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Building state capacity for welfare governance: The pathway and development of child welfare system and social work in China

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ABSTRACT

China's dramatic socioeconomic transformation after the reform and opening up, coincided with changes in state-family relationship, has resulted in a large number of children at risk of care. In the past three decades, child welfare has been highly concerned by the government and society, and the child welfare system has substantially developed in the direction of establishing a moderately universal system. In this process, the development of child welfare and social work has shown a mutually reinforcing trend. This includes the professionalisation of child welfare services, the professional training of child welfare workers and the advancement of child welfare policies. The governance of child welfare is an essential component of national social governance. Its future development should be oriented towards a developmental and holistic approach of governance, and social work as an important institutional actor plays a critical role in promoting good governance of child welfare and beyond.

中国改革以来的经济社会转型伴随着国家和家庭之间关系的变迁,使得许多儿童面临照顾困境。在过去三十年里,儿童福利得到政府与社会的广泛关注,儿童福利制度也朝适度普惠方向获得很大发展。在这一过程中,儿童福利与社会工作的发展相互促进与增强,体现在儿童福利服务的专业化传递,儿童福利的人才队伍建设以及儿童福利政策的进步等不同的方面。儿童福利的治理本身是国家社会治理的有机构成,儿童福利的未来发展应当迈向更具发展性和整体性的治理,而社会工作专业作为一种新的制度行动者能够在推动儿童福利的善治中扮演重要角色。

KEYWORDS

State-family relationship;
child welfare; governance;
social work;
professionalisation

Introduction

Economic globalisation and the accompanying increasing social complexity have brought more uncertainty and social risks, and its impact has been dramatic. While China's rapid economic growth since the late 1970s has significantly improved people's living standards, it also resulted in enlarged income and wealth inequality, more unstable social structure, and even the emergence of social conflicts. Vulnerable children and families in this process have been disproportionately affected. Building the governance system and capacity has become a real challenge for the Chinese government, particularly

in how to effectively address the poverty and inequality issues through enhancing social welfare provision. Since Xi's administration in 2013, alleviating poverty and building a well-off society has been put priority in the policy agenda, with particular emphasis on expanding welfare provision for the most vulnerable groups. Policy focuses are not only reflected in the redistribution of fiscal resources but more importantly, the adjustment the way of governance in addressing complex poverty issues and social problems. Strengthening the social welfare system is viewed as an indivisible part of the overall governance framework in a vision to achieve sustainable development while maintaining socio-political stability.

China's socio-economic development has had a profound impact on children. While children's well-being has improved significantly in terms of multiple indicators of survival and development, a certain group of those from poor and disadvantaged families are still faced with challenges in realising their development potential. In recent years, some incidents of violence and injuries of vulnerable children, especially from rural areas, have caused widespread public and government attention, and higher requirements have been put forward to child welfare policy-making and its implementation system. The recent decade has witnessed a great expansion of the scope of child welfare from ensuring children basic living security to facilitating their healthy development, including broadening their access to public benefits such as education, medical care, rehabilitation as well as protection services. Meanwhile, the administration of child welfare system has been further enhanced for more efficient and integrative service delivery. In January 2019, a new department of child welfare of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) was established and regarded as a milestone of the development of the child welfare system in China.

More policy focuses on child welfare signifies the state's increased responsibility to children in need amid state-family relationship changes, and at the same time to strengthen its governance capacity in welfare provision. The concept of governance by de-constructing the conventional government paradigm emphasises multiple subjects' participation in policy formulation and service delivery (Jessop 1999; Rhodes 1996). Within the governance framework, welfare provisions do not rest solely on the authority and sanctions of government, and the co-production of various stakeholders is seen as better respond to the citizen's differential needs (Bovaird et al. 2015). The goal of governance is to establish an effective mechanism for multiple actors to function. As the "natural" family responsibility of child care is increasingly challenged, the state's governance capacity in the field of child welfare is reflected in how to balance the division of responsibilities among the state, market and the family in order to strengthen the caregiving and protection of children's well-being (Daly and Lewis 2000). It is worth noting that the social work profession as a new institutional actor in China plays a vital role in welfare governance. The development of the profession is viewed as part of the government's efforts to facilitate the modernisation of governance system. This article discusses the development of the child welfare system from the perspective of welfare governance, specifically the role of state and social organisations in this process. In addition, based on the practice of social work participation in child welfare provision, this article analyses how social work can contribute to the improvement of the child welfare system in the context of state-family changes.

