding of the unique governance environment and administrative logic of Chinese social work. This moves students beyond generic organizational theories to immerse them in the specific institutional landscape they will inhabit. Instruction should focus on the tangible administrative reality, exploring the practical evolution of state-society relations and how this dynamic shapes the mission, funding, and daily operational choices of social organizations. A key concept here is navigating "dual lines of accountability"—balancing professional ethics and service user needs with the policy directives and performance indicators of supervising government bodies. Through relevant case studies, students should analyze how successful organizations synergize their professional missions with broader, state-led community initiatives, cultivating an administrative mindset capable of strategic positioning within this ecosystem.

The second essential theme is the practical knowledge of contemporary architecture and the practice of grassroots social governance. This domain shifts from the "why" to the "how," serving as a practical guide to the specific administrative systems graduates will encounter. Instruction should demystify the mechanics of key governance structures, such as the urban grid management system, including its structure, information flow, and data systems. Critically, this theme must explicitly define the evolving role of the social worker within this system—not merely as a passive service provider, but as a proactive "collaborative broker" and facilitator of community problem-solving. This knowledge area must include a practical introduction to key administrative bodies like the Sub-district Office and the Community Party-Mass Service Center, focusing on their work cultures and collaborative protocols. Embedding these topics ensures graduates possess the concrete, operational knowledge required to navigate these frameworks effectively.

4.2.2. Revamping existing curricular themes

Beyond integrating new knowledge, the reform must involve a profound modernization of traditional administrative themes, reframing them through the lens of policy transformation. Core topics like human resource management, financial management, and organizational evaluation remain essential but require substantive expansion and re-contextualization.

The theme of Human Resource Management, for instance, must evolve beyond conventional non-profit recruitment based solely on professional merit. While competence is vital, the curriculum must address the specific talent requirements for implementing public policy within administrative structures. Instruction should guide students on how organizations assess candidates not only for technical skills but also for their understanding of the public administrative system and capacity to work effectively within it. Crucially, it

must incorporate detailed analysis of official career pathways emerging within the public sector, such as the community worker track, equipping students to plan careers within this dominant employment structure.

Similarly, the teaching of Financial Management requires a significant strategic shift. While traditional market-based fundraising techniques remain relevant, the curriculum must be substantially updated to provide a major focus on the intricacies of Government Procurement and Project Management. This encompasses the entire lifecycle: interpreting complex, policy-laden project guidelines; writing proposals that are both methodologically sound and strategically aligned with government goals; navigating multi-stage bureaucratic application processes; and managing public funds with strict accountability and compliance with rigorous auditing requirements. Understanding this process is critical, as government funding is a primary resource for many agencies.

Finally, the concept of Organizational Evaluation needs to be fundamentally broadened. Traditional curricula often focus on internal management tools measuring efficiency (e.g., cost-per-client) or client satisfaction, aimed at demonstrating effectiveness to private funders. The revamped curriculum must introduce a more encompassing concept of "Public Value and Governance Contribution Evaluation." Students must learn that in the current environment, organizations are increasingly evaluated by governmental supervisors based on a different set of criteria. Therefore, the course must teach them how to measure and report on critical indicators such as tangible contributions to local social stability, effectiveness in executing government policy directives, success in mobilizing community participation, and satisfaction ratings from the supervising government body itself. This reframes evaluation from a technical task to a strategic function essential for demonstrating public value and securing legitimacy within the governance ecosystem.

4.3. Innovating pedagogical methods for deeper learning

To effectively deliver this reoriented content and bridge the gap between theory and the complex realities of administrative practice, pedagogical methods must move beyond static, lecture-based approaches towards more dynamic and engaged strategies.

A cornerstone of this innovation should be the development and extensive use of a localized case study library. These cases, ideally created through collaboration between academics, local administrative bodies, and leading social organizations, must reflect the current administrative environment. They should present complex, multi-layered scenarios that foreground the challenges of policy transformation, resource mobilization within bureaucratic structures, inter-agency coordination, and the ethical dilemmas that arise when balancing professional values with administrative requirements. Analyzing such cases allows students to grapple with ambiguity and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills relevant to their future roles.

This case-based learning should be strongly complemented by structured and purposeful field-based learning experiences that go beyond traditional, often ad hoc, internships. Universities should establish formal partnerships with key entities in the local governance landscape, such as sub-district offices, community service centers, and benchmark social organizations known for effective government collaboration. Within these partnerships, structured learning modules can be designed where students undertake specific observational or participatory tasks. These might include mapping local governance networks and resource flows, analyzing the implementation process of a specific local policy, shadowing key administrative personnel, or participating in community needs assessments conducted within the state-led

framework. Such structured immersion provides invaluable firsthand exposure to the operational realities of social work administration.

Finally, integrating practitioners' wisdom through initiatives like a "practitioner-in-residence" program can significantly enrich the learning experience. Instead of relying solely on occasional guest lectures, inviting experienced administrators from local government, relevant departments, or exemplary social organizations to spend concentrated time (e.g., a week or two) on campus offers deeper engagement. These practitioners could co-teach specific sessions focusing on practical skills like proposal writing for government grants or navigating administrative communication protocols, run intensive workshops simulating real-world administrative challenges, or provide mentorship and career guidance grounded in their extensive experience. This direct interaction provides students with access to the tacit knowledge, practical nuances, and contextual understanding that textbooks alone cannot convey.

5. Conclusion and future outlook

This study has addressed a critical challenge in Chinese social work education: the need for curricular reform in Social Work Administration to align with an evolving governance context marked by the establishment of the CPC's Social Work Departments. This institutional shift underscores what is defined within the field as the primary function of social work administration in China: the complex process of transforming social policy into tangible social services. The paper argued that existing curricula, often grounded in Western non-profit management theories, may inadequately prepare students for this specific task within China's unique administrative framework [5].

Consequently, this research has articulated a conceptual framework for this curricular reform, advocating for a three-pronged approach. First, it proposes a fundamental shift in pedagogical philosophy towards indigenization, rooting the curriculum authentically in China's national context. Second, it calls for a reorientation of the core knowledge framework to center on the task of policy execution, integrating foundational knowledge of the local governance environment and substantively revamping traditional administrative topics to align them with the demands of policy implementation. Third, the paper emphasizes the need to innovate teaching methodologies through more engaged pedagogical methods, such as localized case studies and structured field-based learning, to bridge the gap between academic theory and administrative practice.

Looking forward, it is crucial to recognize that the curricular reform outlined here represents an ongoing process rather than a final solution. The specific roles and practices of the newly established administrative structures are still evolving, and social work education must remain dynamic and responsive. This highlights several vital avenues for future research. Empirical studies are needed to systematically investigate the real-world impact of the new administrative context on the operations, funding, and accountability of social service organizations [3]. Longitudinal research tracking the careers of graduates from reformed programs would also provide valuable insights into pedagogical effectiveness. Furthermore, a concerted effort is required to develop a new generation of indigenous teaching materials, including textbooks and localized case studies that reflect the complexities of policy transformation in the contemporary Chinese context [6]. As social work becomes further integrated within China's national governance system, continuous scholarly inquiry and pedagogical innovation are paramount to ensuring the profession remains relevant and effective in contributing to social development.

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Disclosure statement

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