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## Re-emergence of social work in modern China: A perspective by Chinese and U.S. partners

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we offer a perspective on the re-emergence of social work in China from the viewpoint of a longstanding and very productive partnership between Chinese and U.S. social work educators and researchers. We begin with a brief historical context, followed by a description of partnership development among Peking University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and Washington University in St. Louis. To illustrate academic collaborations and policy innovation in this partnership, we use asset building, productive ageing, and financial capability as examples. The partnership has also included joint efforts and interactions for social workers training in multiple forms. We conclude with some of the challenges and lessons in this partnership.

本文从中美社会工作教育者和研究者长期的、富有成效的合作伙伴关系视角来讨论中国社会工作的重建。论文首先简要介绍社会工作发展的历史背景，然后阐述北京大学、香港理工大学和圣路易华盛顿大学之间的合作伙伴关系的发展历程。论文以资产建设、老龄化、金融能力等研究领域为例，探讨伙伴关系进程中的学术合作和政策创新，同时也分享了为培训社会工作者而展开的多种形式的共同努力和互动交流。论文最后讨论了合作伙伴关系中所经历的挑战和经验教训。

### KEYWORDS

Social work; China; partnership; applied social research; social innovation

### Overview and context

This article provides a perspective on the re-emergence of social work as a professional practice in Mainland China. The perspective is from a partnership between Chinese and U.S. social work educators and researchers. This is certainly not the only relevant perspective, but it may nevertheless be informative. We offer only one facet of a complex story as the authors – both Chinese and American – have experienced it.

A key point in this documentation and analysis is that the form of exchange and influence – in contrast to prior historical periods – is defined and carried out as a *true*

*partnership*: one built on mutual substantive academic agendas and long-term commitment and trust. We believe this represents a positive step for the development of social work in China, and may also serve as a small example of how well-meaning colleagues can conduct successful international relationships in a more globalised world.

We begin with a brief historical context. Organised social work first emerged in Mainland China during the tumultuous early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This period was marked by considerable – often exploitative and oppressive – international influences. Social workers did the best they could, under very difficult circumstances, to enable families and communities to cope.

Following the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, practices of international capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and religion were swept away. Seldom has the world witnessed a more complete change in political, social and economic order at such a large scale. In this transformational process, organised social work was abolished in favour of Chinese political organisation – with communal farms, government firms and local committees charged with taking care of social welfare conditions among the population.

There was initial revolutionary enthusiasm; however, as with all ideologies, the slogans did not always reflect reality. Over time, the communist social and economic organisation turned out to be less than perfect. Periods of crop failure (e.g. Great Leap Forward in 1958) and political chaos (e.g. Cultural Revolution in 1966) created hardships among the people, and also weakened the political and economic power of the state. Eventually, strains became too great and reforms were necessary.

Led by Deng Xiaoping, a major redefinition of socialist organisation and market-oriented economic reforms in 1978, known as the Open-door Policy, led to greater stability and stronger economic growth – eventually creating the much wealthier and more influential China of today. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that national policy shifted from focusing exclusively on economic growth to include social harmony, emphasising a balance between economic growth and social development. In this process, social work as a professional practice supported by education and research was gradually “re-seeded” and began to take root in Mainland China.

In 2006, the Chinese government articulated the goal of developing a grand team of professional social workers. Following this pronouncement, growth of social work training and professional development was seriously launched, and the development of professional social work in China continues to expand rapidly. China has now implemented regulations on standards for professional assessment and qualifications in social work and is training up to 1.45 million professional social workers by 2020, which was a goal laid out in the Middle-to-long Term Development Plan for Social Work Professionals 2011–2020 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, PRC 2012).

Since 2008, Chinese social work scholarship and education have witnessed “the spring of the profession” by expanding social work degree programmes to more than 300 universities across the country. During this period of rapid growth, Chinese social work programmes and departments have partnered and collaborated with western counterparts. In this paper, we document and analyse China’s journey to advance education, research and professional practice in social work in a particular partnership.

## Leadership, institutions and capacity-building

One building block in the growth of social work in China is the long and productive partnership among Peking University (PKU), Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), and Washington University in St. Louis (WU). In this section, we briefly describe how this partnership originated and developed over time.