Welfare governance within the state-family relationship

Governance, in its broad sense, refers to any form and process of governing, and typically captures a mode of interconnected networks of organisations in policy decision-making and service delivery (Jessop 1999). The concept of governance is useful to analyse better and classify how multiple entities contribute to the governing of welfare provision. Welfare governance suggests that combination of multiple-agency participation in welfare provisions such as the state, the market, the family and the voluntary sector is more effective in responding to the diverse welfare needs and then achieving a sustainable welfare system (Verschraegen 2015). Meanwhile, welfare governance practice also reproduces the subjects it needs for more effective governance and can be seen as a part of the state's governmentality system implied by Foucault's analysis (Jessop 1999). In the context of developed countries, the theory of governance is viewed as representing a set of a proposal to account for the changes of a modern welfare state (Gilbert 2002; Newman 2001).

Drawn on the perspective of governance, researchers in the Chinese context emphasise reflection and transcendence of the traditional government paradigm in an attempt to enhance the state's governance system and capacities. On the one hand, welfare governance signifies the government's increased concerns about people's livelihood needs, especially in resolving "the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life", as remarked in the 19th CPC Congress report (Xinhuanet 2017). On the other hand, welfare governance also plays a vital role in soothing social conflict through expanding welfare provision to the disadvantaged social members. In this regard, the government strives to establish a cooperative mechanism with diverse social entities in tackling social problems.

Nevertheless, the existing studies on welfare governance in the Chinese context is mainly located within the state-society framework, and the family dimension is often overlooked. In the social policy literature, there has long been the centre of focus on the mechanism of redistribution, including the social security system, eligibility of welfare as well as and the impact on income (Bettio and Plantenga 2004). Scholarly attention is largely directed towards issues related to market-state relations and labour market participation, whereas the discussion of state-family relationship has been limited. With the rise of a gender perspective and the transformation of the labour market, the family's natural responsibility for care is no longer taken for granted (Tronto 1993). The diversification of family forms, population changes, and the increasing employment rate of women have made family care more and more public issues. The family, the market and the state need a new consensus on the commitment of child care responsibilities. Greater attention has been paid to promoting family policies, and supportive services and they have shaped the way and consequences of welfare governance (Bettio and Plantenga 2004). For China, the reform and opening up that began in the 1970s brought about economic changes and in the meantime profoundly affected the relationship between families and the state, including the division of responsibilities for child care. In the context of urban and rural socioeconomic changes, the issue of children has become increasingly more prominent from a family's internal affairs into a social policy issue worthy of attention.

Vulnerable children in the socioeconomic transition

China has a strong Confucian familism tradition in which child-rearing is primarily the responsibility of the family or the clan community. The division of labour and norms of care responsibilities is based on the cultural tradition of intergenerational reciprocity. The state does not inadvertently intervene in the private sphere of childcare. In the Mao's era of the collective planned economy, however, a socialist family-style welfare system was established. Women's full-time labour market participation was prioritised in order for building a new socialist society (Connelly et al. 2018). The state childcare was provided through *Dan Wei* system of work units in urban cities and collective commune system in rural areas despite variations of childcare qualities across different sectors and regions (Zhang and Maclean 2012).

After the reform and opening up, the economic transition and demographic changes have had an intertwined effect on the way of child caregiving. With the release of the population mobility restriction, the massive rural-to-urban migration has profoundly changed the childhood situation. Rural farmers tend to choose a livelihood strategy that combines wage employment in cities and household farming in rural, ensuring the improvement of economic conditions and the smooth progress of family reproduction along with family life course transitions (Chen and Korinek 2010). Under this type of risk-aversion strategy, young adults -mostly men – go to urban cities to work, but leaving family caring burden on the shoulder of the wife or the elderly in the countryside. As a consequence, a large number of children are left in rural hometowns in the lack of adequate parental care.

