

# The Big Society in China: A Failed Experiment<sup>1</sup>

Jie Lei\* and Alan Walker\*\*

\*Sun Yat-sen University, China

E-mail: lejje199147@163.com

\*\*Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield

E-mail: a.c.walker@sheffield.ac.uk

---

*From 1988 the Chinese Government pursued a policy of ‘small government, big society’. The policy was determined at the highest level and, after a pilot study in Hainan Province, was implemented vigorously in a series of political reforms. It was the chief political dimension of the economic restructuring which led from state ownership of enterprises to the so-called socialist market. Like its economic counterpart, it reflected China’s adoption of neo-liberal ideology. The aims were to encourage both civil society and the private market to provide social welfare and, thereby, to restrict demands on public expenditure. However, it failed to realise these goals and was recently replaced by a more state oriented approach. The article discusses the Chinese big society project and, specifically, examines why it was introduced, what it consisted of, its impact on social welfare, the criticisms it attracted and its recent changes in nature. The article concludes by considering some possible lessons for the UK Coalition Governments’ big society project and any similar initiatives attempted in other countries.*

**Keywords:** Small government, big society, socialisation of social welfare, care for older people, China.

## Introduction

The leading objective of this article is to examine the Chinese attempt, starting in 1988, to implement a big society project. This case study examines the reasons for the introduction of this policy, as an accompaniment to the economic restructuring begun under the Chinese leader Deng Xiao-Ping; its impact on ‘social welfare’ (which, in China, means mainly the care of older people) in the form of the ‘socialisation of social welfare’; and the reasons for its recent demise, as the role of the state in social welfare is being reinstated. Although there are striking parallels between this Chinese case study and the project launched by David Cameron in the UK following the formation of the Conservative led Coalition Government in 2010, not least in their common neo-liberal aims to reduce the scope of state welfare and boost that of the market, their comparison is not a purpose of this article. However, the conclusion contains some reflections on the possible lessons from China’s experiment for the UK Coalition Government’s project.

## ‘Small government, big society’

Although ‘small government, big society’ (*xiao zhengfu da shehui*) has never been publicly proclaimed as a slogan by China’s top leaders, as David Cameron has done in the UK,

this term has been so frequently used since the launch of economic reform that its status as an objective of the high level leadership for some two decades cannot be doubted. Thus its currency can be easily tracked in the discourses of government bodies, academia and the media.

'Small government, big society' is often used to describe the preferred consequence of the constant reforms in government administration which have accompanied the fundamental economic changes in China. Both are functions of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) acceptance of neo-liberal prescriptions concerning the importance of the market and the need to reduce the role of the state in welfare (Chan *et al.*, 2008). Economic reform centred on the decentralisation of power to local units, such as state enterprises or rural collectives (Eleventh CPC Central Committee, 1978). Seen as the most important means to achieve this end, the market mechanisms were introduced and the establishment of the 'socialist market economy' was set by the CPC as the ultimate goal of the economic restructuring (Jiang, 1992).

Due to the fundamental changes in China's economic base, the original mechanisms of totalitarian control in work and life (Shaw, 1996) were considered to be impeding the establishment of the socialist market economy. The incompatibility between the economic and political systems prompted the initiation of political reforms. Bureaucratism was identified by Deng Xiao-ping as one of the primary barriers to socialist modernisation. As he argued:

Our leaders at different levels have been involved in many affairs in which they should neither intervene, nor can they do well and nor even can they handle ... With proper regulations, these affairs should have been done better by decentralising to enterprises, public institutions and social organisations. (1980: 328)

Consequently, with socialism and the dictatorship of the CPC, political reform in his mind was related to such measures as promoting younger leaders, streamlining the administrative structure and decentralising government power (Deng, 1987).

Later Deng Xiao-ping's determination to fight against bureaucratism was institutionalised in the Thirteenth CPC National Congress in 1987. The transformation of government functions was confirmed as key in the forthcoming reform of government bodies (Zhao, 1987). According to 'the demands of the economic reform and the separation of national enterprises from government administration', the contents of the restructuring of government bodies in 1988 all aimed at:

improving the unreasonable structure of departments and the low efficiency of administration by transforming functions, decentralising power, restructuring departments, reducing staff, minimising government administration in enterprise management, and strengthening macro-control capability. (Song, 1988)

Also, social organisations were expected to take up some of the functions of administrative departments. As the then General Secretary of the CPC, Zhao Zi-yang, (1987: 39) proposed, 'The effects of mass organisations and autonomous mass organisations at grass-root levels should be fully utilised, so that the people can carry out their affairs by themselves in accordance with the law.'

The notion of ‘small government, big society’ was born along with this political reform process. This slogan was first proposed by a government researcher, Liao Xun (1988), in his academic papers in 1986. These works immediately attracted the attention of the central government as their analyses and policy implications fitted neatly the purposes of the political reform. Liao Xun was soon appointed to the preparatory committee for the establishment of Hainan Province and mainly responsible for designing the government bodies. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that Hainan was chosen by the State Council as the pilot province to fully implement the political reform in 1988, the aim of which was to achieve ‘small government, big society’.

