

An Analysis of Cultural and Institutional Causes for Predicaments in Social Work Education Based on an Empirical Investigation in Southern China

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Abstract: While social work education in China is flourishing currently, it faces various ongoing challenges. This research examines, via non-participatory observation and in-depth interviews, systemic predicaments for social work education in China with the argument that these predicaments stem from a reproduction cycle between cultural devaluation and institutional constraints on social work occupational practice. Culturally, the value of meritocracy and a reliance on informal networks (*guanxi*) have marginalized social work's standing in public life. Institutionally, professional autonomy of social work is diluting through absorbing government-purchased services and embedded in underdeveloped occupational systems. Furthermore, these two factors also interact to form a cycle of reproduction. The findings redefine social work educational predicament as a consequence of cultural-institutional effects on social work occupational practice. Breaking this cycle requires reshaping public narratives of social work ethics, reforming autonomy and career ladders of vocation, and innovating practice-directed philosophy in school education.

Keywords: Social work education; Occupational culture; Institutional structures; Dilemma reproduction

Online publication: July 14, 2026

1. Introduction

Professional social work education in China, since the year of 2020, has undergone a policy-driven phase of development, especially in postgraduate education. Data indicate that by 2024, more than 300 national higher education institutions offered undergraduate programs in social work, while over 200 institutions and research centers provided postgraduate programs ^[1]. Meanwhile, the career development of social work is relatively optimistic. Consequently, the number of applicants for 2024 National Social Worker

Professional Qualification Examination reached a record of 1.889 million ^[2]. These figures represent a thriving professional education sector and occupational situation, which appears to signal a process of professionalization within Chinese social work as well as career development.

However, behind this quantitative boom lies a latent dilemma characterized by a severe mismatch between the educational output and needs of occupation. Despite the unprecedented scale of education, the retention rate of professionally trained social workers within this sector has remained low. According to a report by China Association of Social Work, the 3-year retention rate for graduate students majoring in social work staying at professional social work agencies stood at just 42%, significantly lower than 78% observed in more stable roles, such as other community positions ^[3]. Other data further indicate that the overall 3-year retention rate for social work graduates may be as low as 35% ^[2]. It shows that numerous graduates who have received professional training in social work choose to leave this field early in their careers, resulting in a brutal waste of higher educational resources at colleges.

More crucially, a new generation of social work students exhibits a weak sense of professional identity on a large scale. A report of MSW (Master of Social Work) found that their professional identity was at a moderate level. And, the scores rated by them on career were considerably lower than other occupations ^[4]. This suggests that a large number of students view social work primarily as an experience of obtaining a diploma, rather than a professional calling on lifelong dedication ^[5]. This paradox unveils that the challenges in social work education cannot be resolved merely by hiring top professors, optimizing curricula, or reforming teaching methods. Its roots lie in a broader cultural setting and institutional scheme that shape the whole education-occupation structure.

Our research argues that the predicament of social work education presently is essentially a result of cultural perceptions and institutional arrangements in the occupational practice. Concurrently, a mutually reinforcing dynamic exists between these two factors in a possible way. Through our field research, a systematic analysis of the mechanisms by which culture-institution directed interactions provides an analytical framework for understanding these challenges in the development of social work education in China.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. The Western theories in curriculum and disconnection from a perspective on local situations

Most articles indicate that China's social work education curriculum system relies on the transplantation of Western theories and practice models. Kung and Sun found that more than half of professional course content in academic institutions nowadays is directly translated from Western textbooks, with an underlying teaching model dominating pedagogy ^[6]. This results in a narrow curriculum scope, making it difficult to address China's complex social settings, which reflects a huge difference in government-society relations. Therefore, a severe disconnect between college curriculum and local political, economic, and cultural context is emerging ^[7].

Turning into practice learning, students primarily focus on learning intervention techniques based on Western individualism and clinical psychology ^[8]. They often lack a comprehensive perspective on local residents as well as the ability to address specific issues in China. For instance, acquaintance culture, administrative absorption, and family ethics in a frame of Confucian ^[9]. Current curricula often adhere strictly

to a fragmented agenda of typical social work methodologies, making it more difficult to cultivate generalists skilled in responding flexibly to complex community issues, or specialists deeply rooted in local settings.

2.2. Weak supports for field education system

Field education, as a cornerstone of social work teaching, faces severe inevitable challenges. Multiple studies consistently point to a severe shortage of high-quality placement sites, talented field supervisors, and systematic support from universities. Liu identified key challenges, via a survey of faculty in Central China, including inadequate student preparation, a lack of qualified supervisors, placement agencies, and insufficient environmental supports ^[10]. Placement site arrangements are often brief, with students assigned to deal with a large volume of administrative tasks, rather than receiving professional training from local supervisors. And, many leaders of internship agencies in placement sites typically have a limited understanding of social work ethics with an unmatched expectations with colleges' educational objectives ^[11]. Although some universities or departments have attempted to compensate for this by establishing their own service agencies or having faculty members serve as part-time supervisors, the effectiveness of these measures remains limited ^[12].