Changes in population and family structure have exacerbated childcare problems. Since the issue of the one-child policy in the 1980s, China's population fertility rate has continued to decline (Guo and Gu 2014). The Chinese family, in general, becomes nuclear in structure and diverse in form. The household size averaged 5.3 before the 1950s but declined to 3.96, 3.10, and 3.02 in 1990, 2000, and 2010, respectively (Lin 2018). Meanwhile, family structures have become more fluid and unstable. It should be noted that the type of skip-generation families has seen rapid expansion in size. According to the 2010 census data, a household consisting of grandparents and grandchildren with one generation missing in between, or so-called "generation-skipping household", accounted for 2.26% and was 3.37 times as many as in 1990 (Hu and Peng 2015). A significant increase in the divorce rate has also been presented. A study has shown that the crude divorce rate, calculated as the number of divorces per 1000 people, increased significantly from 0.69 in 1990 to 2.13 in 2011 (Lu and Wang 2013). Research has revealed the impact of rural-to-urban migration, especially more participation of rural women in the formal labour market, on marriage instability (Du 2010).

Transitions of family structure have resulted in weakening ability of family in caring for children, causing risks and even crises in children's life course development. These children include orphans, de facto orphans (*shishi wuren fuyang ertong*), left-behind children, migrant children, and children with disabilities, and so on. According to official data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), the number of orphans was 305,000 by 2018, and the number of de facto orphans was estimated to be around 500,000 by 2018 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, PRC 2018, 2019a). In addition, there were around 6.79 million children who had been left behind in rural areas in 2018. Left-behind children were

officially defined as rural children aged between 0 and 16 whose parents were migrant workers or who had one migrant worker parent, and another one was incapable of guardianship (Xinhuanet 2018). Though no accurate data are available for children with disabilities, it is estimated that there are around 5.04 million children with disabilities under the age of 18 (UNICEF China 2018).

Children in vulnerable status often suffer multiple deprivations. Children's multi-dimensional poverty in terms of nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection is still a big challenge in China. Compared with the poverty of adults, child poverty has devastating and long-term effects on children's future life chances (UNICEF 2016). Based on survey data from five provinces' child welfare demonstration areas, Wang, Zhou, and Shang (2015) estimated that China's multi-dimensional poverty rate for children was 14.29% in 2012. Among them, education is the most serious dimension of deprivation, followed by the dimension of survival and participation. Children with disabilities, children affected by AIDS, and children from ethnic minorities are the three most affected groups of children (Wang, Zhou, and Shang 2015). Similarly, using China Health and Nutrition Survey data, Qi and Wu (2016)'s study found that 8% of urban children suffered from two and more deprivations by 2011. Lacking parental care is a critical risk factor that leads to children's multi-dimensional deprivation and affects their future education and career development. A considerable body of research has revealed the negative effect of inadequate parenting on rural left-behind children. For example, studies have shown that left-behind children tend to have lower educational aspiration and are more likely to drop out of school, particularly in the secondary educational level (Chen, Yang, and Ren 2015; Wen and Lin 2012). The vulnerable status of early life stage often generates cumulative disadvantage for children's life course development. In the absence of external social intervention mechanisms, children may be trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty through intergenerational transmission (Harper, Marcus, and Moore 2003).

In sum, China's unprecedented economic and social changes have brought new social risks to the growth and development of children. The traditional family or community support system faces loopholes and requires readjusting the boundaries of child care responsibilities between families and the state. The government has the duty to be more involved in providing support for family child-rearing, particularly for the most disadvantaged children and families.

The pathway to a moderately universal child welfare system

The child welfare system in China has witnessed a process of gradual improvement in conjunction with socioeconomic transitions. In Mao's era, when most of the people were organised under the collectivist planned economy, the number of vulnerable children was relatively small. The child welfare was not an independent policy field. Since the market-oriented reform, however, the connotation of child welfare, its target group and the way of providing services have undergone prominent changes. The Minimum Living Security Scheme that began in 1999 covers children in poor families. In the Child Welfare Institute, children's rehabilitation, education and social services are introduced, and more emphasis is placed on the improving service qualities. Policy attention has also directed to street children, children affected by AIDS and children with severe disabilities.

Nonetheless, for a long time after the reform, the child welfare system is still underdeveloped. Child welfare policies and welfare administration systems have not been sufficiently emphasised from top to bottom.