Upon the establishment of the province, Hainan should stick to the separation of the party from the government as well as from enterprises, to the simplification of administrative structure and to the initiation of more economic entities . . . in order to achieve ‘small government, big society’. (State Council, 1988)

Subsequently, great efforts were made more or less continuously by the CPC, over two decades, to promote ‘small government, big society’. This can be demonstrated by the similarity between the contents of the later political reforms and those in 1988. For example, it was emphasised by each of the reforms in 1993, 1998 and 2003 that, given the separation between enterprises and government, the functions of government should shift to regulation and macro-control. Also, in order to increase efficiency, the State Council instructed regional and local governments to streamline administrative departments, reduce redundant staff and leave more autonomy for social organisations (Luo, 1993, 1998; Wang, 2003).

In summary, fundamental changes to China’s economic base, especially the introduction of market mechanisms, have forced the CPC to relax its previous totalitarian control. This includes decentralising some of its power to enterprises and social organisations, transforming government functions in regulation, and increasing its administrative efficiency. All of these measures in the various political reforms were intended to achieve a state–society relationship called ‘small government, big society’. The following section discusses how this rhetoric has influenced social welfare (especially in terms of the old-age care) in post-reform China.

### The socialisation of social welfare

As constructed in the Chinese context, the concept of ‘social welfare’ (*shehui fuli*) differs considerably from analogous provision in the western welfare states (Leung and Nann, 1995; Leung, 2005; Chan *et al.*, 2008). Despite considerable variation in coverage and levels, before the economic reform most of the urban population were provided with comprehensive welfare programs by the *danwei* system (Bian, 1994; Walder, 1986; Walker and Wong, 1996). The non-employment-related social welfare, delivered by the Civil Affairs authorities, was narrowly defined as ‘residual’ (*buque xing*), only offering assistance to the most disadvantaged elderly, disabled and orphaned who were neither covered by *danwei* nor supported by their family (Wong, 1998; Dou, 2007). However, after the economic reforms the restructuring of the social welfare system followed the prescriptions of the ‘small government, big society’ initiative. *Danwei* welfare provided by state enterprises was quickly labelled as a ‘public burden’, because it was thought

to prevent state enterprises from competing in the market (Walker and Wong, 2009). Consequently, as former Minister of Civil Affairs Cui Nai-fu (1982–1993) pointed out, ‘Along with further reform of large- and medium-scale enterprises and the transition of their operational systems, some of the services previously carried out by enterprises would have to be transferred to society’ (1992: 137).

Facing the prospect of these welfare responsibilities released by *danwei*, the Civil Affairs authorities decided to promote the initiative of the ‘socialisation of social welfare’ (*shehui fuli shehuihua*). Unlike direct provision, as under *danwei*, ‘socialisation’ refers to ‘push the society and the people to carry out their affairs by themselves with the advocacy, regulation and subsidy of the government’ (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1991: 129). Later, the detailed contents of the ‘socialisation of social welfare’ were specified by the next Minister, Duoji Cairang (1993–2003), (1998).

Firstly, the range of recipients should be expanded from the narrowly defined targets to the whole of the respective group in society. For example, rather than those without family members, all frail older people could be admitted to state nursing homes providing they could afford the fees. Secondly, various sources of fund raising, such as welfare lotteries and donations, could be used to support public funds for social welfare. Furthermore, private investors were warmly welcomed to initiate businesses in the elder care field. Thirdly, community organisations were encouraged to undertake responsibility for the provision of care and support. Fourthly, volunteers were expected to be fully mobilised to support service delivery. In essence, the role of the state in social welfare should be restricted to regulation instead of provision.

The campaign for the ‘socialisation of social welfare’ was still a major one in the early 2000s. It was clearly instructed by a decisive official document that argued that social welfare should be ‘based on family support, supported by community and supplemented by social welfare institutions’. Meanwhile, the role of state provision was further constrained because it was also stated that ‘state-owned social welfare institutions should be the demonstrations while other ownerships of social welfare institutions should be the backbone’ (Office of the State Council, 2000).

In terms of the regulatory role of the state and the heavy dependence on private channels (Wong, 1994), it can be argued that the ‘socialisation of social welfare’ has been deeply affected by the rationale of ‘small government, big society’. For example, in a very similar vein to the discourses about the reform of state enterprises, it was also argued that the government was too involved in the administration of welfare institutions and social organisations such that its functions were both indiscriminate and over-extended.

‘Small government and big society’ is coming into formation because of the reform of government bodies. Regarding the administration of social welfare, the government should change their functions by separating away enterprises, public institutions and social organisations in accordance to the requirement of the socialist market economy . . . Only by doing this can the long-term problems of over-sized government body, over-lapping functions, over staffing, indistinctive governmental relationship with enterprises or public institutions, and serious bureaucrat practices be fundamentally corrected. (Duoji, 1998: 6)

Consequently, one of the two main solutions for reducing the functions of government in social welfare (e.g. the Civil Affairs authorities) was to emphasise regulation instead of provision – a classic choice in social policy, along with funding, with a direct parallel in

the UK in the 1980s (McCarthy, 1989). As Duoji Cairang (1998: 7) argued, 'According to "small government, big society", the functions of government should turn to macro-control by regulations and pass the role of managing welfare institutions from Civil Affairs to social organisations.' Furthermore, he insisted that the role of the government should be strengthened by 'initiating, organising and leading social forces, designing policies and plans, providing guidance and supervision rather than undertaking everything as before' (Duoji, 2002a: 687).

The other solution was to lay the primary responsibility of social welfare provision on to 'society'. This can be illustrated by the statements of Cui Nai-fu and Duoji Cairang.

