

The Evolutionary Logic of Grassroots Governance Specialization: A Case Study of Social Work Practice in Yunnan Province, China

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Abstract

Since the implementation of reform and opening-up policies, professional social work in China has rapidly developed and has been institutionally recognized for its effectiveness in grassroots governance. This study examines the evolution of professional social work in Yunnan's grassroots governance, applying structure-action theory to explore the rationale behind professionalization and optimize these practices. Using qualitative methods, including secondary data analysis, stakeholder interviews, and observations, the findings highlight four aspects of social work evolution: 1) Development path: from professional education to service; 2) Resource provision: from folk reliance to system compatibility; 3) Role transition: from social experimentation to policy implementation; and 4) Organizational structure: from embeddedness to authentication. The study concludes that social work in grassroots governance in Yunnan is a dynamic specialization, professionalism, and service practice process. Community-based governance responds to social issues through an integrated system. National governance is characterized by policy and government leadership, while local innovation is encouraged. Due to its strategic location, the specialization of grassroots governance supports stable border development, national unity, and international cooperative governance.

Introduction

Structure-action theory sees action and structure as two integral aspects of human social practice. In other words, structure is both the condition for human beings to engage in social practice and the product of human social practice (Yang, 2004). Social work has a practical character (Bogo, 2018; He, Chen, Ku, & Ye, 2022). The use of the "structure-action" perspective can better

reflect the positive, collective, and constructive characteristics of "social work action" (He, 2019).

The recovery and rapid development of professional social work in China was spurred by reform and opening-up policy. In December 1978, China began implementing reform policies, which, internally, established a socialist market economic system, stimulating both the market and society. Externally, opening up facilitated

China's integration into the global development landscape, enhancing opportunities for exchanges, mutual learning, communication, and cooperation with other countries in politics, economy, culture, technology, and other fields.

In 1987, the Beijing Madian Conference was held, confirming the professional status of social work and initiating professional social work education in New China. In 1992, the China Association of Social Workers (established in 1989) joined the International Federation of Social Workers. The rapid development of higher education and membership in the International Federation of Social Workers not only clarified the professional legitimacy of social work but also established its legal status in foreign cultural exchanges.

As a significant historical background, the reform and opening-up policy promoted China's rapid economic development. However, it also exposed social problems and deficiencies in people's welfare. To address these social issues, professional social work has been continuously embedded in social governance through practical learning, experimental research, employment, etc., and has kept pace with traditional administrative, social work, interweaving with each other to deal with grassroots livelihood issues jointly.

The 19th CPC National Congress proposed strengthening the construction of a community governance system, pushing the focus of social governance to the grassroots level, fully utilizing the role of social organizations, and realizing the positive interaction between government governance, social mediation, and residents' self-governance (Xi, 2017). Professional social workers have not only responded to these calls but also achieved remarkable results in community services and community governance. These achievements have gained social legitimacy, entered the central discourse and top-level design, established its institutional identity, and made the stakeholders proud of their contributions.

In short, the reform and opening-up policy has provided a relaxed policy environment, abundant resources and diversified social experimental fields for the development of social work in New China. The development of professional social work in Yunnan also emerged and formed an evolutionary trajectory under the policy background of reform and opening-up.

Against this backdrop, this research addresses the question of how the participation of professional social workers in grassroots governance practices developed in the broader Chinese institutional context and the specific local context of Yunnan. Therefore, this study examines the evolution of professional social work in Yunnan's grassroots governance, applying structure-action theory to explore the rationale behind professionalization and optimize these practices.

Review of Literature

The debate over the binary opposition of social ontology, a fundamental question in sociology, has been shaped by the perspective of key figures such as Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, and Parsons. These scholars have debated which is more fundamental to social ontology and better explains the social order of human groups: structure (or system) or action (or individual actors) (Zhang, 2000). Durkheim (1893) divided the social structure into mechanical and organic solidarity, signifying society's transition from tradition to modernity. Levi-Strauss argued that social structure reflects the universal psychological mechanism of human beings and is manifested in different forms across different cultures (cited in Swartz, 1997). Parsons (1951) emphasized that structure has a function.

