

Chinese Social Workers' Participation in Public Health Crises and its Practical Implications

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Abstract:

Since the re-establishment of social work in the Chinese Mainland in the late 1980s, social work has confronted two major public health crises, namely, the SARS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first public health crisis, little attempts of social workers were captured, leading to scant public attention. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that social workers' efforts were widely noticed and valued by the Chinese society. President Xi Jinping highlighted social workers' professional advantages in psychological counselling and emotional support for people during the outbreak of COVID-19. This paper aims to provide a holistic account of Chinese social workers' participation in the fight against the pandemic in Wuhan during the lockdown period. It explores their motivations, qualifications, and approaches of engaging in the battle, the services provided to the vulnerable groups, and the distinct Chinese characteristics of their interventions. Moreover, by demonstrating the transferability of Chinese experiences, this study provides valuable insights for other countries seeking to adapt Western-oriented social work models to their local contexts, thereby offering a framework for professional advancement in diverse cultural environments.

Keywords: Social Workers; the Chinese Mainland; the Battle against COVID-19 in Wuhan; the Lockdown Period; Chinese Characteristics; Practical Implications

1. Introduction

In Western societies, social work has had a long history in handling disasters (Ku et al., 2009). The profession's involvement in public health disaster can be traced back to 1918 with the outbreak of three infectious diseases, namely, influenza, venereal disease, and tuberculosis (Kerson, 1979). Moving to the first decade of the 21st Century, efforts of social workers in combating the pandemics of SARS in 2003, H5N1 in 2006 and H1N1 in 2009 were recorded (Luo, 2021). Taking SARS in China as an example, one

saw social workers in Hongkong responding to the pandemic in a timely fashion, while in Chinese mainland, where the social work profession was only emerging, less intervention by social workers were reported. After nearly twenty years of development, social workers in the Chinese mainland were fully equipped to cope with public health disasters, the biggest of which was the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. As human-to-human transmission was confirmed (Ma et al., 2020), Wuhan was put under lockdown, and public transport was suspended as well. Communities in Wuhan implemented a lockdown as a way to contain the viral transmission. Such stringent strategies greatly contributed to the huge drop in infected cases (Washington AFP, 2020; Cyranoski, 2020). Despite the remarkable outcomes of the lockdown, Wuhan residents faced many challenges. In responding to their hardship, people from all walks of life tried to offer assistance to the residents either voluntarily or when requested by the Chinese government. Among them, social workers in the Chinese mainland seemed to be a new social force despite their low popularity amongst general public. Their efforts were subsequently noticed and valued by Chinese society. In the National Meeting to Commend Role Models in China's Fight Against COVID-19, at least four social workers were decorated with medals for their efforts (the Communist Party of China Network, 2020). In the emerging stage of the social work profession, how social workers fulfilled their duties during the pandemic became a question that needed answering. The authors here have tried to address this question through probing some specific questions, such as who were the social workers in this paper, what were their motivations, what about their payments of fighting against the pandemic, how about their fear, what were their families' attitudes, what were the services delivered to Wuhan residents, and especially what were the specific Chinese features of their participation in the battle against COVID-19 and their practical implications.