2.3. Policy-driven knowledge production and absence of indigenous theories

The booming of social work education in China has been heavily driven by state agenda, especially in the period after the establishment of Social Work Department of the CPC Central Committee in 2023. This situation indeed has brought not only resources and legitimacy but also unique challenges. Wu noted that rapidly changing government policies have profoundly influenced teaching priorities and research agendas, making it difficult to establish a stable, evidence-based knowledge system for practice research ^[13]. The education system has focused on responding to policy hotspots, failing to systematically extract, synthesize, and theorize local wisdom from the rich tapestry of local practice ^[14]. Consequently, the knowledge generated by academia is often disconnected from the real-world dilemmas faced by front-line practitioners. At times, adherence to Western textbook standards leads to a “professional focus” on local practices, further widening the gap between theory and practice ^[15]. The lack of localized social work theory means that education lacks a solid knowledge base suited to national conditions.

The main limitations of the current research are as follows. Firstly, there is a lack of sufficient contextualization in the analysis. Existing studies often diagnose the education system as a relatively closed entity, failing to situate it adequately within the broader macro-forces that influence the fate of the social work profession. Educational challenges are frequently described as internal problems rather than symptoms and outcomes of deeper issues, such as deficiencies in institutionalized professional structures and the devaluation of professional culture. This severs the causal chain between “what is taught,” “how it is taught,” and “why graduates are not retained, or their skills are deemed unusable” ^[16].

Secondly, current research overlooks the process of professional socialization within formal education. Whilst emphasizing teaching inputs and practical placements, insufficient attention is paid to the critical process of student professionalization. This process occurs not only in classrooms and placements but is also profoundly influenced by external factors such as labor market signals, the influence of professional role models, the profession's remuneration and prestige, and the policy-defined nature of professional roles. Existing research has not systematically revealed how the ambiguity of professional institutions and negative cultural evaluations permeate and distort the formation of professional identity within the educational process.

Finally, the proposed solutions to these educational challenges are limited. The strategies proposed in current research primarily focus on internal improvements within the education system, such as promoting curriculum localization, strengthening teacher training, and standardizing the management of placements. Whilst these are all important, if the professional field cannot provide graduates with dignified and promising professional roles and career pathways, improving the quality of education may actually increase students' frustration and dropout rates. Due to a lack of consideration for structural reforms that coordinate the professional system internally, the impact of many educational reform efforts has been negligible.

2.4. A culture-institution analysis framework in occupational practice for dilemmas of social work education

To move beyond an isolated examination of internal issues within the education system and gain a deeper understanding of the systemic challenges facing social work education in China, it is necessary to introduce a comprehensive framework for analyzing professional culture and institutional systems (see **Figure 1**). This framework assumes that social work education does not operate in a vacuum. Rather, it is deeply rooted in a macro-environment constituted by an interwoven system of professional culture and institutional frameworks. These two systems jointly shape the inputs, processes, and outputs of education and are key to explaining the root causes of its challenges.

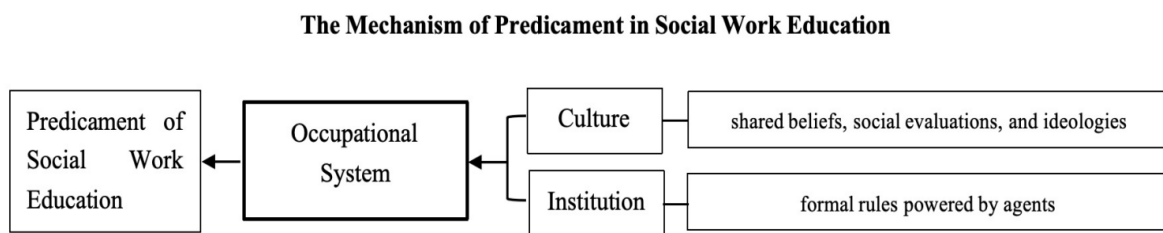


Figure 1. Analytic framework

The professional culture dimension refers to the shared beliefs, social evaluations, and ideologies that shape the meaning, values, and prestige of the social work profession. In the Chinese context, this is particularly evident in a hierarchy of professional prestige dominated by an elite-led system. This hierarchy marginalizes social work—a profession centered on helping and emotional labor within a market-oriented and utilitarian value system—directly affecting the quality of student intake and their professional identity^[17]. Concurrently, the public and administrative systems' ambiguous and instrumental perception of the social worker's role often views it as an extension of administrative assistance or social control, rather than a domain for experts with professional autonomy^[18]. This professional culture, propagated through family expectations, media coverage, and peer pressure, continually erodes the sense of professional sanctity and mission that education seeks to establish.