The most prominent theory regarding "action" is Max Weber's social action theory. Weber (1922) pointed out that social actions have meanings and can be divided into instrumental rational actions, value rational actions, emotional actions, and traditional actions. Habermas (1985)

divided social actions into purposive actions and communicative actions. Purposive actions are instrumental or strategic, following technical rules based on empirical knowledge. Communicative actions emphasize mutual understanding and coordinate behavior between subjects through language.

In short, the structural paradigm has the characteristics of objectivism, emphasizing the determinism of structure and the macroscopic nature of analysis. The action paradigm has the attributes of constructivism, emphasizing individuals' initiatives and the microscopic nature of analysis.

The masters of the structure-action paradigm are Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. They stated that structure (field) and action (habitus) are mutually generated relationships based on practice. Giddens (1984) posited that the subject of action and social structure based on practice are mutually constructed. Social structural characteristics exist as "memory traces" in the "practical consciousness" of actors. Social structure is the system or rules governing social elements. There are three types of rules: expressive rules are symbolic systems and discourse methods; normative rules are codified legal systems; and dominant rules are economic systems formed by allocative resources or political systems formed by authoritative resources.

Due to the limitations of actors' cognitive and practical abilities, purposeful actions will have unexpected consequences, and many recurring unexpected consequences will form social systems. Giddens (1984) identified three types of "actor subjectivity." The first was "discursive consciousness," the "intentionality" of actors, which can theoretically explain their actions in the form of discourse. The second was the "unconscious," similar to Freud's explanation. The third was "practical consciousness" – the fundamental characteristic of structuration theory.

It was the consciousness of actors knowing how to act without verbal expression or the "mutual knowledge" of actors.

Bourdieu was committed to constructing a practice-oriented social totality science, which was reflected in a research path of "generative structuralism" and effectively integrated the micro-analysis of individual actions with the macro-analysis of structures. Bourdieu realized the mutual construction of "structure-action" by constructing concepts such as "field" and "habitus" (cited in Swartz, 1997).

The application of "structure-action" theory to research on Chinese social work reflects on both the practical development and theoretical construction of social work in China. The core theme was to explore the path of "indigenization" of social work since the reform and opening-up and propose the current shift of social work to social governance (Wang, 2015; Xu, 2023; Hu, Wu & Fei, 2018). This marked the beginning of a new journey of professional practice development guided by Chinese-style modernization in the future (Wang, 2023a).

The discussion on the structure focuses on the national top-level design and the implementation of relevant policies, such as the establishment of the Social Work Department, CCCPC (Xu, 2023; Wang, 2023b), the construction of social work stations (Zhang, 2022; Xu, 2021), and the implementation of the government purchase service policy (Meng & Gray, 2024; Xiang & Zhang, 2023; Kan & Ku, 2023). However, academic research tends to focus on the action power of social work professionals. Representative viewpoints include reflections on the advancement of Chinese social work education (Zheng, 2020; Li, Han & Huang, 2012), reshaping knowledge and value (Tong & Zhou, 2022; Xu, Li & Cui, 2022), and emphasizing action research to refine practical wisdom to form knowledge (He et al., 2022).

Cultural awareness and diversity are essential for social workers (Xu et al., 2023; Lin, 2022). The service objects are not only the disadvantaged groups but also focus on “the old and the young” (Zhou, 2024; Howell, Fisher & Shang, 2020). Of course, the most influential is the “embedded theory” (Wang & Yuen-Tsang, 2009; Wang, 2011). Wang (2011) pointed out that professional social work is embedded in the original social service field to seek development. Different from the single perspective of system or action, He (2019) stated that the use of the “structure-action” perspective can better reflect the positive, collective, and constructive characteristics of “social work action.” Xu and Qin (2023) argued that government institutional empowerment and professional self-construction of social work are the two core driving forces for the rapid development of Chinese social work since its restoration and reconstruction.

In short, the structure - action paradigm combines social transformation with professional action to conduct a holistic historical examination of the development of grassroots governance professionalization.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research method. It focuses on the social work profession after the reform and opening - up, which is embedded in China's traditional administrative service system. Social workers continuously participate in the grassroots governance space with autonomous action, eventually gaining recognition at the top level of national design. This top-down promotion enables the social work profession to intervene more deeply in grassroots governance, shaping a new path of specialization with Chinese characteristics.