The Brown School of Social Work at WU has a history of focusing on international social work, thanks to the early groundwork by faculty member Richard Parvis and the deanship of Shanti Khinduka. In the late 1960s, Khinduka (then on the faculty at St. Louis University) and Parvis created a joint seminar on international social welfare open to students from both universities (Khinduka and Parvis 1969), and in the early 1970s, Khinduka articulated the developmental model of social work for the “third world” (Khinduka 1971). After Khinduka became dean at the Brown School at WU in 1974, it enrolled and graduated more international social work students than any school of social work in the United States (Khinduka 2004). Parvis continued to recruit and support international students, and in the 1980s, Khinduka led groups of professional social workers abroad, including a two-week trip to China in 1986.

A formal PKU-PolyU-WU partnership was formed in 1999 when Khinduka delivered keynote speeches at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary symposium of the Hong Kong Social Workers Association, and at Annual Conference of the China Association of Social Work Education. A WU alumnus, PKU Vice President Chen Zhangliang strongly supported the collaboration in social work between PKU and WU. Consistent with Deng Xiaoping’s view of Chinese development, Khinduka encouraged Chinese social work professionals to balance economic development with social development (Khinduka 2001).

In 2000, PolyU led a delegation<sup>1</sup> of scholars from Mainland China and Hong Kong to learn about social work education policy, standards and structures in the United States. Given its long-term commitment to social development, extensive global outreach efforts and high academic ranking, WU was chosen as one of the delegation’s destinations. The work of the Center for Social Development (CSD) at the Brown School particularly interested in the delegation. Therefore, PolyU and PKU met with CSD director Michael Sherraden to begin discussing the design of social work models and practices that could be both impactful and culturally relevant for China.

When Khinduka retired from his 30-year deanship in 2004, he visited PolyU to lecture and consult about enhancing global impacts. He strongly endorsed the PolyU-PKU collaboration and explored the possibility of establishing a tripartite collaboration among PolyU, PKU and WU.

During this time, the social work programmes at PKU and PolyU built a strong partnership. Working together over the next decade, PolyU and PKU developed social work education in Mainland China, aiming to meet international standards while tailoring it for the Chinese context. Wang Sijin at PKU and Angelina Yuen at PolyU provided strong leadership in this endeavour. In retrospect, the challenge and scope of their pioneering work, and resulting steps forward, were enormously effective.

In 2005, PKU and PolyU established a joint PKU-PolyU China Social Work Research Centre (CSWRC) on the PKU campus. This centre has since served as an important hub for social work knowledge building, collaboration, educational development and policy innovation. Some examples are presented below.

## Partnerships in applied social research and innovation

In this section, we briefly summarise academic collaborations among PKU, PolyU and WU in three areas of research and policy innovation: asset building, productive ageing and financial capability. Though certainly not the only areas of academic partnership, they are among the most productive and well-known given their substance, depth and impact.

### *Asset building concept, collaboration, research and publications*

As a result of China's economic reforms in the late 1970s, more than 700 millions of its residents escaped poverty (United Nations Development Programme 2016). However, rapid economic development has widened inequality in household wealth. This has led the Chinese government to shift priorities to focus more on inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development (Deng et al. 2013). Poverty alleviation and building a well-off society are two aspects of this effort (Xinhuanet 2016).

Sherraden articulated that asset-based social policy enables individuals and families to accumulate assets for social investments such as education, homeownership and entrepreneurship (Sherraden 1991). To adapt asset building to the Chinese context, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region initiated a project in Hutubi County to make "dead" assets "alive" by allowing rural farmers to use their retirement accounts as legal collateral to borrow small loans and invest in assets such as livestock, education and small business. Together, WU and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) embarked on a three-year research project (2005–2008) to document this pilot programme. The study found that the pilot project encouraged the Chinese rural farmers to build assets (Guo et al. 2008a, 2008b; Zou and Sherraden 2009, 2010).

Another asset building example in the Chinese context was led by PolyU's Ku Hok Bun (Ben) and colleagues. Focusing on cultural assets, they applied asset building as a theoretical framework for social work practice with ethnic minorities in rural Yunan and Guangdong provinces, and in post-earthquake community development in rural Sichuan (Ku 2018, 2015; Ku and Dominelli 2018; Ku and Ma 2015; Ting 2013; Yan, Guo, and Ku 2017; Zhang, Yang, and Ku 2008). Their research finds that participating women can build their cultural assets by preserving indigenous ethnic artefacts and crafts; in doing so, they can regain control over their livelihood and future security, while developing a stronger sense of identification with their cultural heritage (Ku 2011, 2013; Ku and Ip 2011).