The dimension of professional institutions refers to the formal rules driven by agents who regulate social work practice, define professional boundaries, and allocate resources^[19]. Its core dilemma lies in the government service procurement model characterized by the administrative cooperation of professionalization. This model renders social work services project-based and short-term with a high

possibility, undermining continuous professional development as well as accumulation of knowledge ^[20]. Professional methodologies taught in school education prove barriers to applying in a fragmented practice context. Moreover, a labor market structure lacking clear vocational progression creates disparities between positions, within and outside the public sector. Employee remuneration, job stability, and career prospects are shown with a general lack of transparent career advancement pathways ^[21]. This sends a strongly negative signal regarding students' career prospects, directly dampening their willingness to enter this career.

Besides, the point of view of this framework is that job culture and institutions do not operate in isolation. Rather, they constitute a mutually reinforcing ecosystem in daily occupational practice as well as public attitude. Low social prestige leads to a shortage of high-quality students and sufficient policy support for public colleges, which in turn limits the quality of school education and competitiveness of graduates. Then, social work students struggle to secure decent remuneration as well as professional fulfillment, within a distorted job-market structure, further reinforcing public low regard for social workers. It is easy to see that the education system is trapped within this cycle. The current predicament is both a product of this circle and a manifestation of its inability to unilaterally break free from both external cultural and institutional constraints. Reform of social work education should simultaneously consider these synergies between cultural reshaping and institutional innovation, integrating educational transformation into an overarching strategy for building a more accepted professional ecosystem for colleges, students, and the job market.

3. Methodology

To explore how occupational culture and institutional structure specifically shape the predicament of social work education, this study employed a qualitative method to gain a contextualized understanding of it. Data were primarily collected through non-participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Lingnan Normal University on 29 October, 2024.

Between March and June 2025, our research members each conducted four months of observation in social work classrooms at universities in southern China as well as at two social work agencies. In classroom settings, observations focused on teacher-student interactions. The professional outlines are conveyed through course content, and students' responses to common topics with their learning tasks. Within the agencies, observations focused on daily practices of social workers, not only their interaction patterns with service purchasers, but also the ethical and role dilemmas they encountered. This field observation provided abundant first-hand material for understanding micro-level operations of culture and institutions within the fields of education and occupational practice.

Building on this, our study conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 informants. Participants were selected based on their positions within social work education or practice systems to ensure diversity in this study. Specifically, our interview group comprised 8 social work-related students, 7 practitioners in social work agencies, and 5 college educators (see **Table 1**). The interviews followed a fixed semi-questionnaire. And, the conversations were guided by core thematic areas such as “career choices and job identity,” “educational background,” “professional practice,” “developmental anticipations,” and “attitude or values on social work sector.” Participants were encouraged to share their personal stories, instant feelings, and critical understandings. This approach helped to capture existing complexities inherent in personal agencies within a context of institutional constraints and cultural norms.

Table 1. Interviewee profile

Category	Number	Description
Current Students	8	Including undergraduate and postgraduate students, to understand their professional choice, educational experience, and the process of professional identity formation
Academic Staff	5	Responsible for teaching and curriculum design, providing an internal perspective of the education system, its pedagogical challenges, and reflections on its connection to the profession
Practitioners in Social Work	7	With varying years of fieldwork experience, to reveal the actual workings of the professional field, role-related dilemmas, and developmental challenges

All interviews were audio-recorded following the obtaining of informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Data analysis employed a thematic analysis approach. Observation notes and interview transcripts were subjected to repeated reading, coding, and categorization. This process aimed to identify recurring patterns and core themes relating to professional cultural perceptions, institutional constraints, and the dynamics of their interaction. The research process strictly adhered to academic ethical standards, and all participant information was anonymized.

4. Results

4.1. The dilemmas of social work education

Driven by policy initiatives, professional social work education in China has undergone extensive, large-scale expansion. However, beneath this façade of prosperity lie profound structural contradictions between educational output, the professional ecosystem, and the knowledge system. These contradictions are not isolated; they are intertwined and collectively constitute a systemic dilemma that constrains the sustainable development of the profession. This section will analyze the underlying mechanisms and manifestations of these challenges from three dimensions: the disconnect between talent cultivation and industry absorption, misalignment of professional identity, and the disconnect between education and practice.

4.1.1. Discrepancy between professional education outputs and talent absorption

A severe mismatch between the supply and demand for professional talent, coupled with impeded mobility, has created a significant phenomenon akin to a “talent dam” between higher education institutions—as producers of professional talent—and the social work sector—as the employer^[22]. From the supply side, social work programs within the higher education system have expanded rapidly, producing a substantial number of graduates annually and accumulating a large pool of talent. It is worth noting that Master’s programs in social work have grown particularly rapidly in recent years. However, on the demand side, the quantity, quality, and stability of corresponding professional positions have failed to keep pace. Although the number of social work positions has increased under the impetus of government-purchased services, a significant proportion of these roles are characterized by their project-based, temporary, and low-paid nature. They often fail to offer competitive career prospects or financial security.