This study examines the generation mechanisms of the historical evolution logic of social work participation in grassroots governance. This

exploratory, inductive study was conducted through qualitative research methods. As Chen (2000) pointed out, qualitative research uses the researcher as a tool, employs various data collection methods in a natural context to explore social phenomena holistically, uses induction to analyze data and form theories, and interacts with the research subject to understand behavior and meaning construction.

Specifically, this study achieves its research purpose by using a secondary data survey and an in-depth interview method. The secondary data survey method is divided into two parts. The first part involves collecting academic research results, policies and regulations, and authoritative public statistical data on social work participation in grassroots governance. This helps to comprehensively understand the general data of the research topic and establish the structural background and universal common sense of the research. The second part involves collecting data on the development and changes of social work institutions, social workstations, colleges and universities, and representative work reports to form a unique and rich case data set.

The in - depth interview method is a key component of this study, and it is used to investigate relevant stakeholders. Qualitative research emphasizes the appropriateness of the sample size (Mead, 1953) and whether the sample can answer the researcher's research questions completely and accurately (Chen, 2000). Therefore, the interviewees are government staff, community committee staff, social organization managers, and experts (scholars, university teachers) engaged in social work education and research. The content of the interview includes historical oral personal life stories of participating in social work and cognition of the development of social work in Yunnan. It focuses on the description and evaluation of research topics and important events. These relatively free and vivid in-depth interview

transcripts are an essential data source for this study.

Through qualitative research methods, the case of social work participating in grassroots governance in Yunnan is vividly presented and deeply analyzed to achieve the research purpose of enhancing the governance wisdom and theoretical development of a frontier province.

Results and Discussion

1.1 Development path: from professional education to professional service

The development path of professional social work participating in grassroots governance follows a path from education to service. The professional practices of universities at different levels complement each other, systematically promoting the transformation of social work from professional construction to professionalization and eventually to community services. This process further advances the development of social work and the professionalization of grassroots governance.

Specifically, high-level universities collaborate with overseas institutions to spread professional knowledge nationwide and cultivate social work elites. Local key universities, acting as regional leaders, explore local models of education, employment practices, research, and social services. Other types of universities in the region use application-oriented positioning to promote social work education to meet local needs pragmatically.

Professional social work took root in Yunnan and started with "education". The essential results of the initial stage were the dissemination of Western social work ideas and the training of social workers. In 1992, Yunnan University opened a social work major with the approval of the Ministry of Education, becoming one of the first ten universities in the country to establish such a program. University teachers became the first batch of professional social workers in Yunnan. Still, their educational background was not social

work but philosophy, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, history, and other social science disciplines. Teachers who can speak English and have received international education, have the natural advantage of introducing and communicating overseas social work resources and have become the messengers of social work knowledge dissemination of Western learning.

The professional construction of social work education in China has developed rapidly: there are 70 technical colleges offering social work majors, 333 undergraduate colleges, 183 social work master's degree authorization points, 22 doctoral programs in social work and social policy independently established by colleges and universities, and 17 universities have established doctoral research directions in social work based on first-level doctoral programs such as sociology (Wu, 2023). In the early stages of social work education development in Yunnan, universities offering these programs were concentrated in Kunming, the provincial capital, and later gradually expanded throughout the province. Currently, there are 13 universities in the province offering social work education. University professors have been working diligently to teach and create opportunities for professional intervention in grassroots governance, as Professor A said:

"In addition to classroom teaching, university teachers have also turned their attention to grassroots communities, taking students to carry out learning and research in community professional services, disseminating professional social work concepts, methods, and techniques, and further opening up social work positions for graduates to find employment." (University Professor A, 2023)

The university cultivates talents at different levels of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees on campus. It also cooperates with the government to carry out non-formal education, mainly providing professional training for grassroots government staff, mass organization staff, and community workers.

Professional social workers indirectly participate in grassroots community governance by cultivating talents. Moreover, since 2005, Yunnan college teachers have been boldly trying to establish social work institutions to intervene in community governance. In 2009, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, PRC issued the "Notice on Promoting the Development of Private Social Work Institutions," proposing "encouraging social work teachers to establish private social work institutions based on professional resources" (Yi, 2022), which started the historical process of institutional design to encourage social work teachers to establish non-governmental organizations and directly participate in grassroots governance.