As it will be heading towards the direction of 'small government and big society', many services which were conducted by the government should be carried out by society. Some of them will be delivered by the means of commercialisation and a considerable amount of them will be organised according to the socialisation. (Cui, 1992: 137)

The establishment of the socialist market economy requires the government to transform its functions and requires enterprises to transform their operations, which is in accordance to 'small government and big society' ... Therefore, it is urgent to develop the socialisation of urban services. (Duoji, 1994a: 57).

The social functions separated from enterprises will be undertaken by community ... so that 'small government and big society' can gradually come into being. (Duoji, 1999: 450)

Promoting the socialisation of Civil Affairs ... is the effective means and the right direction of developing civil affairs in the socialist market economy. It is also the basic requirement of adapting to 'small government, big society'. (Duoji, 2002b: 665)

Of critical importance is the fact that the transformation of government functions and the 'socialisation of social welfare' were combined with a substantial reduction in public spending on social welfare as a proportion of total spending. Thus the state's commitment to social welfare was steadily residualised between 1988 and 2009. Despite increased allocations, it can be seen from Table 1 that the proportion of government expenditure devoted to social welfare dropped by over 50 per cent. This severe financial constraint added to the pressure on the Civil Affairs authorities to embrace the big society project. As early as 1985, it was advocated that the work of Civil Affairs should be shifted from 'only emphasizing social profits and ignoring economic profits' to 'emphasizing both social profits and economic profits' as well as 'not only in relation to spending but also with regard to earning money'. Regarding the practice of social welfare reform, state-owned welfare institutions were expected to actively enrol self-financing customers, so that they could realise benefits without asking for a state investment. Also, to subsidise their expenditures, welfare institutions were required to develop new programs aimed at 'gaining quick returns by small investments' (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1985: 59–60). In short, as Cui Nai-fu (1988: 100) summarised, the experience of 'relying on social forces to run social welfare at multi levels and through multi channels' was 'to do more things with less money and to do things without money'.

The heavy pressure behind the search for alternative resources for Civil Affairs was maintained throughout the 1990s. Duoji Cairang (1994b: 190) stressed that 'the problem of the state finance disproportional to the needs of Civil Affairs in the temporary future

Table 1 Spending on social welfare as a proportion of total government expenditure 1988–2009 (100 million yuan)

Year	Social welfare expenditure	Total government expenditure	Percentage
1988	9	2491.21	0.36
1989	10	2823.78	0.35
1990	10.8	3083.59	0.35
1991	11.7	3386.62	0.35
1992	12.4	3742.20	0.33
1993	14.5	4642.30	0.31
1994	17.3	5792.62	0.30
1995	19.7	6823.72	0.29
1996	22.8	7937.55	0.29
1997	27.1	9233.56	0.29
1998	34	10798.18	0.31
1999	52.5	13187.67	0.40
2000	65.4	15886.50	0.41
2001	90.6	18902.58	0.48
2002	167.5	22053.15	0.76
2003	78.9	24649.95	0.32
2004	52.1	28486.89	0.18
2005	55.6	33708.12	0.16
2006	65.3	40213.16	0.16
2007	87.6	49565.40	0.18
2008	103.1	62427.03	0.17
2009	124.1	75874.00	0.16

Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs (2010).

should be fully considered'. Accordingly, 'the economy of Civil Affairs should be actively developed and the economic power serving Civil Affairs targets should be strengthened steadily'. For example, 'all kinds of Civil Affairs institutions should strive to make revenues and subsidise welfare provisions by running businesses'. Similarly, having admitted to the limited financial support coming from the state, former Deputy Minister Fan Bao-jun (1997) insisted that the focus should be placed on broadening the sources of revenue by the socialisation of Civil Affairs.

In summary, the authorities of Civil Affairs promoted the 'socialisation of social welfare' in direct response to the rhetoric of 'small government, big society'. This policy was aimed at expanding the scope of social welfare by means of non-state funding and provision. Similar to the reform of state enterprises, the government's function in social welfare was expected to transform from provision to regulation. At the same time, 'society' (the family, the market and social organisations) was assumed to be the ideal alternative to undertake the welfare services released by the government. In fact, the drive to achieve 'small government, big society' in social welfare was associated directly with the overt intention of the Chinese Government to minimise public spending. The striking similarity with the big society project proposed by the UK Coalition Government hardly needs emphasising. Does the withdrawal of state support, especially in terms of public spending cuts, necessarily enhance the prospects of a 'big society'?

### The failure of socialisation

The Chinese big society project assumed that 'society' could spontaneously substitute for the state, providing that the state retreated from the field of social welfare. After an experiment lasting two decades, the activation of the big society in China – in the absence of sufficient public funding – turned out to be a failure. With regard to the care of older people, there are five main criticisms that are outlined here. Firstly, the decentralisation of welfare responsibilities from the state tended to equate with the irresponsibility of the state. Even the senior leaders of Civil Affairs realised this deficiency and issued some strong warnings. For example, the current Deputy Minister Dou Yu-pei (2007) pointed out that:

Due to the deviation of some areas in understanding, the major responsibility of the government in social welfare has been neglected, which caused the severe insufficiency of investment. This not only constrained the supply of social welfare services, but also mitigated the initiative of social forces participating in it because of the insignificant demonstration by the government.

