

# Unveiling Neoliberal Dynamics: Government Purchase (*goumai*) of Social Work Services in Shenzhen's Urban Periphery

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## Abstract

How has social work, which has emerged as a distinct profession in the PRC with the full support of the party-state, come to produce neoliberal outcomes similar to those found in other, capitalist countries? In this article, I draw attention to the government purchase (*goumai*) of social work services, which is commonly considered as confirmation of state capacity and leadership rather than the passing on of state responsibilities to civil sectors with tight budgets. Ethnographic research on the actual social work practices in Shenzhen's Foxconn town reveals how neoliberal-style outsourcing has converged with diverse historical legacies, thus creating precarious labour conditions for frontline social workers. Neoliberal dynamics end up filling most of these social work positions with migrant youth from the countryside, reproducing and perpetuating China's rural-urban divide. Institutional efforts at social care may not only reduce the existing inequalities but may also rely upon and even reinforce them.

**Keywords:** social work; government purchase (*goumai*); neoliberalism; migrant youth; Foxconn; Shenzhen

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The government purchase of social services is a mechanism by which “the government provides public funds to a non-profit organization or a business to provide public goods and services.”<sup>1</sup> While this has long been common practice in many capitalist societies, the use of this mechanism has dramatically increased since the mid-1970s, shifting the one-time responsibilities of the welfare state on to the individual, family or community. Many scholars, seeing impacts such as the retrenchment of public expenditure, service contracts through competitive bidding, and the restriction of eligibility requirements, critically view the government purchase of social work services as *neoliberal*.<sup>2</sup> For them, the word

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1 Jagusztyn 2012, 4.

2 Ferguson 2004; Garrett 2010; Abramovitz 2012.

“purchase” reflects neoliberal thinking because it implies that the state refashions itself not as the main provider of social services but as an accelerator of market disciplines and priorities.

During fieldwork conducted in Shenzhen 深圳 since late 2012, I found a contrasting response among Chinese interlocutors who engage in social work. Whether researchers, government officials or frontline social workers, the emphasis of their discourse on “the government purchase of (social) services” (*zhengfu goumai fuwu* 政府购买服务, hereafter *goumai*) rested not on the word “purchase” as a neoliberal condition of service contracts, but rather on the notion of “the government” as primary agent. In their accounts, Shenzhen was seen as “advanced” and “exemplary” because it introduced the model of “the government [their emphasis] purchasing social work services” in 2007 – much earlier than the central government which has called for the full implementation of community social work services following this model.<sup>3</sup> Young social workers often told me that it was the government’s strong support for this emerging profession that had encouraged them to move to Shenzhen.

How can we understand the different interpretations of *goumai*? In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), social work (*shehui gongzuo* 社会工作) is still unfamiliar to ordinary people. As an academic discipline, social work has grown rapidly, along with sociology, since the late 1970s. Yet, social work as a profession was not fully recognized until the mid-2000s, when the party-state paid increasing attention to “people’s lives” (*minsheng* 民生) in response to the escalation of social conflicts and waves of resistance. In 2006, the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China passed “resolutions on major issues regarding the building of a harmonious socialist society,” which, among other things, proposed the “urgent need to train talented troops of social workers.”<sup>4</sup> Since then, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) has served as the primary department responsible for drafting policies to promote the new profession.<sup>5</sup> The government purchase of social work services was one such policy; there have also been policies to increase the number of social workers and implement pilot projects relating to social work.

The party-state’s declaration – not desertion – of its “social” responsibility may lead to the conclusion that social work in China is at odds with neoliberal moves that roll back the reach of the state and spur market triumphalism. Nevertheless, my curiosity is aimed at why China’s social work, which has emerged as a social action for *minsheng* with the full support of the party-state, ends up producing neoliberal outcomes similar to those which are usually found in capitalist countries. One of these outcomes includes the highly flexible labour conditions of frontline social workers, which I will detail. The rapid expansion of social work through *goumai* has constructed a novel social work service industry

3 In 2013, the MCA and the Ministry of Finance published their “Opinion regarding the prompt implementation of community social work services.”

4 Tong, Keung and Mei 2009, 85.

5 Li, Yingsheng 2010, 61; Liu, Zheng 2012, 86. In June 2008, official examinations for junior social workers and social workers were held nationwide.

which has created numerous job opportunities relating to knowledge production, qualifications, supervision, education, audit, and so forth. At the bottom of the regime are young social workers who are *forced* to be on the move owing to insecure contracts, low wages and poor career prospects.

In this article, I attempt to unveil the neoliberal dynamics of social work with an ethnographic focus on its actual practices and effects in Shenzhen's urban periphery. To answer how China's social work, which has made a new leap forward thanks to the state's full endorsement and active intervention, leads to the precarization of labour, it is necessary to probe the actual processes of neoliberalization instead of merely viewing China as a replica of the mainstream neoliberalism upheld in the Washington Consensus, or as an exception to it. Some scholars use the framework of "state neoliberalism" to explain China's recent state-led measures for social inclusion, contrasting it with the massive liberalization of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> However, recent efforts to balance economic development with social development seem to sustain neoliberalization "as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites,"<sup>7</sup> given the nation's unabated income inequality.<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I analyse the actual practices of neoliberalization not by inquiring into whether state intervention is limited or not, but rather in terms of the expansion of rationalities and techniques that shape market relations so that inequality persists. My argument is that some characteristics, such as labour flexibility, punitive supervision and a preoccupation with technical matters, which loom large in the workings of social work in Shenzhen, are not simply transplanted from Western neoliberal moves but are unintended convergences of various rationalities and historical legacies across the uneven circulation of power. As I will detail, such entanglements end up filling most positions in social work with migrant youth from the countryside, reproducing China's enduring rural–urban inequality.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Guanghua, a Foxconn town, and elsewhere in Shenzhen over the summers of 2013–2015, and short-term research carried out in October 2013 and January 2015.<sup>9</sup> Much closer to Dongguan 东莞 city than to downtown Shenzhen, Guanghua consists of two communities (*shequ* 社区), each with a population of 150,000 (as of July 2015). Most of the residents do not hold Shenzhen household permits (*hukou* 户口): the number of natives (*bendiren* 本地人) is less than 2,000 (1,050 and 715 each). Most migrants work for Foxconn, a Taiwan-based high-tech subcontractor, which gained notoriety in 2010 for a spate of suicide incidents involving its employees.<sup>10</sup> Because youths (aged 18–35) account for about 85 per cent of the total population, the two community service centres (*shequ fuwu zhongxin* 社区服务中心) in