This disconnect manifests as a direct conflict between the logic of human capital investment in vocational education and the logic of return on investment in the labor market. At the household and individual levels, higher education is viewed as a major investment, and rational choices naturally gravitate towards fields with higher returns. The social work profession occupies a marginal position within the current

social structure, characterized by relatively low starting salaries, unclear career progression pathways, and limited social prestige. This makes it less popular among graduates seeking employment, often serving as a last resort.

“My parents really spent a lot of money to see me through my studies. When I was looking for a job, I did consider going into social work—after all, that’s what I studied. But during my placement, I saw the actual salaries of social workers, which were far lower than what my classmates were earning in tech or the civil service. I really couldn’t explain to my family why I would choose a profession with such a low salary; to be honest, I don’t know how I could afford to live in this city on that sort of pay.” (Social Work Student 04-2506).

4.1.2. The discrepancy between professional educational orientation and public perception

Social work education is dedicated to cultivating a professional identity grounded in specific ethics, knowledge, and skills—that of a scientifically informed, ethically guided helper. However, this internally constructed professional self encounters markedly different role expectations and definitions upon entering the field of practice, leading to the internalization of issues surrounding the blurring of professional identity and role ^[23].

From a social cognitive perspective, the public’s understanding of social work remains largely confined to charitable acts, voluntary activities, and grassroots administrative work. This pre-professionalized or even de-professionalized perception reduces social work to general labor requiring no professional skills, severely eroding the profession’s authority and unique value. From an institutional perspective, social work services in China currently rely heavily on government-purchased service programs, making their survival and development deeply dependent on the administrative system. Whilst this embedded development model provides resources, it also carries the risk of administrative absorption of professionalization. As the primary purchasers and managers of social services, local governments often position social workers as an extension of administrative power. Their performance indicators typically emphasize quantifiable management targets, such as the number of service recipients or activities carried out, rather than professional outcomes, such as client change or empowerment.

“To be honest, more than half of our team’s time and energy is spent on paperwork, reports, summaries, and preparing for inspections. For example, to meet the targets for the ‘Respect for the Elderly Month’ campaign, we had to devote a great deal of effort to planning a large-scale, flashy event centered on performances. But this has nothing to do with what a vulnerable elderly person in our community truly needs: deeper, ongoing support. Even the core principles we have been trained in, such as the strengths-based approach, are of little practical use when you are merely measured by attendance figures or the number of reports submitted.” (Director of Social Work Organization 02-2503)

4.1.3. Disconnect between classroom teaching and professional practice needs

The core of college education lies in conveying a principled knowledge system and cultivating practical skills in students. However, there is currently a disparity between class teaching and fieldwork in social work education at some colleges or research universities. A lack of productive interaction between knowledge production and practical wisdom makes this disparity impossible to translate teaching outcomes into professional practice effectively. This disconnect is primarily manifested in curriculum content that lags

behind social work development in reality. Social work is rapidly changing and increasingly complex issues. However, in some institutions, curricula and teaching materials are updated slowly, continuing to emphasize traditional community problems or traditional theoretical paradigms^[24].

Secondly, it is reflected in a pedagogical tendency to prioritize the transmission of theory over immersive practical experience. Social work is a discipline that places great emphasis on practical wisdom with numerous sets of situational responsiveness. Yet, under the current teaching method, classroom-based theoretical instruction remains dominant^[21]. Although practical placements are included, they are often hindered by inadequate supervision, superficial tasks, and poor integration with theoretical courses. And students struggle to translate abstract theory into concrete skills required to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics by themselves.

Finally, the disconnect between assessment methods and the objectives of professional competence development exacerbates this dilemma. Assessment methods centered on written examinations and essays test students' memory and ability to articulate theory—in areas such as evaluation, intervention, and reflection—rather than their core practical competencies.

“In our teaching, we focus on explaining theory, but feedback from students' placements indicates that their day-to-day work primarily involves routine administrative tasks and support activities. The university emphasizes cultivating students' ability to establish meaningful professional relationships, yet placement organizations typically evaluate them based on quantifiable indicators such as the number of participants. This severe disconnect between our training objectives and the actual demands of practice is truly disheartening for us as educators.” (Social Work Educator 03-2505)

4.2. The erosion of professional values in social work education under elite politics and a culture of connections (*guanxi*)

Against the backdrop of rapid social transformation in our country, social work, as an emerging profession, faces unique developmental challenges in its formal education. Culturally, these challenges stem largely from the erosion of professional values within social work. This section explores, from the perspectives of the sociology of education and the sociology of professions, how this cultural-value dilemma leads to the systematic devaluation of professional values in social work education.

4.2.1. Low professional status under merit doctrine

As a dominant modern concept, meritocracy advocates that individuals should attain commensurate social status and remuneration through education, effort, and talent^[25]. This notion of meritocracy has become intertwined with traditional culture of examination system, fostering strong expectations regarding investment in education and its returns. Within this value influence, the economic returns and social prestige of a job have become principal indicators for measuring its value, placing social work at a distinct disadvantage within this strict system^[26].