Asset-based social policy attracted the attention of Chinese academia when the idea was introduced to China in 2004 with the translation of Sherraden's book *Assets and the Poor* (1991) into Chinese (by Gao Jianguo). Shandong University and WU co-hosted an International Symposium in Jinan on Asset Building and Social Development. The lead organisers were Gao from Shandong University and Zou Li from CSD at WU. The symposium illuminated asset-building policy as an innovative solution for greater inclusion and long-term development, generating substantial interest in Mainland China. Subsequently, CSD presented the policy concept at several policy conferences.

For example, in 2005, Sherraden was the keynote speaker at two social policy conferences in Beijing on asset-based policy, organised by Tsinghua University and CASS,

respectively. These conferences, in turn, led to Sherraden's participation as an international expert on social policy at the national 21<sup>st</sup> Century Forum on "Sustainable Development: China and the World" in late 2005, where Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao spoke positively about the potential of asset-based policy in China.

In late 2007, Zou and Guo Baorong of WU shared research findings from the Hutubi project in a policy conference with the Chinese Ministry of Labor and Social Security. In 2012, PKU and WU co-organised an international symposium on "Lifelong Asset Building: Strategies and Innovations in Asia," which further disseminated asset building ideas and policy models.

Such work is generating a growing body of asset building publications in both Chinese and English. Proceedings from the Shandong academic conference in 2004 were published as a book titled *Asset Building and Social Development* in Chinese published by the Social Science Academic Press in China (Gao and Zhan 2005), and a special issue in the *Journal of Social Development Issues* (Gao et al. 2005). Select proceedings from the 2012 international symposium were published as a book titled *Asset Building: Strategies and Innovations in Asia* in both English (by Routledge) and Chinese (by Peking University Press) in 2014. Sherraden's co-authored 2006 book *Can the Poor Save?* was translated by Sun Yanyan and published by the Commercial Press in Chinese in 2017.

More recently, the research on Child Development Accounts (CDAs) is emerging in China. Deng Suo of PKU is leading two small pilot projects in Shaanxi that incorporate CDAs and parental support services on children and families with disadvantaged backgrounds. His research explores the potential effects of using CDAs as a way of breaking intergenerational poverty in China. The study shows that CDAs have positive financial and nonfinancial benefits for participating children and their families and could serve as a key mechanism for integrating asset building and parental involvement (Deng 2012, 2019).

Other Chinese scholars are in the planning phase for testing CDAs with ethnic minority children. Notably, Chinese research on CDAs was also presented by Deng Suo as one case example in an international conference in Singapore in late 2017. Hosted by National University of Singapore (NUS) and organised by Zou, the conference resulted in a special issue of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development* (Huang, Zou, and Sherraden 2019).

### **Ageing society and productive ageing**

Across the globe, life expectancy has increased from 45.5 years in 1950 to 72.5 years today; simultaneously, birth rates are substantially declining, leaving most societies with fewer younger people and more older people (United Nations 2019). For the first time in history, there are more people older than 65 years than under the age of five (He, Goodkind, and Kowal 2016).

Population ageing is a success story for humankind, resulting from advances in public health, medicine, civil society and women's rights. Yet longer lives challenge the viability of the economic and social institutions that were created in a much different demographic context. Challenges include financial security, living with chronic conditions, care for those who need assistance and accessible transportation and housing. These global challenges of population ageing call for cross-national research and education.

Given the demographic imperative, WU and partner universities in China recognise that addressing the challenges of ageing requires learning from each other. We share a perspective that the growing older population represents opportunities in addition to challenges. Older adults represent a growing abundance of human capital that can be applied toward more positive outcomes for individuals, families and communities. This “productive ageing” approach calls for new programmes and policies that facilitate engagement of older adults in constructive economic and social roles – as workers, volunteers, caregivers and grandparents (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, and Sherraden 2001). This social development response to population ageing is a constructive counterpoint to the “deficit perspective” that views older adults solely as a drain on society.