2. Literature review

There has been a steady stream of publications on Chinese social workers' involvement in the pandemic. With the onset of the pandemic in a context where social work was not popular, Chinese researchers promoted the idea that social workers were able to play some crucial roles in the public health emergency (Wei, 2020; Li, 2020) by showing the advantages of the social work profession (Wang, 2020 a; Wang, 2020 b). Some scholars turned to the hands-on experience of foreign social work in the SARS and Ebola epidemics, hoping to get enlightenment for Chinese social workers in coping with COVID-19 (Liu et al., 2020; Yuen-Tsang, 2020; Du, 2021). However, Western experiences were inapplicable in some cases and did not produce the expected effect as China differed from the West, calling for Chinese social workers to summarize, refine and reflect on the Chinese local experience (Du, 2021). Keeping this in mind, Chinese social workers tried to provide corresponding services in accordance with certain political, social and cultural environments of China, rather than relying on foreign theories and practices (Xu, 2020; Ren et al., 2021). For instance, social workers assisted cadres and community workers in implementing the lockdown order, checking residents' body temperatures, tracing suspected cases and close contacts (Banks et al., 2020), publicizing epidemic prevention and control policy for the returning people (Li, 2020), improving residents' understanding of epidemic measures (Guan, 2020), and easing the tension between doctors and patients, between residents and community workers (Peng et al., 2020). Additionally, "in coping with grief, great importance was attached to different traditional Chinese cultures to help the bereaved people" (Yu et al., 2022). Moreover, new mechanisms and models were developed, such as "integrative multilevel and multistage delivery of online mental health model" (Xu et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2021), interrelated mechanism

among communities, social organizations and social workers (Lu, 2020), and the "4+1 Online-Offline Remote Support Model" (Yu et al., 2021).

In addition, Chinese social workers generously donated medical supplies to social work organizations and shared their first-hand data, experience and strategies. This was in exchange for international social work associations' assistance to the development of China's social work education since 1988 (Yuen-Tsang, 2020). Chinese social workers also tried their best to serve foreign residents living in China (He & Sun, 2020) and also the Chinese people abroad (Ma & Lyu, 2021) because of foreign residents' misunderstandings of China's measures (He & Sun, 2020) and anti-Chinese behaviors in some countries (China Daily, 2023; Benner et al., 2023; Wilson, 2023). Furthermore, Chinese researchers successfully published articles in English to promote their first-hand experiences. For example, the article, "Psychological intervention on the dual-process model for a group of COVID-19 bereaved individuals in Wuhan", was the first academic paper on evidence-based grief intervention for COVID-19 bereaved, which was published in the OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying (Liu, 2022).

Despite the good performances of Chinese social workers, some limitations are evident. For instance, due to low visibility of social work in China, some infected residents preferred to request help from community staff rather than social workers (Liu et al., 2020). Social work agencies could not independently respond to the emergency because in the Chinese social context, administrative forces played a leading role in community prevention and control (Wen, 2020; Guan, 2020), and social work forces had not been completely included into the national and social governance system (Xu, 2020). Responding to the limitations above, researchers on social work have put forward some suggestions, such as incorporating social work into the country's overall intervention to major public emergencies (Gu, 2020; Li, 2020; Liu et al., 2020), strengthening capacity building (Xiang & Zhang, 2021), enhancing the leadership and coordination ability in inter-professional teams (Guo, 2020) and improving their professional ability in social governance and emergency affairs (Guan, 2020; Wang & Ma 2021). Taking into consideration Chinese practical conditions, social workers had to cope with the relations between administrative authority and professional autonomy (Guo, 2020).

The literature reviewed provided abundant information on Chinese social workers' efforts in the pandemic. However, the questions raised at the end of the introduction to this are not well answered by the existing literature. In responding to the questions, the authors launched this research, hoping to serve as a useful reference for coping with future public health crises in China and the rest of the world.

3. Research methodology and sample

We conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and forty cases of social workers' participation in the pandemic. We consulted published articles and proceedings of academic conferences. Moreover, the authors contacted the forty cases to introduce the research and invite participation. From September 2020 to November 2020, fourteen social workers responded to us and generously shared their experiences. Moreover, in writing and revising this paper, the authors went back to some interviewees for further information. More details could be found in Table One.

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews in the form of face-to-face interviews, telephone calls and WeChat video calls. Each interview lasted from half an hour to two hours. Five open-ended questions were answered by the interviewees: (a) What were the motivations that drove you to participate in the battle notwithstanding the sudden and uncertain nature of the pandemic? (b) Were social workers afraid

of being infected and what were their families' attitudes? (c) What made the social workers qualified to fight against the pandemic? (d) What were the main services that were supplied to people in Wuhan during the closed-off period? And (e) What were the features of social work with Chinese characteristics?