"Our institution was established in 2005. It has become a professional social work service institution in our province and one of the earliest social work institutions established by the domestic university." (Social Organization Manager A, 2023)

Regarding the participation of Yunnan social work in grassroots community governance, the distinctive characteristic is the process of the establishment of the social work major at Kunming University (KMU). It established the major "Community Work Management and Service" in 2002 and is one of the earliest universities in Yunnan to establish a social work major. The creation of this major is to respond to the complexity of community management work in Yunnan Province and the need for professional training of community cadres under the background of the transformation from "unit system" to "block system" and then to "community system." The talent training goal is precisely positioned as social work professionals for grassroots community governance.

In 2001, most of the existing community management cadres did not have specialized knowledge of community work and had low academic qualifications, working ability, and

superficial thinking. The goal of running a school is to cultivate senior social work talents who have professional social work spirits, clear service awareness, practical knowledge, operational skills, and work on community service and community management (University Professor B, 2023)

"When I graduated in 2007, a street was recruiting community workers. After I signed up, I successfully entered the community with the highest score in the written test and worked there for five years. At that time, community cadres were all retired and laid-off workers. As a young college graduate with professional knowledge, I had a significant advantage. The street leaders also appreciated me. In my third year, I was transferred to another community and became the deputy secretary of the community neighborhood committee." (Community Neighborhood Committee Staff, 2023)

The employment situation of KMU graduates also demonstrates the advantages of social work students in grassroots community governance. It is worth mentioning that the founder of KMU's social work major is from Shanghai. Besides considering local grassroots governance, the establishment of the major was also inspired by the development of Shanghai's social work programs.

"In 2004, the General Office of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security of China issued the "National Occupational Standards for Social Workers" and first piloted it in Shanghai. Therefore, after returning from the Shanghai inspection in 2005, we actively promoted the Yunnan Provincial Department of Labor and Social Security to carry out the first batch of social workers' professional qualification certification work. This work included theoretical knowledge, written examinations, and on-site practical skills assessment. Before the state first implemented professional certification in 2008, the Yunnan Provincial Department of Labor and Social Security

had certified social work graduates in the three years from 2005 to 2007. Qualification certification provides a legal status for social work professionals to intervene in grassroots governance. Later, our teaching team went deep into towns, communities, and villages, introduced professional service advantages through familiar relationships, and recommended social work graduates to grassroots units. These graduates who obtained social work qualification certificates were generally recognized." (University Professor B, 2023)

Based on vision and courage, supported by professional ambitions and the belief in serving the people, the series of social work explorations carried out by social work professional educators are admirable today. The continuous actions of these educators have gradually enabled social work to gain discourse power, enter the policy framework, and obtain institutional identity. In short, the above development context not only presents the training process of social work professional teachers but also reflects the motivation of professional social workers to shift from education to service. They enter the administrative system in an embedded way to participate in grassroots governance and promote policy formulation and the expansion of institutional resources, which is manifested as "service-oriented governance (Wang, 2015)" for professional development.

1.2 Resource provision: from folk dependence to system compatibility

Social work in China's grassroots community governance has shifted from relying on private sector resources to institutional ones aligned with party policies. Initially, professional social work was cautious about utilizing market resources and seldom considered seeking government funding for projects.

"At that time, we were mainly criticized for blindly pursuing economic growth. For example, "scientific and technological poverty alleviation"

was externally planned for community development, which led to negative consequences such as resource plunder and individual poverty. Therefore, social workers intervened in grassroots governance to avoid using business models to obtain resources and funds." (Social Organization Manager D, 2023)

The government's poverty alleviation efforts, characterized by the provision of materials and "top-down" passive funding, led to a "wait, rely, and ask" mentality among the poverty alleviation targets (Social Organization Manager C, 2023). In the past, when faced with individuals or families who suddenly encountered difficulties due to accidents, social workers sometimes relied on personal donations to provide help. However, this approach also seems "unprofessional." Community projects rely on the resources of foundations or social groups to provide support to those affected. (Social Organization Manager B, 2023)

The milestone event in the shift of social work resource provision in Yunnan was the 6.5-magnitude earthquake in Ludian, Yunnan, in August 2014. On September 5, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, PRC (2014) launched the "Ludian Earthquake Disaster Area Social Work Service Support Plan." The development of social work in Yunnan has shifted from a fragmented resource utilization model to a systematic overall resource investment model arranged by the system. Later, with the modernization of the country's governance capacity and governance system, the institutional resources formed by the top-level design have become increasingly abundant, and social work actors have also shifted to strive for as many policy resources as possible.

