

# Social work in the process of Chinese-style modernization: Process, characteristics and operation mechanism

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**Abstract:** Since the founding of New China, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, a new modernization road, a Chinese-style modernization development road has been stepped out. Among them, using social work as a system setting and governance tool to participate in the solution of major national strategic issues is an important way for the Communist Party of China to govern the country. The relevant social work policy texts formulated and implemented by the state since the founding of the People's Republic of China have "effectively enhanced the effectiveness of social work in participating in grassroots social governance, actively responded to the realistic requirements of social governance innovation, and played an irreplaceable fundamental role in ensuring basic people's livelihood, providing basic social services and innovating grassroots social governance". This paper places social work in the process of modernization, clarifies the path, characteristics and logical mechanism of the Communist Party of China to promote Chinese-style modernization through social work, and analyzes the principal position, operating mechanism and laws of social work in the process of modernization.

**Key words:** Chinese-style modernization; Social work; Institutional setting

The proposition of "Chinese-style modernization" put forward by the 20th National Congress has the dual attributes of noun and verb, that is, Chinese-style modernization = Chinese-style + modernization. As a noun, Chinese style refers to "socialist modernization led by the Communist Party of China, which has common features of modernization of other countries, and more importantly, has Chinese characteristics based on its own national conditions" []. As a verb, modernization refers to China's new journey to comprehensively build socialist modernization, including comprehensive modernization in the political, economic and social fields. In the new journey of building China into a modern country, social work, as a theoretical basis for modernization or an institutional tool to help social governance, has gone through administration-led and education-led modernization to a coexistence of theory and practice, and has played a huge role in promoting economic and social modernization. Therefore, it is necessary to make a systematic analysis of the modernization process of social work from the perspective of Chinese modernization.

## 1. Modernization of the development course of social work

Tracing back to its origin, social work in China has experienced a history of development from civil affairs work, including civil affairs leading, education first and practice later, as well as the modernization transformation without theories, and this transformation is a long-term process combining the will of the state with the gradual change of time and space.

### (1) Planned economy period: modernization led by civil affairs work

Western social work naturally diverts from charity, while Chinese social welfare and social assistance work has been involved by the government since ancient times, presenting social work services in the form of civil affairs work. In the period of planned economy, the typical feature of social work in China is the overall control of the society by the state, forming a "bureaucratic system" of helping people that the government does everything [], that is, the government incorporates all kinds of social and civilian service groups into the national institutional structure, making them civil affairs departments that implement the will of the state and participate in the construction of social modernization. At this stage, the unitary structure system of "isomorphic integration" dispelled the policy soil for the survival and development of social work. Therefore, when the discipline was adjusted in 1952, the social work major in colleges and universities was canceled because of "no use", but the actual service activities similar to social work slowly survived in the face of "mass work". In fact, under the background of "unit system", the administrative work replaces the function of social work, and China's social work presents the characteristics of "civil affairs work is social work with Chinese characteristics" [].

### (2) The period of reform and opening up: the modernization of "education first"

The so-called "education first", one is to adopt the development strategy of training professional talents first, and the other is that professional concepts and professional methods are "ahead" of social practice. In the 1980s, in the context of the restoration and reconstruction of sociology, the advantages of social work in helping the modernization of society have been paid much attention, but they have not been widely recognized. Therefore, after the restoration and reconstruction of social work was not fully launched, on the contrary, after the "Madian Conference", colleges and universities began to offer social work professional education courses one after another. At this stage, the Ministry of Social Work and the Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly cultivated civil affairs talents, and its teaching content was mainly introduced to the western social work theory and experience. It can be seen that social work can be restored and regenerated as a "training system". Through "education first", the popularization of professional concept of social work and the dissemination of professional knowledge have been realized, and the rapid development of social work education in China has been promoted. However, social work education has actually become something that exists before social needs, which makes the development of social work profession divorced from practical practice, and the construction of theory and the development of practice have the problem of "embedding suspension" [].

### (3) The period of modernization: the “two-way promotion” of theory and practice of modernization

At this stage, the mutual construction of social work theory and practice is obvious. On the one hand, social work has realized the care of theory over reality in the modernization. For example, an increasing number of professionals participate in training and obtain vocational certificates, and a trend of integration of professional and local social workers is beginning to emerge. On the other hand, local practice challenges and revises existing social work theories. With the development and deepening of modern society, new challenges have been put forward to the existing social work theories. With the help of practice, the theories have also begun the road of theoretical construction and generation of practice. That is, social work theory becomes the paving stone of practical practice, realizing the expansion and production of practical field; Practice becomes the core element of theoretical production and development through the reflection and construction of practical workers. Therefore, the mutual shaping and construction of theory and practice became a prominent feature of the modernization of social work in this period.

The course of the modernization of social work is the process of civil administration leading, theory first, practice later and theory and practice construction. This process changes the traditional theory and practice duality of subject and object, moves towards “intersubjectivity”, and realizes the symbiosis and mutual construction of theory and practice.

## 2. The logical mechanism of social work modernization

The Communist Party of China promotes Chinese-style modernization through social work, which implies a profound internal mechanism, namely, the tool attribute, the actor attribute and the need motivation.