Higher education, presently, with meritocracy logic, is primarily viewed as a main channel through which families invest in the human capital of generations. Families, particularly those from rural areas or the working class, often link educational expenditure directly to future substantial returns from a job. This group of people anticipated that their children's occupational success would facilitate the family's upward mobility in a socioeconomic approach. Yet, social work as a personal job exhibits characteristics of high investment and low returns. College education requires systematic research spanning multiple disciplines, such as

sociology, psychology, public administration, and so on. However, social work positions are generally characterized by low payments, limited promotion channels, and weak bargaining rights in the labor market. This stark contrast makes it difficult to reconcile a career in social work with families' economically rational expectations regarding educational investment.

Professional prestige is a concentrated expression of public respect for a particular occupation. In this contemporary hierarchy of professional prestige, occupations such as doctors, lawyers, civil servants, and engineers occupy the most respected positions because of their specialist knowledge, high incomes, or institutional authority. In contrast, the job image of social work remains vague. It is often conflated with roles such as neighborhood helpers or volunteers, placing it on a lower rung of the prestige ladder. The nature of this work, which involves serving vulnerable groups, makes it difficult to fit into a grand narrative of typical success. Therefore, it lacks an accompanying social honor bestowed upon other established occupations.

"I was assigned to this field, and my parents couldn't help but compare me to the children in our village who studied computer science or finance, who were earning over ten thousand yuan as soon as they graduated. My dad always says, 'We don't expect you to get rich, but at least make the tuition fees we paid worth it.' Every time I call, they ask, 'Can you sit the civil service exam?' or 'Can you become a teacher?', as if they think being a social worker means I've wasted my education." (Social Work Student 01-2505)

4.2.2. The erosion of professional authority in social work under cultural norms of an acquaintance-based society

Fei's concept of the "Differential Interaction Model" aptly characterizes China's traditional "familiarity-based society"—a relational network centered on kinship and geographical ties^[27]. Despite modernization, the relational logic rooted in special trust continues to profoundly influence behavioral patterns and resource allocation across many social domains. The principles of universalism, professionalism, and institutional trust upheld by social work create significant tension with these deeply ingrained cultural norms. This tension makes it difficult for the profession to establish authority and results in a weak capacity to secure resources.

When faced with personal or family difficulties, the primary channels through which individuals in China seek assistance are still typically their relatives, friends, and local community members. This pattern of seeking help is built upon long-standing mutual interpersonal obligations and special trust, and is considered more reliable and secure. In contrast, social work services, based on contractual agreements and professional ethics, are often viewed as an external, impersonal, and procedural form of intervention. Public understanding of social work remains severely lacking. People have limited awareness of its professional philosophy of "helping people to help themselves," its scientific methods, or its ethical standards, let alone trust in them.

Bourdieu's theory of capital posits that the value of an individual's or social group's status depends on their endowment of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Professional identity itself is an important form of symbolic capital, capable of conferring upon its holder corresponding social prestige, influence, and opportunities for resource connections^[28]. However, within China's current resource allocation system, the social work profession possesses the least symbolic capital. Its professional identity finds it difficult to establish effective links with key social resources such as political power, economic wealth, or high-status social networks.

"What is the hardest part of providing services in the community? Opening the door and getting people to tell you their real stories. When residents have problems, their first step is to seek out the community Party

secretary or a respected local figure. On one occasion, we were mediating a family dispute. We had carried out extensive assessments beforehand and drawn up a professional intervention plan. But in the end, the person involved said, 'Thank you, but my grandfather has asked a leader to put in a word, and that should sort things out.' Faced with that kind of situation where 'personal connections' take precedence, we felt particularly vulnerable and powerless in our professional roles." (Social Worker 07-2504)

Overall, the undervaluation of professional worth of social work in a society is the result of the combined effects of instrumentalism inherent in meritocracy and the logic of informal networks within an acquaintance-based setting. Within this framework, the profession of social work is stigmatized due to its low economic returns and public prestige. Professional social work education is often viewed as an unprofitable investment, triggering an identity crisis for students and their families. In a sociocultural background based on personal connections, networks reliant on typical trust have supplanted demand for professional services grounded in collective trust. Simultaneously, the profession of social work, lacking symbolic capital, has led to its marginalization within job resource allocation systems, making it difficult to establish occupational authority.

4.3. The dilution of social recognition of social work education by occupational institutions

Beyond cultural factors, the root of the challenges that social work education is facing lies in occupational institutions. The development of social work in China is embedded in structural forces inherent in the relationship between government and service agency, specifically the regulations based on these actors. These institutional forces shape the outputs of college education, talent mobility, and the very form of professional ethics in social work practice. The professional field into which social work graduates enter upon, after leaving campus, is neither a value-neutral, autonomous space nor one that operates purely according to professional logic. Rather, it is a structural job environment profoundly shaped by these dual logics of administration and market. Indeed, it restricts professional autonomy, constricts career development opportunities, and creates rigid barriers that make it difficult to retain talent and deepen professional expertise.