Our findings indicate that as we reach deeper into grassroots communities, the demand increases. For example, the various needs of the various needs to three affected groups (left-behind children, women, and older adults) in border villages are very prominent. Although the

government has provided basic services, such as poverty alleviation and food and clothing, professionals still needed to offer refined services to address the needs of those noteworthy groups. On the other hand, the country also recognizes the needs at the grassroots level, especially the inequality of public services. The state guides from top to bottom through the formulation of policies and many government projects at the grassroots level. Therefore, policies also drive us to the grassroots. (Social Organization Manager A, 2023)

Social work organizations have taken root in the grassroots through government purchases and other projects. These organizations based their efforts on discoveries made through grassroots service experience, the needs of grassroots communities, and national governance system arrangements and policy guidance. The bottom-up initiatives of social work are highly consistent with the country's top-down policy arrangements, making government resources the main support for social work organizations.

This shows that social work organizations resource provision has shifted from private dependence to government provision. This is an important manifestation of professional social work gradually gaining institutional identity and position within the system. However, it also brings challenges related to sustainable resource support and the healthy growth of institutions. Particularly during the three-year epidemic, delays in government funding disrupted services and normal operations of some institutions that relied entirely on government funds and support.

Today's social work actors are constantly innovating to achieve multiple funding channels and diversified institutional resource structures. Market-oriented models such as community social enterprises are also beginning to be carefully explored.

1.3 Primary role: from social experiment to policy performer

In its initial development, professional social work had a distinct "social experiment" flavor. The role of "social experimenter" has the following characteristics:

First, establishing experimental sites, internship sites, or pilot projects. The development of professional social work in China did not start with a comprehensive rollout but rather selected pilot projects to carry out social services, scientific research, and education and training. "Learning by doing" is the most essential characteristic of the development of professional social workers. At the same time, social work in China focuses on developing Yunnan characteristics, mainly rural community development, ethnic minorities, girls' education, women's reproductive health, and ecological protection.

Second, social workers possess professional knowledge primarily generated in the West. This "experimental stage" tests the applicability of Western social work knowledge in China. In the initial development stage, social workers are familiar with the conceptual models such as "empowerment" and the three primary methods of casework, group work, and community work. Intellectuals and grassroots social workers trained in professional social work apply some of the world's fashionable ideas, concepts, techniques, and methods to China. These include the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) method to understand the needs of community residents, fair trade, and Grameen Bank Microfinance to carry out social work projects. They also establish community development funds and various community organizations, such as girls' education funds, senior citizen associations, women's organizations, and planting cooperatives.

Third, social workers become critical reflectors of professional practice who “cross the river by feeling the stones.” Western social work practices, when tested in Chinese contexts, revealed both confirmations and contradictions. For example, the conflict between professional knowledge and the local culture has led to difficulties in adapting to the local environment, which is a frequently discussed phenomenon among social work experimenters. This means that social workers in Yunnan Province emphasize an iterative, experiential, and context-sensitive approach, continually adapting professional knowledge to fit local conditions and reflecting on their experiences to improve their practice.

These paradoxical professional practices continuously inspire social workers to examine and critically reflect on Western social work’s value and knowledge system, leading them to constantly revise and adjust their actions to respond to cultural context and situational needs. The localization of social work has become a core issue that “social experimenters” must inevitably address.

As social experimenters, social workers constantly learn, test, and revise Western social work knowledge. However, they later tend to focus more on Chinese party and government knowledge, policies, and regulations, including social welfare policies, serving as policy propagandists, implementers, and connectors. Given the varying abilities of different groups to access policy information, social workers take the initiative to link welfare policies to those in need, particularly vulnerable groups such as older persons and children, to help them solve practical problems, build sustainable development capabilities, and promote social fairness, justice, and well-being. Consequently, media reports often describe the works of social workers as “opening up the last meter of serving the people,” “opening up the last mile of serving the people,” and “optimizing

the last centimeter of public services.” This exemplifies the social workers’ crucial role in ensuring that public services reach every individual, particularly those in need. Overall, it underscores the meticulous and far-reaching efforts of social workers to ensure that public services are accessible, equitable, and effective for all members of society, especially the most vulnerable.