6 So 2009; So and Chu 2012.

7 Harvey 2005, 19.

8 Cevik and Correa-Caro 2015.

9 In this article, except for large areas like Shenzhen and well-known names like Foxconn, all names of places, people and institutions are pseudonyms.

10 For details, see Chan and Pun 2010; 2012, and Chan, Pun and Selden 2013.

Guanghua, which I will discuss in detail, have run many programmes for young migrant workers, as requested by local governments. Participating in routine activities in each centre, I observed social workers' interactions with local government officials, native villagers, migrant workers who volunteer, and the business people who often sponsor social work programmes. I also interviewed 30 social workers in downtown Shenzhen to understand how some differences in neighbourhood environments and district policies affect social work practices. In addition to social workers, interviewees included staff in social work service agencies (*shehui gongzuo fuwushe* 社会工作服务社, hereafter SWSA), local government officials and social work researchers in Shenzhen, who together have established the novel realm of social work as a distinct industry.

This article is divided into four parts. The first part examines scholarly discussions of *goumai* and its impact on social work practices, focusing on why the critique of neoliberalism is not distinct in China. The second part introduces the development of social work in Shenzhen and explains how the city has come to be known as the special “social” zone. It then goes on to detail the murky encounters between local governments and social work sectors in Guanghua, which complicate neoliberal dynamics in the actual practices of social work. The final section analyses the paradoxical reproduction of inequality through the social work regime, which depends on the forced flexibility of young college graduates who mostly come from the countryside.

### Neoliberalism Revisited in the Discussion of Social Work in China

In mainland China, the government purchase of social services is increasingly common. The 2002 Government Procurement Law allows social services and public works projects to be contracted out to the private sector. The 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2011–2015) sets a path for increasing the amount of outsourced services and encouraging various social forces to participate in the process. The national plan draws from numerous experiments in large cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where, since the late 1990s, several sectors and localities have piloted the outsourcing of community services.<sup>11</sup>

There are several reasons behind the rapid expansion of *goumai*. First, the breakdown of the work unit system has meant that employer-provided support has needed to be replaced by social support through governmental and other channels, aggravating the fiscal burden of state sectors. Second, with economic growth and the improvement of living standards, there is a rising demand for better quality social services. Third, the traditional service delivery model, based on residence and a stable workforce, has limits when dealing with an increasingly elderly and floating population.<sup>12</sup>

11 Jagusztyn 2012, 4; Teets 2012, 20.

12 Fisher, Li and Fan 2012, 162; Teets 2012, 15–16; Huang 2015, 145–46; Ma 2015, 295–96.

A critique of neoliberalism is intriguingly absent from all of these reasons. This may be partly because the emergence of *goumai* in China is associated with macro transformations like the nation's "open door" policy. As shown in the interpretations of *goumai* such as "modernization in state governance system and capacity"<sup>13</sup> and "China gets left behind in the history of *goumai*,"<sup>14</sup> developmentalist and modernist approaches overshadow criticisms about the retrenchment and privatization of welfare functions. In this, an analogy can be drawn between China's market transition and the neoliberal turn taken by Western welfare states in the 1970s – rather than a contrast between the two – in the sense that both China and the West had to reduce fiscal pressure on governments and raise the quality of service delivery by introducing market competition, and that their welfare service provision has evolved from being solely the state's responsibility to being a collaborative effort between government apparatuses, market sectors and individual citizens.<sup>15</sup> Even in raising the issue of neoliberalism, scholars do not focus as much on underlining market-driven violence as they do on the shifting role of the state from being a producer to being a regulator, debating whether growing citizen participation can change the relationship between state and society.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of social work, the critique of neoliberalism is elided even more because it is social work as a policy and profession that is new in China, not the outsourcing of existing government institutions. Noting that the *goumai* of social work services is most prevalent in the province of Guangdong, scholars often treat *goumai* as an indicator of economic development, the financial strength of the local government, and political openness.<sup>17</sup> Guangdong, at least for social work, is considered by social work practitioners to be more "advanced" than Beijing. Whereas in Beijing, the government generally dispatches social workers or college graduates directly to a residents' committee, the so-called Guangdong model, which now receives the central government's highest approval, is based on a contract between a government and a *non*-government organization. As for the *goumai* of social work services, as in other types of social services, scholarly debates mostly centre on the role of the state – not on the workings of the "neoliberal" state which facilitate conditions for capital accumulation or expand market rationality,<sup>18</sup> but rather on whether the state's active intervention in designing and supervising *goumai* leads to unprofessional "administratization" (*xingzhenghua* 行政化) or "indigenization" (*bentuhua* 本土化) as grounded in the Chinese condition.<sup>19</sup>

13 Ma 2015, 295.

14 Huang 2015, 146.

15 Zhao 2009, 2; Huang 2015, 146; Ma 2015, 295.

16 Teets 2012, 18; Tang 2013, 154.

17 Law, Wang and Wang 2014, 6. See this work about the regional differences in social work.

18 Harvey 2005, 7; So and Chu 2012, 169.

19 For debates on the expertise of social work, see Tong, Keung and Mei 2009; Liu, Ying, Lam and Yan 2012; Xiang and Ye 2013; Law, Wang and Wang 2014. For debates on the indigenization of social work, refer to Yuen-Tsang and Wang 2002; Yan and Cheng 2009.