4.3.1. Over-reliance on government absorption in social work practice

The trajectory of social work professional development in China is closely intertwined with shifts in governance models by local government, forming a deeply structural dependency. The main feature of this relationship is an extensive administrative absorption of the social work profession ^[29]. It results in professional logic being subordinated to governmental logic in key areas, such as resource acquisition and service delivery.

Under the current public service delivery system, government procurement of services has become the most central—and often the sole—source of operational funding and the basis of legitimacy for the vast majority of social work service agencies. This highly centralized model of resource provision means that the very survival and development of social work agencies are, in essence, controlled by government departments at all levels acting as purchasers, particularly at the grassroots level of sub-district and township governments. This asymmetrical dependency has fundamentally reshaped the field of social work practice. It has transformed it from a theoretically autonomous professional space centered on client needs and

professional ethics into an integral component deeply embedded within the state's grassroots governance network.

The direct consequence is the administrative drift of the professional agenda. When funding for service procurement is tied to specific government projects and policy objectives, the content, form, and evaluation criteria of services are no longer primarily determined by professional bodies based on scientific assessments and ethical standards.

On the contrary, they are dictated by the will and demands of the resource provider and that is the administrative authorities. The concerns of grassroots administrative entities typically lie in a secure satisfaction of political mandates, a rigid maintenance of social order, a widespread dissemination of policy messages, and a visible demonstration of work outcomes. These concerns bear distinct administrative characteristics. Their priorities often conflict intrinsically with social work's professional objectives, which focus on underprivileged groups' needs.

This structural dilemma has had a detrimental impact on professional social work education, creating a self-defeating cycle. The realities of a professional field are characterized by the continuous erosion of professional autonomy. And the dominance of administrative logic is fed back into the education system via various channels. These include feedback from graduates, challenges faced by internship supervisors, and the general perception of the job profession. The feedback loop causes systemic disruption to the goal-setting, implementation, and values cultivation within social work training programs.

Educational institutions are supposed, theoretically, to train professionals capable of independent judgement, adherence to ethical standards, and application of scientific methods in clinical interventions^[30]. In practice, however, the professional field places greater demand on individuals who are proficient in administrative procedures. Those who are skilled in formalized reporting and capable of executing instructions from superiors. This misalignment of objectives places educators in a dilemma. That is, whether to adhere to idealized professional standards, or to adapt to the practical demands of local authorities^[31].

Moreover, when students come to widely believe that the core of social work lies not in honoring professional skills, but in completing administrative tasks, their intrinsic motivation for professional learning is severely eroded. They begin to question the practical value of theoretical knowledge taught in their classroom as well as doubt the feasibility of upholding professional ethics within the constraints of the real world. Consequently, their envisioned future professional identity becomes unstable and unsustainable.

"In my work, I feel I rarely get to apply the professional skills I've learned, such as case work or group activities. I spend most of my day dealing with paperwork, writing reports, coordinating venues and supplies for community events, and preparing for inspections at various levels. Sometimes I feel more like an informal grassroots clerk with no official status. One of my classmates, who studied public administration, now works at a local district office. They have actually adapted more quickly and have better career prospects; their training is better suited to the system's administrative and management requirements. If the job really boils down to handling administrative tasks and dealing with government departments, then, from a purely practical perspective, perhaps studying public administration would have provided me with more relevant skills and greater career opportunities." (Social Worker 02-2504)

4.3.2. Inadequate job system of social work career

Within the structural constraints of the professional system, the lack of clear career pathways in social

work constitutes another fundamental limitation. This challenge is displayed not only in a weak market competitiveness of remuneration but more profoundly, in an opacity of promotion and support systems. Together, these factors create a development environment devoid of incentives and passion, systematically eroding social workers' commitment to long-term sustainability^[32].

Low payments are the most direct indicator of this sector's lack of attractiveness. The overall pay scale in the job of social work has consistently been low. Not only is it unparalleled to high value-added sectors, such as the industry of finance and technology, but it also generally lags behind stable, common sectors such as small business operating or public service. These meagre financial returns directly impact social workers' basic livelihood, dignity, and quality of life. Moreover, the long-term decline in wage levels sends a very negative signal to mass cognition that this kind of job is outdated in future development, particularly to potential entrants.

This suggests that the social value of the profession is not fully recognized and that its professional skills are highly replaceable. Consequently, in the face of harsh economic realities, the lofty professional values that social work education strives to cultivate appear feeble and unconvincing. This makes it difficult for those choosing this career path to secure material and symbolic support from their families and social networks.

The opacity of the career ladder and the existence of a professional ceiling stifle the imagination regarding career progression from a dynamic, forward-looking perspective. Unlike mature professions with clearly visible hierarchical structures, competency standards, and corresponding mechanisms for incremental remuneration, the social work sector lacks widely recognized vertical promotion pathways closely linked to the depth of professional expertise. Even for a social worker who has accumulated extensive practical experience and demonstrated outstanding professional competence, opportunities for upward mobility within the career structure remain extremely limited. A typical progression may involve merely a change of title from front-line worker to senior supervisor, often accompanied by an unsatisfactory increase in responsibility, authority, and remuneration.