It is worth mentioning why social work, introduced from the West, is considered superior to China’s traditional grassroots government service governance model. In practice, it has achieved the “localization” of social work, thus becoming an executive force for party policies. The reason for this is that, since 2006, social work has become a national discourse and was incorporated into the national governance framework. Social workers play an essential role in reflecting the people’s demands from the bottom up, and their participation in policy advocacy, formulation, and improvement has become increasingly in-depth, exerting significant influence. Additionally, with the use of technologies such as big data, national governance technology has become increasingly sophisticated, and Chinese policies are sensitive in reflecting public opinion and demands. In other words, social workers can further understand national development and social public needs in policy learning and achieve professional service goals in the process of promoting, linking, and delivering policy benefits to the public, especially vulnerable groups.

1.4 Organizational structure: from embeddedness to authentication

Education has played a central role in the development of social work in China. Establishing social work majors in universities integrates the Western discipline system into the Chinese education system. Subsequently, university professors establish practical research communities

social work institutions, enabling professional subjects to enter China's grassroots to carry out governance in an embedded manner.

The organizational structure of social work is characterized by a professional independence subject which differs from China's administrative organizational structure. This "embedding" has gradually shifted from an initial comparison and interaction of differences and advantages to a tendency to "please" the government to gain recognition, resources, status, etc., to aid its development. Moreover, the governance effectiveness demonstrated by the professional theories and techniques of professional social work has attracted the interest of traditional administrative social work departments. These departments have actively absorbed and learned the beneficial aspects, leading to the specialization of administrative social work.

The central bodies of social work professionals engaged in grassroots governance are government-run social organizations, government-run mass organizations, and local social organizations. From the existing organizational structure, after entering the national discourse and national governance arrangements, "non-governmental organizations" seem to no longer exist. Instead, they increasingly exhibit the characteristics of "social organizations," with authentication characteristics nurtured by the party and government system.

Firstly, these social organizations have a political nature. As an essential carrier of professional social work actions, social organizations have increased along with China's reform, opening-up, and social transformation. The Communist Party of China has abandoned the tradition of achieving social control by returning to the period before reform and opening-up by compressing the development space of social organizations. Instead, they chose a political integration method

that combines organizational embedding and political absorption, striving to shape social organizations into an essential link for the party to maintain close contact with the masses and serve the people wholeheartedly. Since the 20th century, the party-building work of politically integrated social organizations has continued to advance (Zhang, 2023). With the establishment of the party's social work system, social workforces will be led by the Communist Party of China (Wang, 2023b).

Secondly, these social organizations have an administrative nature. In the early stages of development, the relationship between social work organizations and their members was very close, shaping the organization or team into an emotional community. Social workers also maintained a close relationship with their clients, emphasizing care values and ethics throughout the development of employees within the organization and in the professional services provided to the service recipients.

These institution founders have unique personal charm, certain economic capital, and social capital. Team members trust them and work hard for institutional goals or social ideals (Social Organization Manager D, 2023).

As professional social workers became embedded in the administrative system, their numbers grew significantly. In particular, under the institutional backdrop of increasing the centralized constraints of the state on border governance, the growth of national financial resources, and the extensive implementation of the government procurement services policy, the organizational form of social work institutions has undergone a bureaucratic transformation. The institutions operate through impersonal responsibilities, regulations, and guidelines, with fixed hierarchical positions and job authorities. Employees are appointed based on professional

qualifications and compensated according to performance.

“The identities of the heads of social work institutions are more diverse, and their professional influence varies.” (Government Official, 2023) “Some institutions create positions specifically to better obtain government projects, while some social work stations provide only superficial services.” (Social Worker A) and “We have always been troubled by the contradiction between bureaucracy's inhumane characteristics and the pursuit of social care values.” (Social Worker B)

Thirdly, these social organizations have an official nature. Initially, in addition to the government's bottom-line assistance for weak areas and vulnerable groups in Yunnan, much spiritual and capacity-building work were undertaken by non-governmental organizations. From the 1990s to the early 21st century, Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, attracted a large number of international NGOs and private-public welfare workers, and Kunming was even once called the “NGO capital.” With strong support from national financial resources and the achievement of border governance goals, social institutions have increasingly become government-run.