Surely, it is important to analyse the role of the state in the operation of *goumai*. As I will detail, social work practices through contracting accomplish a double mission of dispersing state functions and re-articulating state power through selective governance.<sup>20</sup> As Jessica C. Teets argues, contracting out the provision of (non-core) public services to non-government bodies “strengthens regulatory state restructuring by freeing up state resources for more supervisory activities, as well as still allowing significant government control and oversight over private production to guarantee stability.”<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, such a discussion of the Chinese state should not cloud other assessments of neoliberalism. My argument is that China’s social work has been informed not simply by “advanced” styles of “developed” countries but partly by the post-1970s neoliberalized transformations that these countries underwent. Analysing neoliberal elements of the UK’s “Third Way,” Ian Ferguson asserts that the retrenchment of government funding in social work has led to a quasi-business culture, in which the overriding priority is keeping costs down and technical, pragmatic approaches silence or marginalize critical perspectives.<sup>22</sup> Theorizing the neoliberal welfare state for social work, Mimi Abramovitz similarly argues that neoliberal retrenchment has exacerbated punitive functions by lowering benefits and reinforcing eligibility requirements.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, Eliza W.Y. Lee reveals how financial austerity has brought about cost containment and re-commercialization in social policy reforms in Hong Kong, whose social work programmes have deeply affected mainland China.<sup>24</sup> According to her, the new Lump Sum Grant System imposed a ceiling on social service expenditure, opening up service contracts for competitive bidding.<sup>25</sup> A social worker in a non-profit organization in Hong Kong told me that whenever she was invited to Guangdong areas for consultation, she could not but focus on managerial principles and technical guidelines because “mainland hosts [local government officials] didn’t want us to raise different political concerns.”<sup>26</sup> Although such techniques are commonly considered part of accountability practices, the seemingly apolitical demands of professionalism are in fact inseparable from some neoliberal agendas. As I will detail, meagre budgets, excessive competition for contracts and laboured processes of assessment are common themes among social workers in mainland China as well as in other countries.

In this section, I examined the translation of knowledge, focusing on the specific ways in which *goumai* and its resultant social work practices have been

20 Howell (2015) makes a similar argument regarding state–labour NGO relations.

21 Teets 2012, 19.

22 Ferguson 2004, 5–7.

23 Abramovitz 2012, 42–44.

24 Government documents about social work in Guangdong commonly indicate an urgent need to learn from experts in Hong Kong. Compared to other Western countries, Hong Kong is considered to have a greater cultural affinity with mainland China. Li, Jinzao 2009, 17–25.

25 Lee 2005, 301.

26 Interview with social worker, Hong Kong, 21 October 2013.

acknowledged in mainland China, a country without “a tradition of contracted social services.”<sup>27</sup> I have insisted that developmentalist and modernist approaches to the new mode, as well as some preoccupations with the changing role of the state, tend to marginalize the critiques of neoliberalism as fostering market-oriented rationalities and techniques. China is no exception to these critiques, although historical and geographical diversities are significant to a great extent. I now turn to the development of social work in Shenzhen as a background for ethnographic findings.

### Shenzhen as the Special “Social” Zone

Shenzhen is the holy place of China’s market reform. As one of the earliest special economic zones (SEZs), the city experienced a massive inflow of foreign capital and enjoyed generous support from the central government. From 1979 to 2016, the city’s population skyrocketed from about 310,000 to about 12 million, and GDP per capita soared from 606 yuan to 163,750 yuan, now China’s highest. Mounting social problems, proportional to the explosive economic growth, led some researchers and government officials to recognize the necessity for “social work” as early as the 1990s. It is also noteworthy that as an emerging city near Hong Kong, Shenzhen was unique in that private or foreign-funded enterprises overwhelmed state-owned enterprises, and the traditional work-unit system was less influential than in other cities in the mainland. As a social work researcher stressed, drawing a new design for the city’s legibility was easier than in other cities that had to struggle with the old mode of urban governance under the planned economy.<sup>28</sup>

It was through the intersection of social transformations at city and national levels that social work gained new significance as a profession in the 2000s. Shenzhen’s fame as the cradle of China’s economic revolution began to fade amidst macro shifts in the economic and political climate. The city’s strategic importance receded as Hong Kong returned to the mainland in 1997 and China gained entry to the WTO in 2001. As China’s market transition reached a certain point, Shenzhen’s role as the testing ground of reform and buffer against it began to diminish, whereas inland cities were given more attention by the central government in the wake of increasing concern about regional inequality. Public debates about the city’s impasse began with uncertainty about its continuous economic development but quickly extended to questions about “society” as the new Party leadership under Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 proposed the building of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) to mitigate increasing social problems. In 2005, in step with this national move, the Shenzhen government selected a new slogan, “Shenzhen efficiency, Shenzhen harmony” (*xiaoyi Shenzhen, hexie Shenzhen* 效益深圳, 和谐深圳), to replace the former slogan