A move into management roles, such as project lead or agency manager, usually requires a shift from the direct delivery of professional services to more complex administrative and fundraising tasks. This transition often conflicts with the initial motivations that led many practitioners to enter the field. This career ceiling makes it difficult for professional growth to receive institutionalized incentives and recognition, leading to a significant brain drain of experienced senior practitioners. Consequently, the sector fails to accumulate and consolidate valuable practical wisdom, remaining trapped in a cycle of repetitive, low-level experience.

"I've been working at the same organization for five years. To be honest, I feel my skills have improved significantly, I can now handle very complex cases on my own. But my salary has barely increased by 30% since I started. My title is still just 'Senior Social Worker', and I can't see a clear path forward. Even the most senior person here is merely a Program Director. It feels as though the salary ceiling is too close. The whole thing is like running on a narrow, short track: no matter how hard you try, you reach the finish line too quickly, and there's nothing exciting waiting for you there." (Social Worker 03-2505)

All in all, social work sector continually undermines the value of professional education through institutional constraints. Administrative logic has supplanted professional logic in a strong way in the practice of this occupation. It forms professional practice of social work into a procedural exercise of carrying out administrative tasks, marginalizing the precious skills taught in college education. While a relatively low

wage income fails to realize the human capital value inherent in academic qualifications from a college level.

This structural misalignment between professional practice and education in social work triggers a self-defeating cycle. Negative feedback regarding job realities, conveyed through graduate students, internship placements, and public reputation, feeds back into the college education system^[33]. This process erodes students' professional identity. Therefore, social work education faces a dilemma. That is, whether to uphold professional standards or to adapt to the job requirements is shaped by administrative directions. The dilemma not only diminishes the attraction of degree-granting education but also fundamentally undermines the perceived legitimacy, or value of social work, as a profession. It results in the investment in social work education continues to dissipate through its structural deconstruction within an occupational system.

4.4. The reproduction of predicaments in social work education: Interaction between occupational culture and institution

The systemic challenges that social work education faces are not caused by a single factor. They are rooted in a process whereby cultural notions and institutional structures mutually constructively reinforce one another in the occupation of social work. This sort of interaction between culture and institutions jointly weaves a reproduced predicament cycle of social work education.

At the level of culture, traditional public perceptions, such as the meritocracy of academic achievement, and the emphasis on abstract principles over practical skills, have profoundly shaped a logic of social resource allocation within a hierarchy of values assigned to different professions^[8]. These concepts tend to concentrate job prestige and social resources in various fields, closely linked to political power or economic capital, whilst marginalizing professions directly involved in providing social services. It translates into tangible power, influencing personal career choices as well as the allocation of policy resources through specific mechanisms, such as parental educational expectations, public discourse, and media portrayals. Social work as an occupation assigns a lower status in this mechanism, thereby indirectly reinforcing its relative scarcity of resources and lower social recognition within the social structure.

Existing institutional arrangements in social work occupational practice continually replicate this kind of cultural perception. Structural disconnects within the education system frequently result in a mismatch between graduates' skills and the demands of front-line practice^[34]. Meanwhile, a job system marked by administrative absorption and narrow career paths traps practitioners in a double bind, that is, a lack of professional autonomy and bleak career prospects. The consequences of these predicaments do not remain hidden. On the contrary, they manifest as observable social facts. These facts are constantly perceived and interpreted by students, their families, and the public. They provide empirical evidence for the negative cultural stigma attached to the occupation of social work. Therefore, the cultural prejudice is not corrected by reality, but is repeatedly reinforced.

A cycle of reproduction shaped by occupational culture and institution in the field of social work has formed and become deeply entrenched. The relatively low professional prestige and cultural standing lead high-achieving students to actively avoid this discipline when applying to university, whilst simultaneously undermining the professional identity of those already enrolled. This dual constraint affects the whole quality of the college educational process in social work. The result is a cohort of graduates with relatively weak professional competence and job identity. When these misaligned graduates enter into the practice field, the professionalism they provide in service projects is inevitably limited. Consequently, it is difficult to improve

the sector's service standards, thereby limiting the potential for enhancing social workers' economic returns and occupational recognition.

Finally, meagre vocational rewards and ambiguous public perception reinforce this initial cultural stigma of low prestige, providing a starting point for a new cycle ^[35]. The development of social work education has become locked into a state of path dependence, with cultural perceptions and institutional structures reinforcing one another, creating a vicious cycle dilemma for the development of social work education.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study asserts that the predicaments social work education is facing in China constitute systemic professional issues originating from a mutually reinforcing cycle between cultural perceptions and institutional structures in its occupational practice. The findings indicate that cultural factors, particularly career value assessments based on meritocracy and reliance on informal networks of acquaintance, diminish the perceived value of social work. This devaluation shapes institutional realities by influencing student recruitment, undermining job prestige, and legitimizing a limited policy supporting environment.