To explore this concept in the Chinese context, productive ageing was selected as a major theme for the Fifth Annual International Symposium and Lectures in Social Policy at Shandong University in 2009. This Symposium was organised by CASS, and jointly supported by Shandong University, CSD of WU and the Centre for Social Development Asia at the National University of Singapore (CSD’s “sister” at NUS). Sherraden proposed this conference, and Morrow-Howell, Gao and Zou were the lead organisers. The symposium brought together more than 30 gerontologists from Greater China, Singapore, Japan, Australia and the United States. As a result, a special issue of the *China Journal of Social Work* (Morrow-Howell and Mui 2010) as well as a book in Chinese (Gao, Morrow-Howell, and Mui 2011) were published.

In 2010, Morrow-Howell invited scholars to Washington University in St. Louis to participate in the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging lecture, *Productive Aging: Cross-Cultural Perspectives from China and the US*, co-sponsored by CSD at WU. A panel of experts from Renmin University, PolyU, Columbia University and the University of Southern California joined WU colleagues to discuss directions in education, research and programmes for a productive ageing society.

A third convening followed at PKU in 2011 gathered scholars and practitioners from the United States, Singapore, Korea and Greater China. Jointly sponsored by CSD of WU, PKU-PolyU CSWRC, Remin University and China Association of Social Work Education, the conference focused on evidence-based policies and programmes, with presentations on innovative programmes and research. Selected conference proceedings led to a special issue of *Ageing International* (Morrow-Howell and Mui 2013) and books in both English (Morrow-Howell and Mui 2012) and Chinese (Mui, Morrow-Howell, and Du 2012).

### **Financial capability**

The practical concept of *financial capability* is based on capability theory, which proposes that well-being is a function of people’s real freedom and opportunity to achieve their goals (Sen 1993). Financial capability is built on a foundation of (a) access to beneficial financial products, services and policies (i.e. financial inclusion) that provide the *opportunity to act*, and (b) financial knowledge and skills that provide the *ability to act* (i.e. financial knowledge and skills); in combination, these interact to create financial functioning that makes it possible to manage a financial life and achieve financial goals, leading eventually to financial well-being (Sherraden 2013). Financial capability aims to shape social institutions to improve financial well-being, including short-term financial

stability (e.g. meeting ongoing obligations) and long-term financial development (e.g. achieving long-term goals). Margaret Sherraden and Huang Jin are leaders in this work (Sherraden and Huang 2019).

Two trends make financial capability an essential part of the global social development agenda: (1) growing income and wealth inequality (Piketty 2014), and (2) the fast pace of financialisation. Financialisation is the growing influence of finance on people's functioning and well-being (Aalbers 2019) that has changed the way people live, the financial opportunities they have and the financial decisions they must make (van der Zwan 2014).

These trends are evident in China. Along with the dramatic development of market economy and privatisation, wealth inequality increases dramatically (Wu 2019). The cashless revolution has swept through the country, supported by mobile payment and transaction systems and other internet-based financial innovations (Chong 2019). Despite its tremendous benefits, such financialisation also creates risks for disadvantaged populations.

In China, large numbers of households face challenges in achieving financial capability. First, they lack access to affordable and appropriate financial services and products, especially formal credit and safe investment products (Chen and Jin 2017; Fungáčová and Weill 2015; Tao et al. 2010). Chinese families frequently turn to their social networks (e.g. friends and relatives) for informal credit and private and potentially illegitimate lenders (Fungáčová and Weill 2015). A growing shadow banking system – including informal underground banks and unregulated pawnshops – (Li 2014) targets vulnerable populations in China, especially youth and older adults, with predatory loans and financial scams (Zhou, Zou, and Huang 2019).

Second, financial literacy scores are relatively low in China compared to those in developed countries (Liao et al. 2017). Many families lack sufficient knowledge and skills to optimally manage money, use credit, acquire assets, choose insurance and plan for long-term financial security and development. In rural areas, only 12% of households answered a question on compound interest correctly (Song 2011). The risks of low financial capability also may contribute to other types of vulnerability, such as food insecurity, lack of health care and physical and psychological ill-health (Taylor, Jenkins, and Sacker 2009).