From the year 2010 onward, the progress of strengthening the child welfare system in China has accelerated. The year 2010 is considered to be a milestone in the development of child welfare policy. The General Office under the State Council in that year enacted a policy on “Suggestions Concerning Strengthening Orphans Protection”, the first national subsidy programme applicable to all orphans in the country in China. In 2013, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued “The Notice on the Pilot Work on the Construction of a Moderately Universal Child Welfare System” and proposed to establish a basic living security scheme for the most vulnerable children. In June 2016, the State Council further issued “The Opinions on Strengthening the Work of Children with Difficult Conditions”. In this policy document, the classification of children from all levels of difficulties was defined at the national level. Other targeted assistance programmes for children in need have also enacted. In 2018, the government announced the establishment of rehabilitation assistance programme, providing cash and services assistance for children with disabilities and their families. In 2019, the orphan subsidy programme expanded to children who are in fact lacking parental care or “de facto orphans”. Additionally, the protective elements of child welfare-related policy systems that prevent children from neglect, abuse and violence are also increasingly emphasised although in its initial stage of development (Man et al. 2017).

Along with the introduction of child-related assistance programmes, the administrative system for child welfare services has also been strengthened. For a long time, the state, mainly through the MCA, was the sole welfare provider for children who were orphaned, abandoned, or disabled, and the government had established state-run children’s welfare institutes to provide child welfare services. With the expansion of child welfare scope, other government sectors have been involved in the provision of children’s services. The government has placed increasing emphasis on the establishment of a multi-sectoral coordination mechanism, especially at the township and community levels. Meanwhile, the government has invested in developing a system and workforce for the delivery of community child welfare services. According to the official statistics of the MCA, as of the end of 2018, the number of community child welfare director, also known as Barefoot Social Workers, had reached about 665,000 among which 45,000 served in townships and sub-district administrative units, and nearly 620,000 were in villages (China Daily 2019). The effort to integrate children’s services is also reflected in the higher administrative level. In 2019, a new division of the Child Welfare of the Ministry of Civil Affairs was established. This is the first separate high-level department on child welfare from the MCA and is expected to help to resolve the fragmentation of the existed child welfare system.

Overall, China’s child welfare system has made significant progress. More vulnerable children were covered by welfare service programmes. Nonetheless, the child welfare service system reflects significant urban-rural disparities. In the context of internal migration, the main focus of rural system is on welfare services for left-behind children and children in extreme vulnerable situation. More service programmes are aimed at alleviating the negative impact of the lack of parental care on children’s survival and development. In urban areas, while the welfare needs of migrant children and families are

typically the focus of the system, increasingly more policy attention has been given to the balance between work and family caregiving, with the release of two-child policy in 2015. Many dual-career families in cities are facing tremendous childcare pressure. This has caused concerns that the population policy might not be able to boost fertility if lacking a strong childcare support system. In addition, child abuse and the impact of domestic violence on children has also received mounting attention in urban cities.

Increasingly, child welfare in China has become an independent policy arena, and the government has reached a consensus to build a moderately universal system for children in need. Nonetheless, the child welfare system is still largely residual with more policy focuses directed to meet children's urgent needs for survival rather than their long-term development. Moreover, child welfare has not yet formed an integrated service delivery system. Although the government has endeavoured to strengthen the community child welfare workforce, most workers are part-time and not professionally trained. The governance capacity of the child welfare system needs to be further improved.

Participation of social work in the governance of child welfare

Social work development and child welfare

Social work, as a key profession in the field of child welfare has presented a unique development trajectory in China's distinctive institutional context. Before the establishment of the Communist China, the social work profession was already involved in providing child welfare services. The educators in the Department of Sociology and Social Services of Yanking University before the 1950s were particularly concerned about women and children in need. For instance, Lei Jieqiong, one founder of social work education in early China, taught the "Child Welfare" course and supervised students' field practice at the Children's Welfare Institute such as *Xiang Shan* Children's home in the 1940s (Wang 2004). Early social work educators have made their efforts to develop child welfare curriculum and practice models in China. As a profession and discipline in the university, social work was cancelled almost right after the establishment of the communist regime. The participation of social work in child welfare was since then largely missing; there was no stable and professional workforce for delivering child welfare services.