At the same time, the institutional structure of social work, primarily characterized by administrative absorption and narrow career pathways, has produced discernible outcomes. For instance, low payment, role ambiguity, and limited autonomy. These outcomes are not neutral. They are often interpreted as empirical influences on cultural prejudice that social work is a less valued occupation. This reinforcement further deters talented groups from entering the field, undermines the college educational process accompany with perpetuating the cycle.

Theoretically, our analysis elucidates the process by which culture and structure jointly construct social reality within a professional field ^[36]. The concept of the reproduction cycle illustrates how initial conditions trigger a series of events within the field of education and employment systems. This framework offers an explanatory chance for understanding the professional challenges of social work in situations where rapid institutional expansion has not been accompanied by a corresponding shift in social values or the development of autonomous job authority ^[37].

The practical implications of our research are that isolated educational reform efforts targeting a single node are bound to yield limited positive results in social work within the reinforcing cycle of occupational culture and institution. Specifically, modifying university curricula to place greater emphasis on practical training, without addressing structural constraints and the limited autonomy of front-line social work practice, will merely produce well-prepared graduates who subsequently face the same corrupting system. Conversely, attempting to raise salaries in a vacuum, without simultaneously striving to enhance the public cognition of ethical value in social work, is likely ineffective, as the fundamental rationale for increased investment remains unproven. Breaking this entrenched cycle requires a coordinated, multi-level strategy that intervenes simultaneously in cultural perceptions and institutional structures, recognizing the connections between them.

An ongoing, strategic campaign of public narrative reconstruction is non-negotiable. It goes beyond general publicity. Rather, it involves deconstructing the label of '*social work being useless*' by systematically emphasizing the profession's expertise. The public narrative of social work is supposed to be evidence-based knowledge, and its vital contributions to social welfare, economic productivity, and public safety. This involves collaborating with the media to accurately portray the complexities of social work practice, engaging in public discourse on social issues with authoritative interventions. Such cultural work must also

align with relevant efforts in adjacent fields, such as mental health, to elevate the entire ecosystem of the care professions.

A key focus must be on fostering greater professional autonomy and transforming the logic of resource allocation institutionally. This requires reforming procurement mechanisms within government and the third sector, shifting from simplistic contracts to funding models that reward genuine, sustainable client outcomes and professional expertise. Also, there is an urgent need to design several robust, well-remunerated career pathways with a strong cooperative approach. These pathways must formally recognize and reward advanced practice, specialization, supervisory, and research roles. Meanwhile, it demands to offer clear progression beyond general front-line job positions. Such structures not only retain talent but also create ambitious goals within the profession and attract individuals seeking long-term development. Furthermore, advocating for policies that integrate social work services into mainstream institutions. Schools, healthcare settings, and workplaces could transform the field from a marginal, project-based presence into a core social function.

Speaking of the education sector in social work, changes should be extended beyond curriculum content to encompass training models themselves. Strengthening practice-oriented education is crucial, but this must be achieved through deeper, more equitable university-agency partnerships, underpinned by shared sustainable funding. Such partnerships should facilitate longer, more rigorously supervised field placements and enable practitioners to make contributions to teaching. Yet, preparations for such an approach must be undertaken with a critical and reflective understanding of the field's current limitations. Consequently, the aim of education should not merely be to produce qualified practitioners, but also to equip students with the necessary political literacy, advocacy skills, and capacity for organizational change.

Ultimately, breaking this cycle requires a collaborative model of long-term investment. Funders, policymakers, universities, and professional associations must work towards a shared vision of a highly skilled, well-resourced, and socially valuable social work profession. This means shifting from past short-term pilot projects towards enduring systemic redesign. It requires the courage to reallocate resources based on the principle of value for outcomes, and the patience to nurture cultural change over many years. However, the cost of inaction is the continued perpetuation of a system that fails to fully utilize or develop the potential of its people, ultimately undermining the well-being of the communities and individuals served by social work. The path forward must necessarily be multifaceted, treating cultural change, institutional reform, and educational innovation as interdependent components of a single, critical re-professionalization project, rather than as separate tracks.

One limitation of our study is its reliance on a qualitative sample drawn from a specific regional context. This method may affect the generalizability of findings. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, incorporating larger-scale surveys to quantify the prevalence of experiences identified here. Longitudinal studies tracking students' entry into their workforce would also be invaluable for mapping the precise trajectories of professional attrition and retention. Of course, the sustainability of social work as a popular occupation in China depends on an understanding of intertwined cultural and institutional mechanisms that currently define its challenging trajectory.

Funding

This research was funded by the Jiangsu Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science (Grant Number: 23ZZC003) and the Special Program for High-Level Talents of Lingnan Normal University (Grant Number:

ZW2535).

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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