Secondly, the potential of civil society was very likely overestimated, especially when compared to the larger demands for social welfare. Chan's (1993: 108) survey revealed that, at the beginning of the 'socialisation of social welfare' in 1988, there were only about 200 beds in all the community-based hostels in Guangzhou (one of the three largest cities in China). Moreover, nursing homes for older people appeared to be one of the most unpopular services for social organisations even after 2000. The percentage of non-government organisations (NGOs) involved in this area ranked twenty-one out of all of the twenty-eight fields across the country (Wang *et al.*, 2001). In 2009, there were no more than 2.66 million beds in all kinds of nursing homes across the country; however, the official figure for the number of older people with full dependency needs was 10.8 million in 2010 (Zhang, 2011).

Despite its role as an important component in civil society, the efficacy of neighbourhood mutual help remained highly questionable during the great 'socialisation'. Chen's (1996) survey in 1990 showed that 83.3 per cent of the older people in Guangzhou named 'spouse', 'children' or 'other relatives' as the most reliable for the provision of financial help or personal care; while only 6.4 per cent chose 'friends/neighbours' and 7.7 per cent said they did not have any source of support. Likewise, a study conducted in Zhejiang Province in 1997 revealed that only 0.3 per cent and 0.5 per cent of the older people living in cities were looked after by 'friends/neighbours' or 'Street Office/Residents' Committees'. Worst of all for the big society project, none of the 1,303 older people in the survey was being helped by 'volunteers' (National Office of the Committee of Ageing, 2004: 392–400). This discrepancy between the needs of the older people and the provision of care by the local community prevailed throughout the early 2000s. Although 96.1 per cent of the respondents in Shijiazhuang (the capital city of Hebei Province) had expectations of community programs, 61 per cent of them never used the services. More than half of the respondents thought that they had a 'not strong', 'insignificant' or even 'not any' connection with the community (Zhou *et al.*, 2001).

Thirdly, it was the instability of funding that that deterred many of the forces of civil society. It was reported that among the fifty-three non-government institutions in Shanghai, only eight managed a small funding surplus while twenty-three were running

on a deficit basis (Li *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, it was estimated that 20 per cent and 29.3 per cent of non-government institutions were operating at a loss in Guangzhou (Zhu, 2006) and Hubei Province (National Office of the Committee of Ageing and China Ageing Association, 2009).

Fourthly, although the 'socialisation' aimed at expanding the scope of social welfare recipients, it was also the case that certain groups of potential users were excluded. For instance, probably because of the concern about minimising costs, nearly two thirds of the nursing homes across urban China, especially the privately owned ones, would only accept admissions from older people who could look after themselves (Zhang, 2011). Other than those in ill health, older people in financial difficulties were the other common group whose needs were usually ignored. The official statistics estimated that 14 per cent of the older people living under the poverty thresholds all over China urgently needed personal care (National Office of the Committee of Ageing and China Ageing Association, 2006: 437). However, according to a survey of 1,500 older people living in Shanghai, 12 per cent of the respondents could not afford the charges even though they were willing to live in institutions (Li *et al.*, 2002). Likewise, Luo and Lei (2008) suggested that this dilemma could face 8 per cent of the whole older population in Guangzhou.

Finally, the retreat of the state from social welfare was actually opposed by public opinion. According to a survey of urban citizens in the cities of Guangzhou, Wuhan and Ji'nan in 1989, 93.5 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'reform should not lower welfare levels'. Moreover, 78.8 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the social services delivered by the community were not sufficient (Chan and Chow, 1992: 135–6). Similar findings were reported in Wong and Lee's (2001) survey in 1996. A total of 1,000 respondents in Shanghai generally favoured a strong state commitment to welfare. For example, 70.1 per cent 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' with the view that 'the main task of government is to enhance economic development, not to improve welfare'.

As demonstrated by the experiences of the 'socialisation of social welfare', the big society project in China was mainly a function of the retrenchment of state support, especially in terms of the reduction in public funding. As a result, there was ample evidence, as illustrated above, to demonstrate that the attempt to achieve a big society in China was a failure. The decentralisation and dispersal of state responsibilities did not necessarily stimulate a growth in social organisations and neighbourhood mutual help. Consequently, those older people most in need and struggling in their everyday livelihoods were quite likely to suffer from the policy of 'socialisation'. Ironically too, the rhetoric of relying on society was actually opposed to the Chinese public's own views, which favoured more statutory support of social welfare during the economic transition.

### **The revitalisation of the state's role**

Due to the problems associated with the 'socialisation of social welfare' policy in China, recently there has been a clear departure from the previous vague nature of 'socialisation' in practice. First of all, developing care provision for older people was acknowledged as a state responsibility. Together with education, income protection, health services and housing, 'security for older people' (*lao you suo yang*) was proposed in the Seventeenth CPC National Congress in 2007 as one of the goals to achieve a harmonious society

(Hu, 2007). Despite once being claimed to be a country deeply affected by Confucian values (Jones, 1993; Walker and Wong, 2005), it may be surprising to some Western commentators to see that the role of family care is being disregarded by the Chinese authorities. This can be illustrated by the rationale of a forthcoming system of 'socialised elderly service' during the Twelfth-Five Year Plan (2011–15):

To strengthen the system of socialised elderly service is the only road for adapting to the change of traditional old-age care and for satisfying people's needs of old-age care . . . The shrinkage of family size and the change of family structure are contributing to the weakening of family care. This is leading to the increasing needs for professional institutions and community services. (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2011)

The inclusion of old-age care as a state responsibility demands the 'leading roles of government' (*zhengfu zhudao*) in the big society project, especially in terms of increasing financial investments. In charge of social welfare in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Dou Yupei (2008) reinterpreted the relationship between 'state responsibility' and 'socialisation': 'Socialisation is not to reduce the state responsibility. It is rather to strengthen the state responsibility, such as in planning, investment or regulation of elderly service.' In a similar vein, the former Minister Li Xue-ju (2003–10) (2008) stressed that, 'The role of the government as the main investor should not be changed in the socialisation of the elderly service . . . The major responsibility of the government in social welfare shall be of more importance and its funding shall be further increased.'