4. Why did Chinese social workers join the tough fight against COVID-19?

In this research, social workers mainly referred to the professional staff affiliated with social work agencies, communities, or hospitals. University teachers and students of social work majors were also included. Out of the fourteen interviewees, two were social work senior students, one a professor of social work, one a community worker with social work license, and ten social workers affiliated with social work agencies. Among the ten social workers, ten took charge of their social work agencies. Concerning the motivations, could salary-driven factors be the main incentive? According to the interview data, none of the interviewees-including social work students, university professors, and agency-affiliated practitioners-received direct payment from clients for their pandemic-related work. For most of them, their participation in pandemic prevention and control was conducted during their free time and was regarded as unpaid volunteer work. Social work students were purely unpaid volunteers, while university teachers got indirect benefits through research opportunities and academic recognition rather than the remuneration from the clients. Only a few agency-based social workers got payment, but this came from project funders based on their pre-existing service contracts, not from the clients. These funders used to buy their services for the community residents, and when the pandemic broke out the funders permitted the social workers to reallocate resources to the pandemic crisis, maintaining contractual payments despite the service shift. If salary-driven factors didn't make an impact, then what would the real factors be? According to our interviews, social worker interviewees said they joined the fight against COVID-19 out of their own free will. To be specific, they were convicted by the mission of social work and influenced by advanced figures on the front lines, seeking an opportunity for doing social work on the ground, and improving the image of social work to the public.

4.1 The mission of social work and the Communist Party

Regardless of the worsening situation, social workers across the country actively took the initiative to help the people in Wuhan either by working online or offline. Eighty percent of the interviewees regarded helping Wuhan as the social workers' mission. "When the pandemic broke out, the mission of social work drove me to support Wuhan, and I believed that my major could make a big difference. Therefore, I joined the battle to supply services online" (a senior student of social work majors in Wuhan, female, aged 20, 7 October 2020). A social worker who was commended as a national role model in fighting against COVID-19 explained that, "on mass media, seeing so many health care workers risking their lives on the front lines moved me deeply. As a member of the Communist Party, I regarded myself as a soldier who should stand up bravely and always be ready to sacrifice everything for the Party and the people. Now is the time to put our hands to the plough" (the director-general of a social work service center based in Wuhan, male, aged 45, 16 November 2020).

4.2 Deeply influenced by the positive actions of friends or family members

Fifty-seven percent of the interviewees also revealed that they were touched by others' deeds of devoting themselves to supporting Wuhan. "While chatting with a friend who was also a social worker, I learned that he was helping a community in severe situation by the means of WeChat, in collaboration with doctors, psychologists, and volunteers. His deeds inspired me to do something for Wuhan, so I joined the online service team after our talk" (a social worker based in Wuhan, male, aged 24, 10 October 2020). A student

who majored in social work shared that, “when the epidemic overwhelmed Wuhan, my social work teacher made an immediate response of launching an online support team. In the most difficult and desperate of times, she stood with Wuhan, which deeply moved me. When her newly-built team faced a staff shortage, I joined her without any hesitation” (a senior college student of social work majors, female, aged 20, 25 October 2020). Some interviewees were inspired by their non-social worker friends or family members. “I was encouraged by my two elder sisters. One sister is a retired doctor but chose to go back to work, and the other sister, a civil servant, joined the battle as a volunteer” (the director-general of a social work service center based in Wuhan, male, aged 45, 16 November 2020).