In accordance with policy requirements, every town (street) has a social workstation. Yunnan took the lead in completing this initiative in 2021, opening a new stage where official social workers participate in grassroots governance. Currently, with government support, influential social work institutions have transformed from providing social services to vulnerable groups in specific fields to cultivating social service talents and grassroots social service institutions. The government has established specialized incubation centers or bases for social organizations within different administrative regions, inviting

various social organizations to settle in for free. Additionally, the government provides free office space, conference facilities, and other support, along with regular and irregular consultation and guidance.

In 2023, the establishment of the Social Work Department, CCCPC was considered by scholars to be an example of “large social work” (Wang, 2023b), “large governance concept,” and “large social governance” (Xu, 2023). This fully demonstrates that social work has not only entered the national top-level design but has also taken root through the establishment of national governance organizations. This development opens a new stage in which official professional social workers participate in governance at different levels of the country and localities. It is reflected in the form of Party committee leadership, government responsibility, and collaborative governance.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Yunnan was among the first provinces in China to resume professional social work education and engage in grassroots governance post-reform.. It has rich practical experience and is unique due to its regional characteristics such as frontier ethnic minorities and the forefront of opening up to the outside world. However, the existing research, first, lacks a holistic perspective on the unique development of social work in Yunnan; second, there are few research results that combine practical exploration with policy research and conduct in-depth theoretical dialogues; third, the research perspective is relatively single, lacking a research perspective that combines top-down government governance with bottom-up social work actions. Therefore, this study can compensate for existing academic knowledge's shortcomings.

From the perspective of structure - action theory, this research examines the development and evolution of social work participation in grassroots governance, illustrating the dynamic evolution of the actors' action power and the results of structural construction within the context of institutional structure and resources. The evolution of social work professional action is reflected in four aspects: 1) Development path: from professional education to professional service; 2) Resource provision: from folk dependence to system compatibility; 3) Role transition: from social experiment to policy performer; and 4) organizational structure: from embeddedness to authentication.

The development of social work in Yunnan's grassroots governance reflects the differing characteristics of Chinese and Western social work as follows:

(1) Professional social work in China is rooted in grassroots efforts, responding to social development issues through integrated response rather than merely refining professional techniques. Guided by the developmental social policy approach (Midgley, 1995, it integrates the efforts of families, communities, non-governmental organizations, market forces (i.e., for-profit organizations), and the state into a new institutional framework that jointly promotes social welfare. This coordination of social policies with economic development positively contributes to improving the sustainable livelihoods of the people.

(2) Prioritizing education has gradually promoted professional development, and ultimately achieved complementary development between education and profession, benefiting community governance. Successful community governance practice, in turn, promotes high-quality social work education and professionalization. This reflects a process of complementary construction and

development of specialization, professionalization, and service practice.

(3) State-led characteristics are distinct in the recovery and development of social work, driven by national policies. Both national and local policies, regulations, and government actions play a leading role.

(4) Unified policies and local proactive exploration and innovation are equally important. Policy promulgation and local projects coexist, with social work action subjects developing distinct characteristics and complementing each other. The next step for social work in guiding the healthy development of grassroots specialization depends on the extent of opportunities, freedom, and support provided by the government and the continuous collaboration and learning between the government and professional entities such as social work organizations.

(5) Yunnan social work participation in grassroots governance is unique. It meets the inherent requirements of stable border governance and the development of the Chinese nation while also reflecting international governance trends due to its strategic location at the forefront of international opening in South Asia and Southeast Asia. However, research in this area is not yet comprehensive and warrants further exploration in the future. To enhance social work's effectiveness in grassroots governance, policymakers should consider fostering stronger partnerships between government entities and social work organizations. This can be achieved by providing consistent funding, creating supportive policies, and encouraging the sharing of best practices. Additionally, promoting professional development and continuous education for social workers is crucial. Investing in training programs focusing on the theoretical and practical aspects of social work can help ensure practitioners are well-equipped to address the complex social issues

they encounter. Furthermore, it is essential to maintain a balance between government oversight and the autonomy of social work organizations. While government support is vital for stability and resource provision, allowing social work organizations the flexibility to innovate and adapt to local needs will enhance their effectiveness. Encouraging local pilot projects and fostering a culture of proactive exploration and innovation can lead to the development of tailored solutions that better address the unique challenges faced by different communities. By adopting these strategies, policymakers can help create a more dynamic and responsive social work system that effectively contributes to social welfare and sustainable development.

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