Thus the forthcoming system of 'socialised elderly service' will require the authorities to substantially increase funding, either for guaranteeing the operation of public institutions or for subsidising services carried out by social organisations (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2011). For example, between 2009 and 2010 500 million Yuan were spent on pioneering the development of home care in twelve provinces. This was the first time central government had supported local services for older people (Dou, 2010). Based on the numbers of residents and newly increased beds, nursing homes for older people in Guangzhou can receive certain levels of subsidies from the local government (Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs, 2009).

The revitalisation of state funding is directly connected to a new concept called 'appropriate universalism' (*shidang puhui xing*). This was proposed by the authorities of Civil Affairs and was used to replace the previous 'residual' approach (*buque xing*) to social welfare. The major difference between these two strategies concerns the beneficiaries receiving state support. On the one hand, a universal old-age allowance is distributed in most of the urban areas (Dou, 2010). In Guangzhou, once over the age of seventy, older people are entitled to a monthly allowance and this allowance will increase along with age (Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs, 2011). On the other hand, even if in great need, poor older people with family support were mostly overlooked by the previous big society project. They were only eligible for state protection when they had exhausted all sources of informal support. Now this group of older people can also be entitled to government subsidies on the basis of a means test and a needs assessment. For instance, the following four groups of older people in Guangzhou could receive a stipend from the government if they are in need of home-care services: the traditional Three Nos (people without any means of support); recipients whose incomes are lower than the Minimum Living Standard Guarantee threshold or the Low Income threshold

and if they are either living alone or unable to care for themselves; people who were ever honoured as a model worker and are currently unable to care for themselves; or people who are over the age of 100 (Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs *et al.*, 2008).

In summary, all of these measures signal the changing attitudes of the Chinese government towards the 'socialisation of social welfare', enabling the future funding and delivery of social welfare by a more active state role. In other words, the Chinese leadership has acknowledged the inadequacy of the 'small government, big society' policy and recognised that both social welfare and civil society initiatives require financial backing from the state. The big society was not able to substitute for the state, therefore welfare has had to be re-nationalised (or re-socialised) as a core government responsibility. Needless to say, this presents a challenge to the neo-liberal ideas that have influenced China's reform path over the past two decades but which are beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Conclusion: lessons for the UK?**

What pointers for UK policy may be extracted from this case study of the rise and fall of China's big society initiative? Despite the striking parallels, both rhetorical and substantive, between the Chinese policy and the Coalition Governments' approach (the latter could have been modelled on the former if this was not such a politically preposterous idea) care must be exercised in attempting to transfer policy lessons across such fundamentally different societies, welfare regimes and polities. But there are four potentially instructive conclusions to be drawn from China's attempt to implement a big society framework, which apply with equal force to both Asian and European contexts.

First, there is the obvious danger of constructing a major policy initiative based on a vague rhetorical notion that appears to lack any empirical connection to real social and civic life and any understanding of how civil society operates, such as the factors which determine sustainable civic and social institutions, and how community solidarity is created. Second, there is the failure to recognise the need for state investment to support innovations in civil society. The current UK government appears to be following in the footsteps of the Chinese one in implementing its big society programme in parallel with cuts in public expenditure (Corbett and Walker, 2012). In both cases too, the big society rhetoric is central to the legitimation of those cuts in public spending. Third, is the crudely false perception of civil society as an alternative to state funded social welfare, as opposed to a supplement to it (although not necessarily in a handmaidenly role). Fourth, there is the erroneous equation, in both the Chinese and UK big society initiatives, between society and the market, when the two derive from fundamentally different logics: altruism and a network orientation on the one hand and, on the other, self interest and individualism. Arguably markets are major inhibitors of socially rooted activities, pushing as they always do for competitive advantage rather than a needs-focussed distribution. The fact that, following two decades in pursuit of the big society, the Chinese Government acknowledged its failure and set a new course towards the state sponsorship of social welfare and the role of civil society within it presents an instructive lesson for other governments contemplating similar strategies.

In the UK, the big society policy can be seen as supporting the further colonisation of the public and social by the market, the consequences of which are entirely predictable on the basis of previous experience: increasing social inequality, reducing solidarity and less freedom for the majority (Corbett and Walker, 2012). These are inevitable consequences

of the 'strategy of inequality' favoured by neo-liberals (Walker, 1990; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). The Chinese Government is clearly worried by these tendencies and has therefore decided to scale back the policy and adjust its rhetoric accordingly. It is a matter of conjecture how the UK Coalition Government will react to the predictably similar outcomes from its own big society initiative and, indeed, to what extent the Chinese Government will further modify its own neo-liberal inspired economic reforms by a thorough reassertion of the state's role in welfare.

### Note

1 The original version of this article was published with Jie Lei's name spelled incorrectly. A notice detailing this has been published and the error rectified in the online PDF and HTML copies.