27 Fisher, Li and Fan 2012, 165.

28 Interview with social worker, Shenzhen, 5 August 2013.



of “Shenzhen speed” (*sudu Shenzhen* 速度深圳). A director in an SWSA cites social tolerance, not economic prosperity, as the city’s strength: “Cheap labour in sweatshop factories shouldn’t represent our city. As you know, Shenzhen is a migrant city (*yimin chengshi* 移民城市). This feature prompted our government to foster social sectors early so that they could embrace migrants. You may have heard the saying, ‘Once you’re here, you’re a Shenzhener’ (*laile jiu shi Shenzhenren* 来了就是深圳人).”<sup>29</sup>

Social work was one of the “social sectors,” along with volunteer activities, public interest activities, public fundraising foundations and other social organizations, which, starting in the mid-2000s, mushroomed everywhere in Shenzhen. Right after the CCP made achieving a “harmonious society” its paramount goal in 2007, the Shenzhen Civil Affairs Bureau and Municipal Party Committee released a series of documents on 25 October of that year entitled “Opinion on promoting social work and social work workforce.” Considered to be the Shenzhen social workers’ “bible,” the so-called “1 + 7” documents articulated regulations designed to make social work a profession relating to registration, employment and remuneration, as well as guidelines for enhancing social work qualifications.<sup>30</sup>

As a model for social work best practice, the “1 + 7” documents first conceptualized *goumai*, the government purchase of the services of social workers who are recruited to SWSAs on a contractual basis. Commonly called an “NGO” by staff, SWSAs are officially “private non-enterprise units” (*minban feiqiye* 民办非企业) which are listed in several categories under “social organizations” (*shehui zuzhi* 社会组织). Yet, the relationship between the SWSAs and government is sufficiently close that retired government officials, professors and businesspeople who often have personal connections with government officials plunge into this new industry. The *goumai* began with the purchase of “posts” (*gangwei* 岗位) not only in the units within the MCA but also in other departments and government-operated organizations that engage in welfare, education, police, emergency relief, and so forth.<sup>31</sup> Starting in 2009, the Shenzhen government also implemented the purchase of “projects” (*xiangmu* 项目), encouraging SWSAs to operate “public good” (*gongyi* 公益) projects in local communities. The number of registered SWSAs in Shenzhen increased from 13 in 2009 to about 200 in 2015, while the number of social workers skyrocketed from 96 in 2007 to 5,260 in 2014.<sup>32</sup>

Pioneering *goumai* as a model of social work, the Shenzhen government declared that the government would no longer be the “producer” of social service but its “purchaser.” It stressed that this “purchase” was intended to achieve the “small government, big society” (*xiao zhengfu da shehui* 小政府大社会) directives

29 Interview with director of an SWSA, Shenzhen, 2 August 2013.

30 The “1+7” documents consist of a main document and seven supplementary documents.

31 The number of purchased posts increased from 37 in 2007 to 1,500 in 2012, while government expenditure for this task, including the expense of inviting social work practitioners from Hong Kong, increased from 2.22 million yuan in 2007 to 133.814 million in 2012. Zeng and Ye 2014, 79–80.

32 Sznews.com 2015.



through partnerships with civil organizations. It should be noted that the state-led revitalization of social sectors accompanies the de facto outsourcing of welfare functions, for which the socialist work unit system was responsible in the past. A social work researcher in Shenzhen University agreed with my view, saying, “Hiring social workers by subcontracting rather than recruiting public officials for the same position really reduces government costs.”<sup>33</sup> Neoliberal rationality, which aims at passing on state responsibilities to civil sectors with tight funding, is as distinct in the realm of social work in Shenzhen as in community volunteering in the post-welfare states.<sup>34</sup> However, it should be also noted that the local NGOs, according to the “1 + 7” documents, should adhere to the Party line, following the principle that “the party-state leads, the government drives, civil organizations operate, and the mass participates.”

In all, the proliferation of social sectors in Shenzhen, which has reconfigured itself as a special “social” zone, does not necessarily lead to an autonomous zone independent from state authority. The development of social work as a profession demonstrates that the question of “society” is closely linked to the exercise of sovereign power. In her analysis of voluntarism in Italy, Andrea Muehlebach notes the workings of the neoliberal state, arguing that the state no longer reifies itself as a single mediator of social relations: “The state’s moral transcendence – its will to mediate solidarity – has been replaced with the moralized individual as willing mediator of solidarity.”<sup>35</sup> However, what we witness in China is the party-state’s persistence of visibility and transcendence amidst its neoliberal calculation. In the next section, I will explore how the emphasis of the party-state’s leading role complicates neoliberal dynamics in actual social work practices.

## The Multiple Uses of Social Workers

Although Shenzhen, full of migrants, has established tolerance as its motto, the city’s acclaimed tolerance for newcomers intriguingly coexists with its divided landscapes. Shenzheners commonly divide the city into “inside the pass” (*guannei* 关内) and “outside the pass” (*guanwai* 关外). *Guannei* indicates four districts in the original SEZ, while *guanwai* refers to the suburban districts incorporated into the SEZ in 2010. Whereas the former boasts gleaming skyscrapers and shopping malls, the latter is crammed with sweatshops and clumsy factory blocks clustered along dusty roads. *Guannei* is populated by white-collar migrant youth who work in the IT and financial industries, while *guanwai* is a temporary home for “the new generation of rural-to-urban migrants” (*xinshengdai nongmingong* 新生代农民工), that is, less-educated factory workers or casual workers in the low-wage service sector. Although the municipal government formally urbanized all rural

33 Interview with social work researcher, Shenzhen University, 22 October 2013.

34 On the outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services in the West, see Iltan and Basok 2004; Rosol 2012.