It was not until the end of the 1980s that social work education programmes first restored in Peking University, which was driven largely by the government's intention to professionalise its manpower for social service delivery (Yuen-Tsang and Wang 2008). Since then, the education programmes have proliferated for over 30 years, especially after the year of 2006 when the goal of building a large social work talent team was proposed in the communiqué of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee. As of 2018, there were 349 universities offering undergraduate in social work in Mainland China, of which 155 have MSW programmes (Ministry of Civil Affairs, PRC 2019b). In addition to training social workers through formal university education, the development of social work in China has adopted a localised strategy. The staffs from the civil affair system, especially those working at the community level, are encouraged to obtain professional certificates through training in social work expertise and become a social worker. In 2011, the MCA proposed a ten-year plan to promote the construction of

a social work talent team, setting a goal to have 1.45 million social workers by 2020. The most recent data show that 439,266 individuals held the certificates of assistant social workers and social workers nationwide and the total number of social work talents was over 1.2 million by 2018 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, PRC 2019b).

Social work has been involved in the provision of child welfare services in different ways, and the government purchase service system provides a major opportunity for social work's participation. The central government has allocated specific funds every year for service purchase through the request for tenders (RFT), and a large number of contracting-out programmes are in the field of children and family services. According to public data, in 2018, the total amount of funds for the purchase of children's professional services by the central government was 55.76 million yuan, accounting for 30.81% of the total purchase funds in the year or 1.41 times that of 2013. The number of service items in the children's services field is 148 or 1.69 times that of 2014 (China Philanthropy Research Institute, and UNICEF China 2019). The professional services undertaken by social work agencies, a particular type of professional non-profit organisations, covered a wide range of children's services, including but not limited to services to left-behind children, disabled children, migrant children, orphans and children with severe illness. Many local governments budgeted annual funding to purchase children's social services from social work agencies or general NPOs. In the case that the child welfare system remains underdeveloped, the professional service provision through service contracting mechanism is viewed as an effective supplement to the state-run child welfare services.

The role of social work in child welfare and challenges ahead

The development of social work has provided momentous and substantial professional support to the child welfare provision. Social work's role in child welfare is mainly reflected in delivering professional services, promoting the professionalisation of the child welfare workforce, and advocating policy formulation.

First of all, the application of professional concepts and methods of social work has improved the quality of child welfare services. Many professionally-led innovative practice models have been developed. For example, from 2010, UNICEF and the Ministry of Civil Affairs established a child welfare demonstration zone project. This project has greatly expanded the accessibility of welfare services for children in need by establishing community child service centres and using social work concepts and methods to train front-line child welfare workers. The community-oriented approach supporting child protection services has been adopted in many places. It is considered a more desirable model for social work with children at the community level. Likewise, social work has been adopted in agencies and areas such as child welfare homes, community corrections and rehabilitation of children with disabilities in the purpose of improving its service quality. Participation of social work has changed the traditional top-down administrative way in service delivery by placing more weight on the protection of children's social rights and the effectiveness of relevant interventions, and ultimately benefits the well-being of children and their families.

Moreover, social work has engaged proactively in strengthening the professionalisation of children's social service workforce. Professional social service workforce is an

imperative element of child welfare system (UNICEF 2019). Child welfare provision in China involves multiple government sectors and agencies, such as the Ministry of Civil Affairs, All Women's Federation, the Communist Youth League, the Ministry of Justice, etc., consisting of a large number of children's social service workers. In recent years, the government has become more aware of the urgent need for a professional workforce for the healthy development of the child welfare system, especially the need for workers trained in social work. Some government departments involving children's services have formulated plans to train professional social workers and offer related job positions. For instance, the Communist Youth League issued "The Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Professional Talents in Social Work for Adolescent Affairs" in 2014 and set the goal to provide 100,000 social workers in the field of adolescent work. The Ministry of Justice has also announced a plan to develop social workers in the field of adolescent and youth community correction. Many state-run Child Welfare Institutes are required to increase the proportion of professional social workers in its workforce. Finally, the role of social work is also reflected in the advancement of child welfare policies. "The Law of the People's Republic of China against Domestic Violence provides specific responsibilities to social work with regards the protection of children, which is regarded as a milestone for publicising social work's role in child protection and family services (Zhao, Hämäläinen, and Chen 2017). Another example is the advocacy of new policies on the construction of rural community child welfare service systems. Researchers also call for more policy-making and service planning based on evidence-based practice from front-line social work practice.