### References

- Bian, Y.-j. (1994) *Work and Inequality in Urban China*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chan, C. L. W. (1993) *The Myth of Neighbourhood Mutual Help: The Contemporary Chinese Community-Based Welfare System in Guangzhou*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Chan, C. L. W. and Chow, N. W. S. (1992) *More Welfare after Economic Reform? Welfare Development in the People's Republic of China*, Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.
- Chan, C. K., Ngok, K. L. and Phillips, D. (2008) *Social Policy in China Development and Well-being*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Chen, S.-y. (1996) *Social Policy of the Economic State and Community Care in Chinese Culture: Aging, Family, Urban Change, and the Socialist Welfare Pluralism*, Aldershot: Avebury.
- Corbett, C. and Walker, A. (2012) 'The Big Society: rediscovery of "the Social" or rhetorical fig leaf for neo-liberalism', draft available from authors.
- Cui, N.-f. (1988) 'Cui Nai-fu Zai Quanguo Minzhengting Juzhang Zuotanhuishang De Zongjie Baogao [Summary report by Cui Nai-fu on the Conference for the Directors of Provincial Departments of Civil Affairs across the Country]', in Ministry of Civil Affairs (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minzheng Gongzuo Huibian [Document Collections of the Work of Civil Affairs of the P.R.C. Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, pp. 99–101.
- Cui, N.-f. (1992) 'Cui Nai-fu Zai Quanguo Minzhengting Juzhang Zuotanhuishang De Jianghua [Speech by Cui Nai-fu on the Conference for the Directors of Provincial Departments of Civil Affairs across the Country]', in Ministry of Civil Affairs (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minzheng Gongzuo Huibian [Document Collections of the Work of Civil Affairs of the P.R.C. Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, pp. 135–38.
- Deng, X.-p. (1980) 'Dang He Guojia Lingdao Zhidu De Gaige [Reform of the leadership system of the party and the state]', in Editorial Committee of Central Party Literature (ed.), *Deng Xiao-ping Wenxuan Di'erjuan [Selected Collections of Deng Xiao-ping Part Two]*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, pp. 320–43.
- Deng, X.-p. (1987) 'Gaige De Buzi Yao Jiakuai [Reform shall be speeded up]', in Party Literature Research Centre of CPC Central Committee (ed.), *Shi'erda Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian Xia [Selected Collections of the Important Documents since the Twelfth National Congress of the CPC Part Three]*, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66680/4493952.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Dou, Y.-p. (2007) 'Woguo De Shehui Fuli He Youfu Anzhi [Social welfare and preferential treatment and settlement in our country]', <http://fss.mca.gov.cn/article/ldjh/200712/20071200007910.shtml> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Dou, Y.-p. (2008) 'Zhuoli Tuijin Yanlao Fuwu Shehuihua [To greatly promote the socialisation of elderly service]', <http://shfl.mca.gov.cn/article/ldjh/200809/20080900019982.shtml> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Dou, Y.-p. (2010) 'Jiakuai Jianquan Shehui Yanglao Fuwu Tixi [To accelerate the establishment of the socialisation system of elderly services]', <http://shfl.mca.gov.cn/article/ldjh/201011/20101100113189.shtml> [accessed 07.12.2011].

- Duoji, C.r. (1994a) 'Tuidong Shequ Fuwuye Quanmian Fazhan [Promoting the development of community service]', in Duoji Cairang (ed.), *Minzheng Gongzuo Yanjiu Yu Shijian [Research and Practice of the Civil Affairs Work Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp. 55–65.
- Duoji, C.r. (1994b) 'Duoji Cairang Zai Dishici Quanguo Minzheng Huiyishang De Gongzuo Baogao [Work report by Duoji Cairang on the Tenth National Conference of Civil Affairs]', in Ministry of Civil Affairs (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minzheng Gongzuo Huibian [Document Collections of the Work of Civil Affairs of the P.R.C. Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, pp. 184–91.
- Duoji, C.r. (1998) 'Guanyu Shehui Fuli Shehuihua De Jige Wenti [On several problems about the socialisation of social welfare]', *Zhongguo Shehui Gongzuo [China Social Work]*, 4, 4–7.
- Duoji, C.r. (1999) 'Yi Shequ Fuwu Wei Jichu, Tuidong Shequ Jianshe Shijian [Promoting community building based on community service]', in Duoji Cairang (ed.), *Minzheng Gongzuo Yanjiu Yu Shijian [Research and Practice of the Civil Affairs Work Vol. 2]*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp. 449–53.
- Duoji, C.r. (2002a) 'Zuohao Minzheng Gongzuo Bixu Zhengque Chuli Liuge Zhongyao Guanxi [Six important relations must be correctly handled in the work of Civil Affairs]', in Duoji Cairang (ed.), *Minzheng Gongzuo Yanjiu Yu Shijian [Research and Practice of the Civil Affairs Work Vol. 2]*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp. 679–89.
- Duoji, C.r. (2002b) 'Xinshiqi Minzheng Gongzuo De Zhanwang [The prospects of the work of Civil Affairs in the new era]', in Duoji Cairang (ed.), *Minzheng Gongzuo Yanjiu Yu Shijian [Research and Practice of the Civil Affairs Work Vol. 2]*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp. 656–70.
- Eleventh CPC Central Committee (1978) 'Zhongguo Gongchandang Di Shiyijie Zhongyang Weiyuanhui Disanci Huiyi Gongbao [Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee]', in Party Literature Research Centre of CPC Central Committee (ed.), *Sanzhong Quanwei Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian Shang [Selected Collections of the Important Documents since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee Part One]*, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66677/4493869.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Fan, B.-j. (1997) 'Minzhengbu Fubuzhang Fan Bao-jun Zai Quanguo Minzhengting Juzhang Huiyishang De Zongjie Jianghua [Speech by the Deputy Minister of Civil Affairs Fan Bao-jun on the National Conference for the Directors of Provincial Departments of Civil Affairs]', in Ministry of Civil Affairs (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minzheng Gongzuo Huibian [Document Collections of the Work of Civil Affairs of the P.R.C. Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, pp. 304–5.
- Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs (2009) 'Guangzhoushi Minban Shehui Fuli Jigou Zizhu Shixing Banfa [Temporary regulation about sponsoring the masses-run social welfare institutions]', <http://mztt.mca.gov.cn/article/yltjh/zcfg/201011/20101100112996.shtml> [assessed 07.12.2011].
- Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs, Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Finance and Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Health (2008) 'Guangzhoushi Shequ Jujia Yanglao Fuwu Shishi Banfa [Regulation of the community care in Guangzhou]', <http://www.gzmq.gov.cn/zwgl/flwj/gz/200901/3461.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs and Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Finance (2011) 'Guangyu Kuoda Woshi Zhangzhe Changshou Baojianjin Fafang Fanwei He Tigao Fafang Biaozhun De Gongzuo Chengxu De Tongzhi [Notice about expanding the scope of beneficiaries and enhancing the standard of old-age allowance]', <http://www.gzmq.gov.cn/zwgl/flwj/gfxwj/201105/9809.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Hu, J.-t. (2007) 'Gaoju Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Weida Qichi Wei Duoqu Quanmian Jianshe Xiaokang Shehui Xinshengli Er Fendou [Hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and strive for new victories in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects]', in Party Literature Research Centre of CPC Central Committee (ed.), *Shiqida Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian Shang [Selected Collections of the Important Documents since the Seventeenth National Congress of the CPC Part One]*, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content\\_6938568.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content_6938568.htm) [accessed 07.12.2011].