35 Muehlebach 2012, 133.

areas in *guanwai* in 2004, the perceived distinction between *guannei* and *guanwai* persists along with the long-term graduated processes of development in the city.

Located in *guanwai*, Guanghua is an area full of young migrant workers from all over China. Most of them work for Foxconn. Built in 2006, Foxconn's Guanghua plant dramatically transformed a peripheral village into a Foxconn empire comprising factory facilities, dormitories, rental residential buildings, restaurants, stores, bars and internet cafés.<sup>36</sup> However, the urban environments in which migrant youths work, walk and breathe are so temporal that they seem to force the youths' very mobility. Poorly built high-density housing is designed to maximize rental income (250–400 yuan monthly) and accommodate as many people as possible. Shops sell only cheap plastic household items that workers can easily discard when they move. Interpersonal relationships as well as the physical environment are, largely, temporary. Disconnected both emotionally and legally from their temporary place of residence, the young migrant workers whom I met described themselves simply as “passers-by” (*guoke* 过客).

The establishment of community service centres was one of many countermeasures against the fragile construction of the locality and towards social “stability” in 2009–2011. The Shenzhen government dispatched social workers to Foxconn soon after the serial suicide incidents. A year later, Foxconn, burdened by media attention, began to act independently by employing its own social workers and counsellors as well as expanding volunteer and recreation activities within its facilities.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the local government needed to take measures because more and more workers tried to find rental housing outside the factory rather than staying in a dormitory. As frequently shown in my interviews, these workers were unwilling to join in with the activities within the factory as they sought freedom and wished to expand their social networks.

It is within this context that the main purpose of social work in Guanghua was stipulated as “providing a series of advice and programmes to young migrant workers who came to Shenzhen, particularly those who worked in Foxconn, so that they can relieve stress, extend social networks, and build a sense of belonging to the city.”<sup>38</sup> In December 2011, the Fenghuang SWSA (service provider) made an official agreement with the district government (financial sponsor) and the street office (project manager). The municipal government and the district government paid 500,000 yuan each, annually, for two community projects with three-year contracts. Accordingly, the Fenghuang agency set up two community service centres and dispatched six social workers to each centre. These social workers have organized various activities, such as picnics, karaoke events and cooking contests, while inviting migrant youth not only as service recipients

36 Foxconn has constructed two plants in the *guanwai* area of Shenzhen. The Guanghua (pseudonym) plant is one of these.

37 Interview with a director of a community service centre, Guanghua, 5 August 2013.

38 Internal material from the Fenghuang agency (December 2011).

but also as volunteers.<sup>39</sup> They have also organized trade union-sponsored group blind dates and sporting events in Foxconn and other companies.

In fact, neither the social workers nor local government officials with whom I met were sure that these community activities would be able to solve the so-called Foxconn problem; the grave temporality and fragility of the Foxconn town was structurally conditioned by the great mobility of global capital and the local government's attempts to seize it to boost economic growth.<sup>40</sup> Instead, all the interlocutors seemed to be preoccupied with apparatuses for making a problem "solvable." In the above contract, for instance, the district government had already set service goals, plans and targets. As for the "quantitative" target, each centre is required, over the course of one year, to provide lectures (12), group meetings (50–70 hours), community activities (10), workshops (18), training sessions (11), and complete advisory case work (more than 60 times), the filing of service recipients (more than 300 cases), the registration of volunteers (more than 30), and so forth.<sup>41</sup> The tripartite agreement states that it is in fact part of the service agency's *duties* to conduct projects in accordance with the standards and regulations of the contract, and that the two governments have the *right* to withdraw from the contract if any problem occurs. Each centre is contractually subject to numerous inspections not only by the special audit office but also by local governments at various levels. For example, the district bureau of civil affairs sets the annual standards for evaluation as follows:

- a) Basic items (total of 1,000 points): service planning (100); work sincerity (100); personnel management (100); space management (60); quarterly management status (120); quarterly finance management (120); employment status (100); the annual effect of services (200); and the annual status of fund use (100).
- b) Bonus items (extra points): personnel arrangements; the use of funds; media reports; the reception of central, provincial and municipal officials; the branding of services; and the selection of proposals.<sup>42</sup>

The total evaluation is based on the sum of (a) and (b). Each item is subdivided into several categories and standards, which reveal how the government deals with the novel regime of social work as well as the particular ways in which it intervenes to solve social problems through this regime. For instance, extra points are given to a "self-financed" centre that minimizes operation expenses or finds

39 In downtown Shenzhen, social workers usually organize activities for local residents, who are commonly categorized as "children, the disabled, old people, and migrant workers." Particularly in an urban periphery like Guanghua, young migrant workers are considered the primary targets of social workers' care.

40 An official in Guanghua told me, "We can't push Foxconn around. Once they leave, the local economy will be destroyed." He cited Foxconn's recent moves to relocate and build new production facilities in central and western regions to reduce labour costs. Interview with a government official, Guanghua, 10 August 2013.

41 As for the "qualitative" target, the government not only decided on the number of participants in every activity including PR, but also imposed a series of guidelines for group meetings and casework.

42 Internal material from the Social Construction Bureau of XX District in Shenzhen, 15 April 2013. In the case of "bonus items," points are not assigned to each item separately.

sponsors without seeking assistance from the government. Extra points are also given to a “loyal” centre that serves high-level state leaders or achieves recognition from the local government. Both self-governance and a commitment to state authority weigh heavily.