4.3 An opportunity to learn and practice

Some social work agents joined the battle with the purpose of putting knowledge to practice, testing social work theories and methods, and getting more practical experiences. “Social work is a practice-based major. The public health crisis provided opportunities of applying knowledge learned in class to the real world”, a senior student majoring in social work said (a senior college student of social work majors, female, aged 20, Wuhan, 25 October 2020). Moreover, “in participating in the battle, social workers could put the idea of social work into practice which would enhance the well-being of people and society, and it was also a chance to test the effectiveness of social work methods in responding to public safety crisis” (a social worker based in Nanyang city of Henan Province, male, aged 42, 13 November 2020). Furthermore, some interviewees participated in the battle for the sake of gaining practical experience. “I have little experience of public health social work and hope to learn more while also doing something for Wuhan. When I heard the call for social work volunteers to supply online services from a hospital, I had no hesitation to sign up” (a professor of social work based in Jiangxi Province, female, aged 50, 26 September 2020).

4.4 Improving public cognition of social work

Compared with Western countries, the initiation of social work in the Chinese mainland is relatively late, resulting in people's low-level recognition of social work. Bearing this in mind, some social workers participated in the battle with the goal of not only fulfilling the mission of supporting Wuhan but also enhancing public recognition towards social work. “A considerable number of people do not know what social workers really do. Social workers' involvement in the battle can make more people realize the importance of social work” (a social worker based in Henan Province, male, aged 42, 13 November 2020). Another interviewee echoed, “participating in the fight is an important opportunity to propagandize social work amongst the general public. Providing community residents with services helped them to know the social work profession and its values better” (a social worker based in Wuhan, male, aged 35, 15 November 2020).

5. Were social workers afraid of being infected and what were their families' attitudes?

As lay persons, social workers faced the fear of the pandemic as well. At the very beginning, eleven out of the fourteen interviewees worked online to supply services, reducing the risk of being infected. When the pandemic situation was not as serious during the initial outbreak, five out of the eleven interviewees shifted to offline services. Only three interviewees carried out offline services from beginning to end. As for these front-line social workers, what their family members' attitudes were and how to explain their selfless actions became a fascinating question.

“My family did not support me. In the afternoon when I left home to the front line, my husband quarreled with me, and he called my parents, hoping to stop me. At that time, I was quite optimistic because most

of the people who died were the elderly with chronic diseases, while young people were mild patients. On the other hand, the street committee which purchased services from our agency requested us to take care of a dependent child at an isolation point. I failed to find anyone to do this work. Although I faced the high possibility of infection, I hurried off to the child to fulfill my duty" (a chief inspector of a social work agency in Wuhan, female, aged 32, 21 November, 2020). Another interviewee (female, aged 55, a social worker in Wuhan, 28 November, 2020) recalled her different experience, "I have stayed at a quarantine hotel for one month until it was closed. There were no objections from my family members as my marriage ended many years ago and my daughter and parents had no idea of what I was doing. Many a time, I hung up video calls from my daughter and called her back by voice call, preventing her from seeing me in protective suit. My colleague asked me why not tell my daughter the truth that her mother was performing glorious deeds. I replied that I did not want my daughter and my parents to worry about me. After securing victory over the pandemic, I told my daughter what I had done. She expressed her worries for me but also commented that her mother was always so kind for helping people. I replied that if I did not do it, who would?"

6. What made the social workers qualified to fight against the pandemic?

Medical social workers were well equipped as the best candidates to deal with the public health crisis. It was estimated that, in the Chinese mainland, one thousand and thirty-four hospitals had set up social work department staffed by medical social workers (Health Commission of Jiangxi Province, 2022). During the pandemic, the social work department of Hubei Cancer Hospital fully participated in the battle on the front line, benefiting from its professional and geographical advantages (Jiang et al., 2020 ; Hubei Cancer Hospital, 2020). Social workers of Shanghai East Hospital launched online psychological services for their fellow doctors rushing to the front line in Wuhan, linked resources for Wuhan, and provided emotional support for Wuhan residents (Peng et al., 2020). Meanwhile, social workers who specialized in family, school, community governance, mental health and so on were also good candidates to meet some needs. Despite social workers' speciality in some domains, they were required to obtain training to guarantee the quality of services. "To be honest, dealing with public health crisis was really a challenge as I used to focus on community and social organization incubation. All of us, whether social workers or medical workers, were required to take crisis intervention training" (a social worker based in Wuhan, female, aged 25, 25 November, 2020). Another interviewee shared that, "China Association of Social Workers initiated training of psychological assistance and shared useful materials with social workers across the country. Moreover, foreign social work professionals also supplied training and guidance for the social workers in China" (a professor of social work major based in Jiangxi Province, female, aged 50, 26 September 2020). Moreover, "there are supervisors to guide our work and enhance the quality of our services through supervisory meetings held every two or three weeks" (a social worker based in Wuhan, female, aged 25, 25 November, 2020).