Concerted efforts have been initiated globally to promote social development through financial capability. In the United States, social workers serve millions of financially vulnerable households and understand the important professional responsibility of enabling clients to build financial capability and achieve financial well-being. Social workers have developed programmes and policies and provided professional interventions and services that expand financial inclusion, education and guidance to financially vulnerable populations. The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare selected *Financial Capability and Asset Building for All* as one of 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work, providing a platform for future development (Huang et al. 2017). Systematic and planned efforts on financial capability in the United States inform other countries, including China, and stimulate positive discussion.

In China, educators are creating new Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (MSW) programmes with a specialisation in financial social work (FSW) (Sherraden and Huang 2019). In 2018, universities of finance and economics in



Guangdong and Jiangxi enrolled their first cohort of bachelor FSW students. In addition, China Central University of Finance and Economics define FSW as the core theme of its MSW programme in 2019 (Sherraden et al. 2019). Other social work programmes are preparing to integrate financial capability content in their curricula.

As in other countries, the development of financial capability research and education provides an opportunity for Chinese social workers to re-examine household finance practice, initiate innovative financial capability services, create new social work professional positions and collaborate with financial institutions. Some social service agencies have summarised their household finance service experiences from the framework of financial capability to create practice guidelines for future services (Sherraden et al. 2019).

Social workers in both the United States and China are working together to integrate the financial capability into research, education and practice. Together, they are introducing new ideas, expanding education, building knowledge and practice expertise and promoting a social work strategy for financial capability. Recently, major magazines and journals in social work, such as the *China Social Work* and *Social Construction*, have published multiple papers on the topic by both U.S. researchers and China social work leaders (Chen and Jin 2017; Deng 2018; Zhou 2019; Zhou, Zou, and Huang 2019).

An international symposium to promote social work education, research and practice on financial capability took place in November 2018, sponsored by China Central University of Finance and Economics, CSD of WU and PKU-PolyU CSWRC. Huang was the lead organiser from WU. About 200 social work researchers, educators and practitioners attended the symposium. As a result of the conference, social worker attendees formed an online network to collaborate on financial capability projects.

To create more opportunities for collaboration, the U.S. social work partners also invited Chinese social work faculty and students to be visiting scholars, post-doctoral researchers and visiting students. Such training and collaboration initiatives prepare participating scholars to be leaders of financial capability work. For example, the Chinese translation of the first textbook on financial capability (Sherraden, Birkenmaier, and Collins 2018) is in progress and led by the visiting scholar, and will be published in 2020. An edited book on the latest research of financial capability and social work in China and the United States will be published in 2020 by the Press of East China University of Science and Technology. As of this writing, there is additional interest in financial capability as a social work practice at other universities in Mainland China, along with curriculum translations and development in Taiwan and Singapore. Margaret Sherraden and Huang Jin are leading this work.

## **Social Work development, partnerships and directions**

### ***Training of social workers in China***

Since the initial launch of the first MSW programme in 2009, China now has more than 150 universities offering MSW education. Training social work faculty and building research capacity is critically important to providing quality MSW education.

A number of organisations are leading this training: PKU-PolyU CSWRC, the State Council Academic Degrees Committee, the National Social Work Professional Degree

Graduate Education Steering Committee, CASWE, the Department of Sociology at PKU and the Department of Applied Social Sciences at PolyU. Given the leading role that PKU plays in China social work, both the Secretariat of the National Social Work Professional Degree Graduate Education Steering Committee set up by the Ministry of Education of China and the Secretariat of the CSWEA are located at PKU. Longstanding social work leadership of Wang Sibin was an anchor for these institutional developments at PKU.

The PKU-PolyU collaboration in training future scholars is unparalleled. Uniquely positioned to play a leadership role in China, CSWRC is organising and mobilising all institutions that offer social work education. In addition to promoting the research capacity of Chinese social work scholars, educators and practitioners through research workshops and conferences, CSWRC invites international social work scholars to China to train MSW instructors, host academic seminars, teach courses and conduct research.

Together with CASWE and Council on Social Work Education, CSWRC initiated the MSW Education Collaborative Project among universities between China and the United States. As the Asia-Pacific regional resource centre of the International Association of Schools of Social Work, CSWRC has organised various training activities for the development of social work education in Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam and Cambodia.