All of the social work researchers, frontline social workers and staff members I interviewed in Shenzhen mournfully stressed the obstacle of such bureaucratic techno-politics. A deputy director in an SWSA in downtown Shenzhen complained to me about excessive requests from the government and the frequent delays in financing, adding that collective action was almost impossible because “all agencies have to compete with one another to secure a contract.”<sup>43</sup> My concern is with what happens when most of those involved with social work, including even local government officials, agree that such enormous requests are impossible to comply with, yet nevertheless the government officially defends those requests in the name of “fairness” and “professionalization.” Intriguingly, most social workers in Guanghua neither resisted the government directly nor followed contract conditions seriously. Rather, these workers devoted most of their energies to following whatever directives they received from local officials. In other words, the frontline social workers portrayed themselves as the “mobilization unit” of the party-state in order to keep their contract.

During fieldwork, I found that social workers were constantly, and at short notice, summoned by different levels of the government and Party organizations. One evening in August 2013, for example, Xu Yongbin, a director of one of the two centres, received a call from the street office. The office ordered a campaign to recruit more Foxconn workers as new volunteers. The next morning, about 15 social workers and previous volunteers gathered at a police station in front of the Foxconn cluster. They waited about for instructions from the street office for about an hour before Yongbin finally received a call informing him that the promotional campaign was to be cancelled owing to heavy rain. Few were angry about this incident because this was “what the government always did,” as a social worker said cynically.

If we consider how vulnerable social workers are in terms of state governance, however, we come to notice how local governments and Party bureaus have found multiple uses for them. A deputy director of the community workstation (*shequ gongzuozhan* 社区工作站) in Guanghua, who frequently supervised social workers, described how they were there to deal with “small issues”: “Small issues are handled by social workers while big contradictions are [handled] by us [the government]. For example, we intervene when more than a hundred people petition. Social workers intervene in the case of a family dispute.”<sup>44</sup> However, what he called “small issues” encompassed a vast range of tasks. First, social workers were not only implementing regular programmes but also frequently mobilized

43 Interview with a deputy director of an SWSA, Shenzhen, 15 January 2015.

44 Interview with a deputy director of a community workstation, Guanghua, 18 July 2015. The community workstation is the lowest-level government agency under the street office. It has been established uniquely in Shenzhen because the residents’ committee, consisting of only a few native residents, is unable to deal with the numerous migrants.

for government and Party meetings, events and campaigns which required the participation of large numbers of people. In place of government officials, they were also expected to engage in community matters relating to police, hygiene, employment, education, and so forth. As most social workers stayed in rental housing in Guanghua, they were often confronted with local disputes.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, many local officials realized the value of young, educated social workers in implementing the party-state's new project to "build society" (*shehui jianshe* 社会建设). The building "society" campaign, which is already fluid and has been modified at the central level, has inevitably been identified with the project to build "social organizations" in local administration.<sup>46</sup> Pressured to follow state directions and suture administrative holes, street-level officials in the community workstation, the residents' committee and the community Party organization all expected social workers to create community events in partnership with them or to apply for grants from higher-level governments to operate new social organizations. Social workers plunged into these extra activities in an effort to supplement their insufficient project funds. What Patricia Thornton calls "Party-organized non-governmental organizations" have sprung up in Guanghua – created when local Party members nail the Party's sign (*guapai* 挂牌) to social organizations that have emerged in this way.<sup>47</sup> In short, at minimal cost achieved by outsourcing, local government and Party officials utilize social workers for multiple purposes.

## Reproduced Inequality and the Problem of Expertise

On the surface, this situation seems to show a symbiotic relationship which benefits both local state officials and social workers from NGOs. However, it is important to consider the uneven distribution of power among the various players in government agencies and social sectors. Instead of forming a parallel partnership with civil organizations, local governments exert their flexible and ubiquitous influence and exploit a particular group, frontline social workers, who for the most part are young college graduates in their 20s.

This exploitation is primarily the outcome of *goumai*. In the case of the contract between the district government and the SWSA, the former's duty to provide funds on time, unlike the latter's duty to follow the government's instructions and report the use of funds regularly, is not compulsory. The common delays in funding from

45 This condition is scarce in community service centres in downtown Shenzhen, where most social workers commute long distances owing to the high rents in areas proximal to their workplace.

46 When I asked an official in the district government why the local government was focused on the task of creating social organizations among the many indicators involved in "building society," she gave her own interpretation: "In fact, we have implemented most tasks relating to 'building society' under the umbrella of 'building economy.' Public services, community building, and social management, which is mainly about crime prevention, are what we have done in order to cushion the impact of economic development. Yet, building social organizations is kind of a new one. It highlights civil participation at a grassroots level." Interview with district government official, 6 August 2014.

47 Thornton 2013, 3.

the government, as well as illicit commission for winning a bid, allow the agency to postpone payday for social workers and reduce the operation expenses for their activities.