7. The services that social workers supplied for Wuhan people during the closed-off period

At the early stage of the pandemic, numerous supportive activities were organized online. It generally included psychological support for Wuhan residents and the frontline workers, assistance to the people staying in designated quarantine hotels or Fangcang hospitals, coordination of social resources, care to the children without guardianship and the elderly living alone, and grief counseling. Firstly, "many people were fearful of being infected. Panic and anxiety became more frightening than the

epidemic itself", said the director-general of a social work agency in Wuhan. In response to Wuhan residents' panic, the agency recruited volunteers to initiate online services. In WeChat groups, questions, like "My body temperature is going up", "I have coughed a lot", "I am probably infected", "I feel so hopeless", and "I don't know what should I do", were the most frequently-raised (M. Wen, 2020). An interviewee echoed that, "In many cases, people were not infected with the virus but the common cold. Our job was to work with doctors to identify their symptoms, so as to relieve their anxieties" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 24, 10 October 2020).

Secondly, as for the patients in Fangcang hospitals, the fear of the virus and the poor adaptability to Fangcang environment were on the top of the challenge list. Social workers responded to their challenges by answering their questions, giving feedback to their requests, supplying emotional support and coordinating with community workers to look after their children left at home, so as to make them stay in Fangcang and feel ease. When the patients recovered and were discharged from Fangcang, social workers provided follow-up services, such as helping them integrate into communities. In quarantine hotels, "Our clients were the close contacts, patients discharged from hospitals after treatment and recovery, and overseas personnel who had to do a fourteen-day isolation period at quarantine hotels. Our aim was not to kill their desire of going out; we, however, had to use professional skills of empathy and active listening to understand their difficulties so as to help them get through the quarantine period" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 55, 28 November, 2020).

Thirdly, the sudden advent of the public health crisis and the subsequent sharp increase in the number of infected people left pharmacies and hospitals with insufficient medical supplies. Social workers fully played their role of resources linker. "We contacted a foundation to clarify the intended recipients of the resources as well as the specific hospitals and communities that would receive allocations. Subsequently, the foundation handed out medical resources in accordance with our proposed plan" (the Director-General of a social work agency in Wuhan, female, aged 30, 24 October 2020). Worse still, the reserved staple foods, such as rice, flour, meat, vegetables and eggs, gradually ran out. "Central and provincial governments supplied relief materials to support Wuhan, but there was still a dearth of living resources. As a senior social worker, I have established partnerships with many charitable organizations. Thus, many daily supplies were linked through my personal relationship networks" (a leader of a social work agency in Wuhan, male, aged 35, 15 November 2020).

Fourthly, social workers paid a close attention to dependent children without companionship because their guardians were infected and isolated as well as the elderly people living alone. Concerning the children, "usually, we preferred to turn to the police to find temporary guardians for them. In some cases, if children's relatives could not be reached, we would send the children to rescue stations for a temporary stay (a social worker based in Wuhan, female, aged 25, 25 November, 2020). Sometimes, social workers acted as temporary mothers. "I was appointed to take temporary guardianship of children in an isolation hotel where I met a four-year old girl. She came to the isolation hotel with her mother who was a confirmed patient. Being separated from mother, the introverted girl became more scared. Firstly, I spent some time establishing a good and mutual-trust relationship with her. Later on, I gave more companionship and emotional counseling to the little girl by drawing, reading, dancing, doing exercise, and sharing fun things. Until her mother was cured, I fulfilled my duty of a temporary mother who had always been there for her" (a chief inspector of a social work agency in Wuhan, female, aged 32, 21 November 2020). Regarding elderly people living alone, a social worker shared, "there was an elderly man whose only offspring passed away and was referred to my social work agency. He was in a state of anxiety because he was running out