### ***Training of Chinese scholars in the United States***

Of course, many U.S. universities are training Chinese scholars. The Brown School at WU has contributed to this effort in social work. Select Chinese graduates, and post-doctoral graduates include Zou Li (WU), Huang Jin (St. Louis University), Guo Baorong (University of Missouri-St. Louis), Zhan Min and Li Hong (the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Jin Minchao (New York University, leading NYU social work education on the Shanghai campus), Deng Suo (Peking University, and deputy director of the PKU-PolyU CSWRC), Ada Mui (Columbia University), Tang Fengyan (University of Pittsburgh), Tan Jing (Bridgewater State University), Chen Huajuan and Wang Yi (University of Iowa). Each of these scholars, and others still in training, have contributed to research in asset building, productive ageing and financial capability (summarised above).

American educators have been invited to train Chinese scholars in China. For example, on the invitation of Wang Sibin, then President of CASWE, Michael Sherraden was invited to deliver a keynote speech at the first Chinese Social Work Research Symposium in Wuhan in late 2009. Leading social work researchers across China attended this symposium and had the opportunity to learn how to conduct impactful social work research, and how to inform social policy with research results.

### ***Partnerships through a university-level initiative***

In November 2012, PolyU organised the “University Social Responsibility in an Era of Globalization” forum as part of the university’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, for which Sherraden provided the keynote address. His speech on the concept of asset building and ways to impact global social development through education and research prompted PolyU to organise a follow-up forum two years later. In 2015, PolyU formally launched

its flagship global initiative named “University Social Responsibility Network” (USRN). With the goal of making the world more just, inclusive, peaceful and sustainable, USRN encourages universities to work together to find solutions in addressing economic, social and environmental challenges. Among the 14 founding members of the USRN<sup>2</sup> are PKU and WU. The latter has taken an active role in contributed to USRN’s development by providing ideas, sharing experiences and sending faculty and students to attend conferences and events organised by USRN since its inception.

### **Changing leadership and adaptations**

Institutional leadership changes over time. For example, recent WU-PKU-PolyU collaboration in social work has focused more on short-term educational programmes than on substantive academic research. These educational programmes are primarily geared towards American students, and consist of a week or ten days of classroom training and travel experience in China during the summer. The enrolled students are primarily from WU. The first Summer Institute focused on ageing in China, held in Beijing in 2006. The 2007 institute was in Hong Kong and Kunming, focusing on social development, poverty and social inclusion. The 2008 institute was in Hong Kong and Xi’an, focusing on Mental Health in China and the United States. The 2009 institute was in Kunming, focusing on economic crisis and the impact on social development.

Universities in China respect WU’s leading social work programme and value long-standing substantive collaborations. WU has an opportunity to continue to build on the long-term research and policy partnerships that have been achieved over many years and to take greater advantage of the high ranking of WU social work as a respected “brand” in China. CSD continues to engage in substantive collaborations, and, going forward, the considerable potential of this partnership may again be realised. As U.S. scholars have learned in working with Asian partners, a long-term view will serve us all well.

### **Interpretation and lessons**

Over the past several decades, Chinese social work education, practice and research have experienced robust development. Of course, the core energy for this social work re-emergence has come from China. The leadership of PKU and PolyU, led by Professors Wang and Yuen, has been the driving force in re-emergence of social work in modern China. American partners have been fortunate to contribute in some ways to this journey, and have learned a great deal in the process.

The partnership among PKU, PolyU and WU has been a strong and productive cross-border and cross-cultural collaboration. It grew from key leadership and faculty academic connections to joint research projects, major conferences, collaborative publications, curriculum development and expanding student education. The partnership has grown in scope, depth and impact over time. As in any collaborative development, the partnership has also encountered some challenges, including the following:

- *Cultural differences*: Universities in the United States, Mainland China and Hong Kong are very different. They have unique historical, political, social and cultural characteristics. These fundamental differences may affect their perceptions,

approaches to social work intervention, knowledge building and decision-making processes. Open-mindedness, cultural awareness and problem-solving are always necessary.