Such neoliberal-style outsourcing when combined with a state socialist legacy of rigid bureaucracy and mass mobilization further exacerbates the predicament of social workers. By acting as de facto “bosses” who design, supervise and audit social work programmes, local government officials control these workers, making them a “multipurpose” and “cost-efficient” army. In order to keep their contract and make up for the lack of operation costs, social workers subordinate themselves to street-level officials, helping them with numerous chores and events. Li Lan, a social worker in Guanghua, described herself as “Leifeng [a model socialist worker well known for his sacrifices in the Maoist era] with a salary” (*na gongzi Lei Feng* 拿工资雷锋), as did the local residents who were not familiar with social sectors. She said to me, “I realize that I’m nothing but a handful of sand ... We social workers and volunteers seem to be merely a decorative army that the government has mobilized in order to give people the impression that our society is peaceful and harmonious.”<sup>48</sup>

Not surprisingly, these circumstances prompt social workers to look for alternative work. A recent report on social work development in Guangdong summarizes the demography of social workers as follows: “The sex ratio (man: woman) of social workers is 3:7. More than 90 per cent comprise ‘post-80s’ university graduates, whose length of service is only 2–4 years.”<sup>49</sup> The frontline social workers I interviewed in 2012–2015 received a much lower wage (about 3,500–4,000 yuan per month) than the standard set by the municipal government (4,700 yuan). Low earnings, delayed payment of wages, excessive demands made by local governments, little recognition from the public and uncertain future career prospects all contribute to the high dropout rates of social workers: in Shenzhen, the dropout rate jumped from 8.2 per cent in 2008 to 22.2 per cent in 2014.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, research and media reports ignore some crucial questions. Where do most social workers come from? Why do new social workers continue to join this “problematic” profession while so many leave in disappointment? In Guanghua and elsewhere in Shenzhen, most of the social workers I met were migrants. In July 2013, only one of the 18 social workers in Guanghua and nearby areas had a Shenzhen *hukou*. This number increased to three in July 2015: two had volunteered because they were able to live off the rent they received from renting out accommodation to migrants, while one was doing temporary work in order to receive extra points for a public official exam.

48 Interview with Li Lan, a social worker in Guanghua, 13 August 2013.

49 Law, Wang and Wang 2014, 17.

50 In 2014, 1,622 out of a total of 3,535 workers resigned, while 785 of the retirees sought completely different types of jobs. See [sznews.com](http://sznews.com) 2015.

Most social worker positions have been filled by migrant youth, despite the special dispensation given by the government to Shenzhen *hukou* holders. Majoring in social work and other related disciplines, these youth have migrated from all over China to Shenzhen, where this new profession is considered to be at its most advanced. Mostly born in the countryside and sent to an unfamiliar place, these social workers experience “forced flexibility,” that is, “a troubling way of life in which in-between lives crossing urban and rural areas are forced rather than chosen.”<sup>51</sup> The high cost of living makes it increasingly difficult for these migrant youth to stay in Shenzhen. Yet, the return to “backward” hometowns is likely to render their social worker certificates useless. The nation’s rise in graduate unemployment, which has seen college graduates from the countryside often endure precarious labour conditions in order to survive in the city, has only made their situation worse.<sup>52</sup> Li Lan, the social worker mentioned above, once explained to me why her household goods were “too simple”: “I’m not sure whether I will keep doing social work or not. It is impossible to settle in Shenzhen on this low wage. I’m thinking of going to a graduate school in Xiamen, but can’t afford tuition. I might try the public official exam, start a small business, or simply find a new social service agency.” Li Lan was on the move, as were many of the other social workers I met.

Raising the issue of the proletarianization of young migrant workers, Ngai Pun and Jenny Chan argue that “this reserve army of Chinese internal migrant workers helps lower not only production costs, but also social reproduction costs in host cities by denying rural migrant workers various kinds of social services and public education.”<sup>53</sup> This argument applies not only to factory workers but also to low-level white collar workers. As dispatched workers sandwiched between the government as the prime contractor and the SWSA as the subcontractor, frontline social workers are continuously moving from one agency to another or to other similar sectors in search of *slightly* better treatment. A deputy director of an SWSA in downtown Shenzhen justified this situation by saying that “this job [social work] is not permanent for them [migrant youth] anyway.”<sup>54</sup> Herein lies the paradox of social work: the new apparatus that has emerged to alleviate social problems is sustained by, and exacerbates, the nation’s enduring problem of rural–urban inequality.

It should be noted that the occupational preoccupation with expertise (*zhuanye* 专业) helps to reinforce the perpetuation of this inequality. Policymakers commonly consider the expertise of social work in terms of its complete institutionalization, bolstering training, conducting evaluations, and determining the qualifications of social workers. They emphasize *zhuanye* as a precondition for successful *goumai*. As explained above, however, frontline social workers have

51 Cho 2009, 53.

52 UWN.com. 2009. “CHINA: graduate unemployment on the rise,” 12 April, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20090409203634912>. Accessed 7 November 2015.

53 Pun and Chan 2013, 181.

54 Interview with a deputy director of an SWSA, Shenzhen, 20 July 2014.



no choice but to be “unprofessional” if they are to survive in this industry. Although the dilemma of expertise is structural, local government officials, and even some SWSA staff members, often explained it in terms of the “immaturity” of youth. In July 2014, at a reunion party for the staff of an agency which had dispatched its social workers to Guanghua, the “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) of frontline social workers emerged as one of the main subjects of discussion: “social workers learn nothing about professional ethics in college. After less than one or two years of working as frontline social workers, some insist that they want to become senior staff;” “I also met an applicant who boldly proposed the bottom line of her expected wage in the interviews;” “The ‘post-90s’ youth is really something. Many are uncontrollable and irresponsible.” In these accounts, the problems with the social work sector are shifted onto the “unprofessional” conduct of “unqualified” individuals.

Most social workers who decide to remain in the profession seek to gain “expertise” in any way possible, even when they realize the near impossibility of doing so. Professionalism is their last bastion of legitimacy not only in the eyes of the local residents who confuse them with agents of the state but also the volunteers who often question the difference between volunteer work and social work. In all, the technical approach, which looms large in the realm of social work in China as well as in other countries, is not an ahistorical mode of neoliberalized social work but a contingent outcome of neoliberal dynamics in which various rationalities and interests intersect across the uneven circulation of power.