of sleeping pills. We turned to a psychiatrist for help given the fact that sleeping pills were prescription drugs and people could not buy the pills online or request from the pharmacy. From beginning to the end, I was there accompanying him online, chatted with him to relieve his insomnia, and showed concern for his feelings. On the day of Wuhan's opening up, the man shared a video of him playing violin. He said, "thank you for always accompanying me" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 25, 25 November, 2020). Fifthly, grief counseling was indispensable for every disaster-affected individual. Without timely intervention and treatment, it would exert a negative impact on their future lives. "Normally, potential clients were scattered in different online groups. In order to identify who was grieving, we observed daily conversations and informed them of our free services of grief counseling. If they needed the services, we would convey their information to the grief counseling WeChat group, which had psychological experts to supply one-on-one assistance (a senior student of social work majors, female, aged 20, 7 October 2020). Another social worker based in Wuhan (female, aged 25, 25 November 2020) shared a case: a Covid-positive woman had thoughts of committing suicide, as a result of her father's death from COVID-19 and the isolation from her infected husband. "In view of her situation, we fulfilled our common role of coordinator to form an online service team with doctors, psychologists and social workers. They talked to her, shared health knowledge about the epidemic and guided her to do breathing exercises in order to relieve her fear, tension and physical pain. Gradually, the woman accepted the truth of her father's death and gave up the thought of suicide. In the end, both she and her husband recovered and returned to a normal life".

8. The features of Chinese social workers' involvement in the pandemic

8.1 Mutual support between the Chinese government and social workers

In the Chinese mainland, it revealed a mutual support between the Chinese government and social workers. During the pandemic, considering the advantages of social workers in helping the vulnerable despite its low popularity among general public, the Chinese government issued a couple of official documents to legitimate social work forces' participation in the fight, such as "the Notice on Printing and Distributing the Psychological Counseling and Social Work Service Plans for COVID-19 Patients, Isolators and their Families" and "the Notice on Strengthening Psychological Assistance and Social Work Services in Response to the COVID-19". In this context, "the Wuhan government endorsed my social work professor's project without delay, allowing social workers to enter Fangcang Hospitals" (a senior student of social work major in Wuhan, female, aged 20, October 25, 2020). In turn, "social work gained a greater acceptance and a growing popularity from community residents. More significantly, social workers' painstaking efforts helped local governments build a closer tie with the grassroots" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 25, 25 November 2020), gradually becoming a powerful helper to the government and acting as the backbone of community governance" (a social worker in Guangzhou, female, aged 33, 30 October 2020). Mutual support between the Chinese government and social workers was key to tackling the challenges caused by the Wenchuan earthquake and the COVID-19.

8.2 The consistency of socialist values and social work values

The values of the social work profession fit well with the socialist values, making them share the same goal in the public health crisis. A head of a social work agency based in Wuhan commented that, "the Party committees gave top priority to the health and safety of the people. Even on the first day of the Chinese New Year, General Secretary Xi Jinping chaired a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau to issue directions to fight

the virus. In total, more than twenty meetings were held by the Standing Committee to study the strategies for epidemic prevention and control. Just as the Chinese government has always practiced the philosophy of putting people first, social workers always headed to the places where people needed them most by practicing the altruistic values of helping the vulnerable group" (the director-general of a social work service center based in Wuhan, male, aged 45, 16 November 2020). Without this strong commitment, "we could not be involved in the anti-virus work so deeply" (a social worker based in Guangdong Province, female, 30 October 2020).