While the critical role of social work's involvement in child welfare has gained more consensus, the way toward professionalisation is not straightforward without difficulties and barriers. Up to today China is awaiting a systematic institutional framework for child welfare and protection, and the institutional role of the social work profession in this framework is not clearly defined yet. Unlike western countries that stresses the building of a strong legal protection system for children, China's child welfare system focuses more on basic living security. Its response to children's multi-dimensional needs and the provision of social services to children and families usually lag behind, which tends to restrict the function that professional social work can actually perform. Related to this, the intergovernmental coordination of children's welfare services persists to be fragmental. An effective operating system on detecting, reporting and responding to children's issues is rarely well-developed in most places. In addition, the professional development of social work is inadequate and unbalanced between urban and rural areas and across regions, which negatively affects the professionalisation of child welfare. While social work agencies and professionals are relatively abundant in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, well-trained social workers and professional training opportunities manifest deficiency in many areas where child services are most needed. Taken together, the professionalisation of children's social service workforce has a long way to go.

Toward a holistic approach to the governance of child welfare system

The child welfare system in China reaches a critical crossroad of development. The emergence of children's problems closely connects to socioeconomic transformation

and changes in population and family structure. Children's issues should be better understood and addressed in the context of the overall economic and social development. A holistic approach toward good governance of child welfare provision is worthy of attention and discussion.

Against the background of new socioeconomic development and family changes, a holistic view of child welfare governance is imperative. A holistic approach to welfare governance views the service delivery process as an interlinked and integrated system (Kagan and Neville 1993; Perri6 et al. 2002). Over the past decade, influenced by the New Public Management argument, the government's purchase of services is considered to be an effective mechanism to break the boundaries between government departments and promote more flexible and diversified service delivery. However, in the framework of service-contracting, the delivery of child welfare services receives criticism for its superficiality, with more attention to the quantitative indicators (e.g. number and frequency) of service activities than to the accomplishment of children's social rights (Marwell and Calabrese 2014). Fundamental structural problems on child welfare and protection are often marginalised. Governance in the field of child welfare should transcend the discourse of new public management and move towards a more holistic approach that can better protect children's rights and motivate children's social investment in the context of socioeconomic transition. Meanwhile, it also requires child welfare services to be delivered more effectively as a response to the multiple needs of children and families.

The holistic approach is congruent with social investment or developmental orientation in child welfare. The social investment reflects the future orientation of child welfare and protection, emphasising child-centred development and integrated service delivery (Parton 2006). Social investment-oriented child welfare is not just child protection in a narrow sense but committed to achieving equality of life-long opportunities for children (Conley 2010). For the development of China's child welfare in China, the perspective of social investment policies implies at least three aspects of particular importance. First of all, legislation and institutional design for the protection of children's rights need to be further strengthened. Eliminating multi-dimensional child poverty through cash or in-kind assistance for vulnerable children and families remains the key to policies to minimise the negative impact of poverty on children. Second, a universal child allowance policy should be implemented for children's long-term social protection. Presently major countries and regions in the world have had various forms of child allowance policies. While traditional child allowance is presented as family wage and compensation for the loss of mother's labour, the new child allowance policies alike put more emphasis on child-centred social protection and investment. It reflects a renewed social contract between the state and the child/family (Barrientos et al. 2013; Curley and Sherraden 2000). Third, it is critical to develop and implement supportive policies and services for children and families, broadening children and their family the access to education, nutrition, healthcare, housing and other basic public services. The family support policy assumes that children's problems arise from family dysfunction or inadequacy. Policy and service interventions should be directed towards providing stronger support for families to raise children and the partnership building between the state and families. Due to the space limitation, these three aspects are not fully discussed here. However, it should be noted that a developmental and holistic approach

of children welfare requires a systematic policy framework for the sake of children's lifelong development needs.