### (1) Tool attribute: institutional setting and governance characteristics in the development of social work

As an “institutional” setting, the development of social work is closely related to the national institutional changes, and as a tool of governance, it can be used continuously. On the one hand, as a static institutional structure, the introduction, cancellation, restoration and development of social work are closely related to the “compulsory institutional changes” of the country. In the early years of the Republic of China, social work was introduced as an “imported product” to transform Chinese society, but its development was difficult due to the lack of national policy support. After the Social Affairs Department of the government of the Republic of China was established and reassigned, social work was incorporated into the national governance framework and entered a period of rapid development. After the founding of New China, limited by the planned economic system and the unit system, the department of Sociology in China was cancelled, and the social work subject attached to the department of sociology was forced to cancel. After the reform and opening up, social work education was restored and rebuilt with the promotion of administrative policy. After the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, social work was embedded in the concept of national governance and top-level design, and substantial breakthroughs and rapid development were made in education and practice. After the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, in the context of social governance innovation, social work practice has become an obvious latecomer. In addition, the establishment of the “government purchase service” mechanism, the convening of the 20th Party Congress, and more social subjects to assume the responsibility of public service, which provides support and guarantee for the development of social work from the policy and environmental aspects. On the other hand, the promotion of Chinese-style modernization is a grand systematic project. Social work with public attributes needs to be continuously applied for a long time, and the Party leadership provides a supporting mechanism for it. The Communist Party of China has successfully injected the party’s characteristics of serving the people wholeheartedly and governing philosophy into social work services. and made full use of professional means to help the people, focusing on solving the people’s urgent problems and worries, and laying a solid foundation for the Party’s governance [1]. Under the leadership of the Party, social work, as a helping profession, has developed into an important social force assisting the government in solving people’s livelihood problems. Its starting point and goal are focused on the people, and it is an important institutional setup for implementing the people-centered development philosophy. This coincides with the concept of “people-centered” scientific development implemented in Chinese modernization. It can be seen that placing the leadership of the Party at the core of social work can better promote the benign operation and development of social work.

### (2) Attributes of actors: unitary leadership and multiple shaping in the development of social work

In the process of modernization, the Communist Party of China has constantly changed the constitution of social work development to adapt it to the Chinese-style modernization development system, and the transformation contains the characteristics of “univariate leadership” and “pluralistic shaping”. From the perspective of “unitary leadership”, social work has the “attributes of socialism with Chinese characteristics”. First, it always adheres to the overall leadership of the Communist Party of China and serves the modernization; Second, based on the basic national conditions at the present stage, the localization of social work. From the perspective of “pluralistic shaping”, the development of social work is shaped by multiple actors. After the founding of New China, China’s social work went through the road of “Western learning spreading to the east”, “education first” and “practice later”, and played an important role in social governance and social service. Although the social work major in colleges and universities was cancelled after the discipline adjustment in 1952, its survival has not been extinguished, but since its restoration and reconstruction, generations of social scholars, from missionaries to overseas students to government officials, have been driven by the two wheels of theory and practice. Gradually realized the shift from “complete ownership” of civil affairs experience to professional social work practice, which not only provided space for the expansion of social work practice field, but also provided a guarantee for the Communist Party of China to actively participate in the powerful leadership of social work in the Chinese-style modernization.

### (3) Motivation of need: “forced by problems” in the development of social work

As an institutional tool to solve social problems and improve social governance, responding to social needs is an important thrust for the development of social work, and social work has been deepened in the modernization process of constantly solving problems. During the Republic of China, the introduction of social work in our country was the result of forced problems. Under the intrusion of industrialization, urbanization and “strong ships and guns” by foreign powers, the original ways of helping others in our country could not alleviate a series of social contradictions, so social work was constructed. After the reform and opening up, the dissolution of the unit system, the development of the market economy, and the increasing social demand, the existing work mode and response ability of the Ministry of Civil Affairs have been greatly challenged, which has created the soil for sustainable survival of social work. Since entering the 21st century, the degree of modernization has deepened, and social contradictions have caused reforms at the social level, forcing social work to begin a social turn, that is, social work has become a scientific method and social system for modern social management and public service [1]. After the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the CPC, social work has developed rapidly with the support of the government. The 20th CPC National Congress put forward the proposition of Chinese-style modernization, which endowed the development of social work with new tasks and problems of the era. That is to say, the modernization of social work is socialist in nature. It should not only take root in the “national conditions” to address the people’s immediate difficulties and aspirations, but also firmly promote common prosperity and build a community with a shared future for mankind.

In a word, the modernization process of China’s social work is closely related to the top-level planning and arrangement of the state, and is also the product of multiple shaping of practical subjects such as missionaries, civil affairs personnel, and scholars. Its deep-seated “problem forcing” is guiding the transformation of social work into the reality of solid promotion of the modernization of China’s social governance.

### 3. Make steady progress on the road of Chinese-style modernization

Taking the road of Chinese-style modernization as the field and exploring the operation mechanism of social work taking root in China’s “national conditions”, we can see the overall picture of the Communist Party of China’s realization of building a new modern society through social work, a system setup with socialist nature. On the one hand, the Chinese-style modernization road is socialist in nature. The Chinese-style modernization path is led by the Communist Party of China, and the leadership of the Communist Party of China determines that social work can always move forward along the right path. On the other hand, social work has an obvious socialist character. The development concept, development constitution and overall design of social work are highly consistent with the socialist road. The institutional setup, the attributes of the actors and the motivations of the needs for the survival and development of social work are interlinked, which drives social work steadily towards the direction of Chinese-style modernization. The institutional arrangement and support of the state give social work the legitimacy to survive, and the leadership of the Communist Party of China gives social work the continuity of its operation. Social work with public attributes improves the needs of social governance, lays the foundation for the effectiveness of social work’s participation in modernization, and is an important force to promote the process of Chinese-style modernization.

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