8.3 Acting as a complement human resource to the primary-level Party Committee

The complexity of the pandemic sparked an urgent need of cross-sector cooperation to expand supporting networks, which was widely practiced by global social workers (Zerden et al., 2022; Franceschini et al., 2021; Sullivan-Tibbs et al., 2022; Delegation of the Government of Catalonia to the EU, 2020). In the Chinese mainland, before the pandemic, collaboration across different professions has been practiced and named as "linkage of three social organizations", namely, communities, social work agencies and social organizations were united to work together under the guidance of primary-level Party committee (Zhu, 2015). It had a distinguishing feature of primary-level Party committee playing a central role, while social workers acted as a complement human resource to it. In the battle against the pandemic, China Association of Social Workers (2020) wrote the synergy of the linkage mechanism into its work guidance, and later the linkage was extended to five organizations by adding psychological consultants and medical staff (Xu, 2023). Nevertheless, community party committees gave full play to their roles as fighting fortresses (Zhao, 2022), while social workers and other social forces carried out collaborative work (Chen, 2020), acting as a complement human resource to the primary-level Party. However, they played an important role in making up for the deficiencies of traditional administrative forces and establishing a relationship coordination mechanism to ease the tension between the public and cadres (Wei, 2020).

8.4 Marxist theory, ideological mobilization, and religious methods were practiced by and inspired Chinese social workers

In the Chinese mainland, Marxist theory is considered a powerful ideological weapon for understanding and changing the world. Among the contents of Marxism, concrete analysis of the specific problem is the living soul (Dong, 2023). Amid the pandemic, Chinese social workers practiced the philosophy by providing corresponding services in accordance with the needs of various groups, forming a local practice based on the political, social and cultural environment of China (Xu, 2020). An interviewee echoed that, "if the clients had common diseases and psychological needs, they were directly placed in the general WeChat groups; If suffering from COVID-19 or other special diseases, they were put in the secondary group for special services. As for the third group, one-to-one follow-up services would be provided. To sum up, according to the concrete conditions of service objects, the services were changing as well" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 25, 25 November 2020).

Ideological mobilization was an important method created and practiced by the Chinese Communist Party, "meaning providing rational and persuasive education to people in order to achieve a specific political goal" (Zhou, 2022). In the pandemic, mobilizing the whole nation to participate in the fight was important for successfully containing the virus. "In quarantine hotels, some isolates could not accept the quarantine policy or endure the fourteen-day isolation. We patiently explained the significance of quarantine to themselves and the whole society, the fact that all the expenditure of quarantine was covered by the government without any economic burden on individuals, and the contributions and sacrifices made by volunteers on the front lines. Such kinds of ideological mobilization gradually impressed the isolates and

helped them complete quarantine successfully" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 55, 28 November 2020).

Apart from the above, religions also could interpret the cause of the COVID-19 and supply solutions (Obadia, 2022 a; Obadia, 2022 b). In our research, social workers were inspired by some religious methods to reflect their practices during the COVID-19. One interviewee shared that, "I'm an atheist but observed a Christian event once. I found that their methods were similar to social work skills, but with better effects. A few families got together to read the Bible and share their mental state, which we called as group work in social work profession. In the sharing session, they talked freely about their troubles and worrisome. Everyone listened carefully, discussed it, and raised solutions. The most important thing was that they fully believed the solutions and had a strong ability to execute them, under the premise of common faith and trust relationship. I really enjoyed this session and was inspired by their methods" (a social worker based in Nanyang city of Henan Province, male, aged 42, 13 November 2020).