- *Leadership changes*: Changes in leadership occur during any long-term collaboration period. When leadership changes, perspectives on partnership and level of commitment can influence the partnership. When core faculty members involved in the partnership share common vision and goals, the partnership can find a way to survive and thrive.
- *Engaging faculty*: Geographic location in itself is a huge barrier for faculty members to stay engaged and committed to long-term collaboration. Long-distance travel, commitment of time and resources are very real challenges. Although many U.S. faculty members have expressed interest in collaborative research with Chinese colleagues, only a few have sustained long-term relationships.
- *Financial resources*: International partnership requires interactions for both faculty and students via international travel, and this is expensive. It is almost always a challenge to secure adequate funding to support and sustain academic exchange programmes.
- *Administrative support*: Administrative support for international partnership is necessary, including logistics for travel, lodging and transportation. The formation of the CSWRC has alleviated some of the administrative burdens to a certain extent and enabled faculty members to engage in academic collaboration without attending to all of the administrative details.

Despite these and other challenges, the PKU-PolyU-WU formal partnership has been sustained for almost two decades. This in itself is a worthy achievement and serves as a foundation that can support future growth. Along the way, we have also learned some lessons in international partnership, including the following:

- *Remain open-minded*: Social work in China is relatively new and still developing compared to its Western counterparts. Chinese social work educators and professionals are inventive and passionate, and welcome new ideas and approaches. They are eager and ready to improve the profession in the unique Chinese context. U.S. partners must be equally open-minded about Chinese leadership and decision-making that may be a little unfamiliar.
- *Have a conduit on each team*: International partnership thrives on meaningful collaborations. It is extremely helpful to have a conduit on each team. The conduit can be an individual or an organisation. It is invaluable for the conduit to have strong connections in both countries, cultural familiarity and fluency in both languages.
- *Develop joint projects*. Developing long-term collaborative research on a mutual research topic sets the stage for faculty members and students to develop new knowledge and encourage academic exchange. In addition, this foundation is necessary for the research programme to achieve momentum, productivity, policy and practice impacts, and international visibility.
- *Publish in all languages*. Research results and conference proceedings published in Chinese, along with Chinese translations of key texts (as noted throughout this

article) has been fundamental to the success of this academic and professional training partnership. Publishing only in English will not have a broad impact in China, and even more so, publishing only in Chinese will not have a broad impact in the United States.

- *Respond to large global challenges.* Rising inequality, ageing societies and financialisation are just a few examples of the global challenges that people face no matter where they live and work. A cross-nation partnership can be used to inform not just the countries involved, but also to connect with similar challenges, knowledge building and innovations internationally.
- *Secure financial support.* Stability matters. Long-term and sustainable financial support, especially endowed funding, is ideal for any international partnership. If partner universities can use their networks of support to identify funding sources, the sustainability of long-term partnerships is on a much stronger footing.

In closing, we emphasise the single most important lesson in this partnership: *A strong and lasting partnership is built on substantive academic agendas and long-term commitment and trust.* Strong academic partnerships are not self-interested or “one-shot” endeavours. A key to productive relationships, perhaps especially in Asia, is being a steady partner in both good times and bad. Problem-solving is always necessary and, as in any relationship, this can build trust.

This article outlines the development of social work education and professional practice in modern China. This endeavour has spawned knowledge development, policy/practice innovations, educational excellence and more capable graduates for all of the university partners. More generally, this work weaves strands of mutuality into the ongoing tapestry of globalisation. In a world where large political and economic forces can pull people apart, this example of academic and policy collaboration is a small yet meaningful contribution to pulling people together.

## Notes

1. The delegation consisted of the following members: Professor Wang Sibin, then Head of Sociology Department at PKU and President of the China Association of Social Work Education; Professor Zhang Lixi, then Vice President at the China Women’s College; Professor Angelina Yuen, then Associate Head of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at PolyU, and Dr. Ting Wai Fong, Assistant Professor at PolyU. The delegation visited the University of California at Berkeley, University of Michigan, Columbia University, and Washington University at St. Louis, and the National Council of Social Work Education.
2. Founding members of the University Social Responsibility Network include: PolyU (Chair), Peking University, China, Beijing Normal University, China, Sichuan University, China, Yonsei University, South Korea, Kyoto University, Japan, New South Wales University, Australia, Haifa University, Israel, Clare Hall of Cambridge University, UK, Manchester University, UK, Washington University at St. Louis, USA, Tufts University of USA, University of Pretoria, South Africa, and University of Sao Paulo of Brazil.

## Disclosure statement

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