## Conclusion

On the morning of 20 October 2013, I headed to Guanghua to attend a sports meeting. Organized by one of the two community service centres, the meeting was one of many events put on for local residents, about 90 per cent of whom are migrants without a Shenzhen *hukou*. In the morning, the social workers at the centre were busy sharing programme details and checking gifts and prizes. After lunch, about 20 young migrants who had registered as volunteers gathered to assist in the day’s event. They helped the social workers move sports equipment, gifts, loud speakers and advertising posters to a nearby basketball court, the only playground in this concrete jungle overgrown with high-rise apartment blocks for migrant tenants.

The main event started at four o’clock. Local residents, who were staring blankly at event preparations, began to gather in knots with their children. Among these local residents, however, there were hardly any native villagers whose *hukou* belonged to Guanghua. Since the building of the Foxconn town, the once-poor peasants have become wealthy landlords through building rental accommodation for the incoming migrant workers. Many have moved to downtown Shenzhen, or even to Hong Kong, and only visit their hometown “by helicopter,” as a taxi driver said jokingly, to collect rental payments or receive stock dividends.

The family shrine, located at the opposite side of the basketball court, still made the absentee landlords visible to everyone. Newly built this year with donations from families with the He surname, the shrine was mostly locked, in contrast to the playground across from it that was always open. Participating in the sports meeting with the migrants and glancing at the natives' closed shrine, I became confused about "the sense of belonging" (*guisu gan* 归属感) that the centre was expected to boost as it received sponsorship from the government. To what or where do those who participated in the sports meeting belong? Where does their sense of belonging come from? Does it come from the local community of Guanghua, or from the city of Shenzhen, as the government wishes? Does their common awareness of "belonging to nowhere" perhaps lead to a sense of belonging *among* them rather than *to* a certain locality?

During fieldwork in Shenzhen's urban periphery, the sense of belonging that I found was directed neither towards the city nor towards the building of a "harmonious society." Rather, it demonstrated an affective bond among the social workers and Foxconn employees – young, migrant outsiders in the city who were, if anything, unable to make claims on urban citizenship. In official events and ritualistic campaigns, the two groups met as "social workers" and "volunteers," respectively; at night time, however, informal intimacy replaced formal authority. Staying in cheap rental housing, most social workers, like other migrant youth, had little to do in their small rooms. After work, they usually went home, ate dinner, and then returned to the centre with their friends. Foxconn workers who registered as volunteers at the centre also joined them. Whether social workers or factory workers, these young urban aliens used the government-provided facility as their playground, where they chatted, played table tennis, surfed the internet, or watched films together. Just as the Foxconn workers were on the bottom rung of the outsourcing of global capital, the social workers in Guanghua were at the lowest level of the complex outsourcing of welfare functions. Encountering one another as "social workers" and "volunteers" who were expected to boost urban citizenship, these migrant youths shared a sense of precariousness while finding a temporary nestling place provided by the government.

This scene may not have been what numerous interlocutors imagined when they revitalized the field of social work as a profession. Not merely indicative of a Chinese "problem" of authoritarian governance, however, it prompts us to rethink social work as a series of practices in which the nation's historical legacies are associated with market transformations that have occurred at different times and on different continents. In this article, I drew attention to government purchase (*goumai*) as a window into social work practices. Instead of accessing social work in terms of its proclaimed goal (the alleviation of social problems) or key agenda (expertise), I attempted to unveil the neoliberal dynamics of *goumai*, which bloomed in Guangdong and started to spread as a model of social work nationwide with the full backing of the central government. Based on a textual analysis of *goumai*, I explored how developmentalist and modernist

approaches elided the neoliberalization of social work, including the containment of public expenditure, competitive bidding and preoccupation with market efficiency and technical knowledge, aspects of which China has adopted. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Shenzhen's Foxconn town, I revealed how such neoliberal-style outsourcing converged with state centrality, bureaucratic professionalism and the spectacle of mass mobilization, thus causing social suffering among frontline social workers. With a high turnover rate, most positions end up being filled with migrant youth from the countryside, who provide a cheap, flexible labour force as they struggle with the nation's upsurge in graduate unemployment as well as with forced flexibility between the city and the countryside. Governmental and scholarly attention needs to be paid to the paradox that institutional efforts for social care may not only reduce the existing types of social inequality but may also rely upon and reinforce them.

### Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF), Grant 2013S1A5A8022066. I would like to thank the people in Guanghua for their generous hospitality. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Urban/Ideology and Contemporary China Workshop at the Australian Centre on China in the World, Australian National University, in 2014, and at the Korea Workshop at the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in 2015.

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**摘要:** 在中国政府的大力支持下, 社会工作已成长为一个新兴产业。但和其他资本主义国家一样, 在中国的社会工作发展中也发现了新自由主义的产物, 这是如何产生的呢, 带着这一疑问, 本文中我特别关注到政府购买社会工作服务项目, 通常这被认为是对国家能力和领导力量的证明, 而不是以紧缩的预算将国家的责任转移给非政府部门的行为。通过对深圳富士康工业区社会工作实践的民族志研究, 提出新自由主义形式的外包囊括了各种历史遗留问题, 使得一线社工面临着不稳定的劳动条件。新自由主义运行机制最终依靠来自农村的外来务工人员填补了社会工作的空位, 加重了中国长期以来的城乡差异。关于社会保障的制度上的工作不仅会减少现存的不平等, 也会依赖并加强这种不平等。

**关键词:** 社会工作; 政府购买; 新自由主义; 外来务工青年; 富士康; 深圳

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