- Jiang, Z.-m. (1992) 'Jiakuai Gaige Kaifang He Xiandaihua Jianshe Bufa, Duoqu You Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Shiye De Gengda Shengli [To accelerate the pace of reform and opening-up and modernization: to seize great victory of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics]', in Party Literature Research Centre of CPC Central Committee (ed.), *Shisida Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian Shang [Selected Collections of the Important Documents since the Fourteenth National Congress of the CPC Part One]*, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66685/4494252.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Jones, C. (1993) 'The Pacific challenge: Confucian welfare states', in C. Jones (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Welfare State in Europe*, London: Routledge, pp. 198–217.
- Leung, J. C. B. (2005) 'Social welfare in China', in A. Walker and C. K. Wong (eds.), *East Asian Welfare Regimes in Transition*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 49–72.
- Leung, J. C. B. and Nann, R. C. (1995) *Authority and Benevolence: Social Welfare in China*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Li, D.-h., Hu, F.-y., Zhang, Z.-a., Wu, G.-q. and Zhuo, Z.-j. (2002) 'Guanyu Shanghaishi Fazhan Minban Yanglao Jigou Xianzhuang Wenti He Duice Jianyi' [Suggestions about the current situations, problems and solutions of the development of non-government institutions], *Shanghai Laonianbao [Newspaper for Shanghai Elderly]*, 29 June, 4.
- Li, X.-j. (2008) 'Guanyu Jiakuai Fazhan Yanglao Fuwu Shiye [On rapidly developing the elderly service]', <http://shfl.mca.gov.cn/article/ldjh/200902/20090200027020.shtml> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Liao, X. (1988) *Makesi Engesi Xiaozhengfu Sixiang Yu Dangdai Jingji Gaige [The Thinking of Small Government by Marx and Engels and Contemporary Economic Reform]*, Haikou: Hainan People's Publishing House.
- Luo, G. (1993) 'Guanyu Guowuyuan Jigou Gaige Fang'an De Shuoming [Explanations about the plan of the reform of the departments under the State Council]', <http://www.law-lib.com/fzdt/newshtml/20/20050729180818.htm> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Luo, G. (1998) 'Guanyu Guowuyuan Jigou Gaige Fang'an De Shuoming [Explanations about the plan of the reform of the departments under the State Council]', <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/10434/10435/20030306/937505.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Luo, G.-c. and Lei, J. (2008) 'Shehui Fuli Shehuihua De Xianjing Yi Guangzhou Laoren Yuanshe Weili [The trap of the socialisation of social welfare: a case of Guangzhou institutional care]', *Huadong Ligong Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexueban) [Journal of East China University of Sciences and Technology (Social Science Edition)]*, 1, 25–9.
- McCarthy, M. (ed.) (1989) *The New Politics of Welfare*, Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Ministry of Civil Affairs (1991) 'Minzheng Shiye Fazhan Shinian Guihua He Bawu Jihua Gangyao [The Ten-Year Plan of the development of Civil Affairs and the outline of the Eighth Five-Year Plan]', in Ministry of Civil Affairs (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minzheng Gongzuo Huibian [Document Collections of the Work of Civil Affairs of the P.R.C. Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, pp. 125–9.
- Ministry of Civil Affairs (1985) 'Minzhengbu Guanyu Yinfa Quanguo Minzhengting Juzhang Huiyi Jiyao De Tongzhi [Notice by the Ministry of Civil Affairs about circulating the summary of the National Conference for the Directors of Provincial Departments of Civil Affairs]', in Ministry of Civil Affairs (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minzheng Gongzuo Huibian [Document Collections of the Work of Civil Affairs of the P.R.C. Vol. 1]*, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, pp. 58–61.
- Ministry of Civil Affairs (2010) 'A11-Expenditures of Civil Affairs', *China Civil Affairs; Statistical Yearbook 2010*, Beijing: China Statistics Press.
- Ministry of Civil Affairs (2011) 'Shehui Yanglao Fuwu Tixi Jianshe Shierwu Guihua (Yijian Gao) [The Twelfth Five-Year Plan of the system of socialised elderly service (Draft)]', <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/zwgk/mzyw/201102/20110200133797.shtml> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- National Office of the Committee of Ageing and China Ageing Association (2004) *China Statistical Yearbook of the Work of Ageing 1982–2002*, Beijing: Hualing Press.
- National Office of the Committee of Ageing and China Ageing Association (2006) *China Statistical Yearbook of the Work of Ageing 2003–2005*, Beijing: Hualing Press.