9. Implications

Globally, many countries, like China, have imported social work from the West, yet it remains far from being widely recognized by society. However, in terms of interventions in public health crises, social work in China has gradually gained public recognition and acceptance from the first SARS outbreak to the post-COVID-19 period. Notably, at the National Meeting to Commend Role Models in China's Fight Against COVID-19 in September of 2020, at least four social workers were decorated with medals for their efforts (the Communist Party of China Network, 2020). Following this, Beijing Municipal Health Commission issued an official document, urging Beijing to achieve the full coverage of medical social work in the city's medical institutions by 2025 (Xia, 2020). Moreover, social work profession was written into the Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council (Xinhua News Agency, 2018). Further, in 2023, social work department was unveiled by the Communist Party of China Central Committee. It is a new central department to help modernize country's social governance (Li, 2023). This little success may offer some valuable experiences for other countries around the world.

Firstly, it is crucial to establish a mutual support between governments and social workers. If social work profession has low popularity among general public, its development faces significant obstacles, needing support from the governments. In certain social work lectures, we often heard from social workers sharing their experiences in building relations with local governments via regular visits. It aims to enhance the governments' understanding of social work profession, its strengths, and achievements. Such understandings, in turn, make governments supply support, such as policy recognition and resource allocation, ultimately empowering social workers to better fulfill the mission in promoting social welfare and harmony. A notably example during the pandemic was timely policy support from the Chinese government, which legitimized and facilitated social workers' participation in the pandemic response. In turn, Chinese social workers became a powerful aid to the government and gained popularity from their clients. At this point, it showed a mutual support between the Chinese government and social workers.

Secondly, another insightful strategy for ensuring the survival and development of social work profession lies in its localization within the Chinese contexts. Amid the pandemic, it has been noted that Chinese social workers responded to COVID-19 flexibly by adjusting to the changing contexts (Ren, Wang and Rasell 2021). In the field of grief relief, "great importance was attached to diverse traditional Chinese cultures to helping the bereaved cope with grief" (Yu et al., 2022). Moreover, Chinese social workers took

on some work unrelated to social work, such as assisting cadres and community workers in implementing the lockdown order, checking residents' body temperatures, tracing suspected cases and close contacts (Banks et al. 2020), publicizing epidemic prevention and control policy for the returning people (Li 2020), improving residents' understanding of epidemic measures (Guan, 2020), and easing the tension between doctors and patients, between residents and community workers (Peng et al., 2020). Our interviews also confirmed this view. "In quarantine hotels, the routine work of social workers contained doing check-in, testing temperatures, making disinfection of carry-on items, supplying disposable household articles, making guest rooms, delivering three meals a day, purchasing temporary goods, assisting doctors with nucleic acid testing, performing daily disinfection, providing psychological support and assessing special needs" (a social worker in Wuhan, female, aged 55, November 28, 2020). It seems that social workers engaged in a lot of non-professional work, but this is a typical case of the localization of social work in China. Through these works, they established close ties with the people and finally obtained recognition and popularity from the public.

Lastly, from a global perspective, social workers across nations should abandon ideological oppositions and actively embrace diverse and constructive philosophies to advance social work profession. In the fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese social workers not only applied Marxist principles in their practice but also were inspired by some certain religious methods to reflect their practices, despite identifying as atheists. By the same token, Marxism should not be confined to the socialist countries; rather, it merits global recognition and scholarly exploration. This approach aligns with social work's principle of "respect for diversity" (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). By overcoming rigid ideological barriers, social workers are able to embrace diverse philosophies, enrich the profession's theoretical framework, and build a collaborative global network (Midgley, 2010).

Limitation: In spite of collecting abundant cases and conducting interviews with social work professionals, there is still a limitation in the data collection. The authors did not interview the service users to ask their opinions on the roles social workers played in the pandemic. The authors hope to remedy this in future research and hope this research will lead to more extensive research.

Informed Consent Statement: Ethical approval was sought prior to the interviews, and informed consent was obtained from all the interviewees. Confidentiality was addressed through the use of pseudonyms for them.

Data Availability Statement: All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article. More data is unavailable to share due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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