Moreover, a holistic approach toward welfare governance stresses integrative delivery of children's services, including building a strong state-family partnership. The issue of child welfare is often complex, involving multiple needs of children and families, and thus requires coordination among different sectors and professions. Contrast to the requirement, the delivery system has long been fragmental, especially at the community level. Motivated by the incidents of left-behind children's injuries in recent years, the government has endeavoured to build an inter-ministerial joint meeting system for children's affairs at all levels, especially at the community in rural areas, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. Nonetheless, as the government's financial and resource allocation is still carried out in terms of a particular departmental channel, it is often difficult to achieve true cross-sectoral and inter-agency cooperation. Children in vulnerable status in some cases lost in the gaps among different sectors. The newly established department of child welfare is expected to play a pivotal role in coordinating different policies, resources and stakeholders. China has a strong family cultural tradition in which parents' rights and responsibilities for child care are fundamental. However, in the context of the changing family structures and functions, it is imperative for the state and the family to build a partnership relationship in caring for children. Family policies and services, such as extended childcare leave, gender-sensitive and family-friendly employment policies, parenting service programmes, etc., are critical to support family caregiving. The community can be a place where multiple child welfare provision subjects' function as an integrative system. A platform of information sharing, common funding pools and inter-professional cooperation mechanisms for child welfare provision at the community level would be very useful, e.g. a community one-stop service centre that can help match resources with children's needs in a better way. All in all, China's child welfare system is stepping in a stage featured with more comprehensive and profound development. Responding to children's needs should be seen as an indivisible part of overall national development and governance.

Social work acts on the boundary between different systems and is often viewed as an "in-between" profession incongruent with the profession's guiding principle of "whole-person" and "person-in-environment" (Abbott 1995; Ungar 2002). Given the nature of the profession, social work should be assigned more significant roles in the process of developing a holistic child welfare system. Social workers serve as a point of contact for vulnerable children and families through linking resources from differentiated government and non-government sectors. Nonetheless, to achieve its mission and goal in providing services, social work's involvement in child welfare should build on evidence-based practice by testing the effectiveness of policy ideas and interventions through continuous social innovation in the practice. In this regard, some recent studies based on intervention programmes such as community-based child protection, child development accounts (CDAs), and social information-processing skills of children are good references (Deng 2019; Lei et al. 2019; Wu et al. 2016), but more rigorous and informative research on innovative practices are still deadly in need. Last but not least, the delivery of welfare services is incomplete without the voice and engagement of children and families. The social worker as the agent of change is mainly responsible for assessing, serving, and

monitoring children's needs. In this sense, professional training of the values, knowledge and abilities of social work practitioners is the key to the effectiveness of service delivery.

Conclusions and discussions

The United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) declares that every child has a protected right to be free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. To approach this goal, it is obligatory for the state to establish a strong child welfare and protection system to prevent all children from poverty and threats, and timely respond to their needs and concerns. In the past three decades, China's child welfare system has developed substantially. Significantly more children in need have been covered by the system, and the governance of child welfare provision has been gradually strengthened. The emergence of children's problems is closely associated with the transition in families, communities and society as a whole, among which the change of state-family relationship is a critical background. China's child welfare system does not follow the child protection approach in the narrow sense as in many Western countries but instead pays more attention to respond to the welfare needs of the most vulnerable children and families. China's dramatic socio-economic transition has generated urgent demands for enhancing the state's governance system and capacity. The development of the social welfare system, including child welfare, has occupied more important place increasingly within the overall governance framework.

The development of the social work profession can be seen as a proactive response to the transformation of social governance in China. The participation of social work promotes the redefinition of people's welfare service demand, changes the role and interaction mode of different actors in the welfare delivery system, and affects the improvement of welfare governance capacity and the realisation of effectiveness by promoting professional service delivery mode. In this sense, the development of social work should be regarded as a process of building good welfare governance. Social work has deeply involved in building a moderately universal child welfare system through delivering children's services, promoting the professionalisation of the child welfare workforce, and advocating policy formulation and implementation. The development of social work is mutually reinforced with that of the child welfare system, and the profession is foreseen to play a more active and contributive role in the advancement of the governance system in the field of child welfare and beyond.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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