- National Office of the Committee of Ageing and China Ageing Association (2009) *China Statistical Yearbook of the Work of Ageing 2008–2009*, Beijing: Hualing Press.
- Office of the State Council (2000) 'Guanyu Jiakuai Shixian Shehui Fuli Shehuihua De Yijian [Suggestions about speeding up the socialisation of social welfare]', <http://shfl.mca.gov.cn/article/zcfg/zonghe/200809/20080900019761.shtml> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Shaw, V. N. (1996) *Social Control in China: A Study of Chinese Work Units*, London: Praeger.
- Song, P. (1988) 'Guanyu Guowuyuan Jigou Gaige Fang'an De Shuoming [Explanations about the plan of the reform of the departments under the State Council]', <http://www.law-lib.com/fzdt/newshtml/20/20050721212027.htm> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- State Council (1988) 'Guowuyuan Pizhuan Guanyu Hainandao Jinyibu Duiwai Kaifang Jiakuai Jingji Kaifa Jianshe De Zutanhui Jiyao De Tongzhi [Summary forwarded by the State Council about the further opening-up and the acceleration of economic development of Hainan Island]', <http://www.hainan.gov.cn/data/news/2008/01/44717/> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Wang, Z.-y. (2003) 'Guanyu Guowuyuan Jigou Gaige Fang'an De Shuoming [Explanations about the plan of the reform of the departments under the State Council]', <http://www.5izy.cn/articles/h000/h02/1167352564d2193.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Walder, A. (1986) *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Walker, A. (1990) 'The strategy of inequality – poverty and income distribution in Britain 1979–89', in I. Taylor (ed.), *The Social Effects of Free Market Policies*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 29–48.
- Walker, A. and Wong, C. K. (1996) 'Rethinking the Western construction of the welfare state', *International Journal of Health Services*, 26, 1, 67–92.
- Walker, A. and Wong, C.-K. (2005) *East Asian Welfare Regimes in Transition: From Confucianism to Globalisation*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Walker, A. and Wong, C.-k. (2009) 'The relationship between social policy and economic policy: constructing the public burden of welfare in China and the West', *Development and Society*, 38, 1, 1–26.
- Wang, M., Deng, G.-s. and Gu, L.-s. (2001) *Zhongguo NGO Yanjiu 2001: Yi Ge'an Wei Zhongxin [Case study on China's NGOs 2001]*, Nagoya: United Nations Centre for Regional Development.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Allen Lane.
- Wong, C.-k. and Lee, P. N.-s. (2001) 'Economic reform and social welfare: the Chinese perspective portrayed through a social survey in Shanghai', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 10, 28, 517–32.
- Wong, L. (1994) 'Privatization of social welfare in post-Mao China', *Asian Survey*, 34, 4, 307–25.
- Wong, L. (1998) *Marginalization and Social Welfare in China*, London: Routledge.
- Zhang, K.-t. (2011) 'Quanguo Chengxiang Shineng Laonianren Zhuangkuang Yanjiu [Research of the urban and rural older people with dysfunctions across the country]', <http://www.cncaprc.gov.cn/info/13085.html> [accessed 07.12.2011].
- Zhao, Z.-y. (1987) 'Yanzhe You Zhongguo Tese De Shehui Zhuyi Daolu Qianjin [Advancing along the socialist road with Chinese characteristics]', in Party Literature Research Centre of CPC Central Committee (ed.), *Shisanda Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian Shang [Selected Collections of the Important Documents since the Thirteenth National Congress of the CPC Part One]*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, pp. 4–61.
- Zhou, W.-w., Yan, X.-p., Zhao, W. and Qi, X. (2001) 'Chengshi Laonian Qunti Shenghuo Xuqiu He Shequ Manzu Nengli De Xianzhuang Yu Wenti De Diaocha Fenxi [A survey of the current situations and problems about the needs of urban older people and the satisfaction of community provision]', *Zhongguo Renkou Kexue [Population Science of China]*, 4, 55–61.
- Zhu, Y. (2006) 'Guanyu Fuchi Minban Fuli Jigou Fazhan De Duice Yanjiu [Research about supporting the development of non-government institutions]', *Zhongguo Minzheng [China Civil Affairs]*, 8, 30–2.