

Interview

Social Work and Reverse Migration in China

Tuesday 6 March 2018, by [China Development Brief](#), [CHOW Julian Chun-Chung](#) (Date first published: 6 February 2018).

In this wide-ranging interview, Prof. Chow discusses topics including the work of his research center in Guiyang, how research can provide a grounding for social work, how the NGO sector can help deal with the issues of left-behind children and reverse migration, and the development of the social work sector in China.

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This interview was conducted by CDB on the 30th of November, in the context of the World Philanthropy Forum in Beijing, to which Professor Chow was invited as a speaker.

Helping left-behind children: promoting a participatory approach

China Development Brief: Professor Chow, you have analysed the development of social service systems in China for many years. Recently you have been focusing much attention on the topic of left-behind children. Could you tell us what you think the social service sector and NGOs could do to cater to the needs of this group?

Julian Chow: I am running a research center right now, a collaborative project with the Guiyang city government that uses big data. The name of the center is the Guizhou Berkeley Big Data Innovation Research Center. We established it last year, in January 2017. The main objective of the center is to use big data to study social welfare-related issues. When we hear the term big data, we tend to think about commercial applications, tourism, or JD.com. So the technology is there but it has not really been used for social welfare or social service-related issues. After establishing the center, we have conducted a pilot study on left-behind children which is somewhat linked to the question you asked.

The idea is that in order to better understand left-behind children, we should integrate data from different departments or bureaus. We were able to obtain data from schools, educational departments, civil affairs, the census and health departments, and then develop a comprehensive database. We were then able, using a machine-learning model, to study left-behind children in terms of their academic achievements in Mathematic, English and Chinese.

One of the interesting findings from the study is that even though left-behind students overall perform not quite as well compared to the migrant children and local residents, this is not uniform. In other words, some left-behind children performed as well as the other groups. We tried to raise and answer the question of what makes the difference, and we found out that the school they attend

makes a certain difference. For example, if left-behind students go to school A as opposed to school B, in school A they perform better overall than many other children, and we try to look at what some of the school factors are.

The beauty of this research is that we do not simply focus on the individual student or label the group of left-behind children as poor academic achievers. Instead, we argue that if we invest in the school, provide resources, improve the quality of teachers, provide more activities and after-school programs, and engage the parents or grandparents, they can perform just as well as other children do as expected for their level.

One of the questions you asked is what we can do for the left-behind and migrant children to improve their overall schooling, education, well-being and health. We recognise that social services are by and large political. So I don't think in the short term we can anticipate the complete relief of the hukou, the birth registration system. The notion of left-behind and migrant children remains a key issue. It is true that some of the cities provide access to services for the migrant workers as long as they meet some specific criteria, so if they have a contract, pay taxes and the employer supports their application, then their kid may be able to go to a public school. But when you look at all those criteria, they are pretty difficult to reach for most of the low-wage migrant workers. As a result, their kids will still be left out from getting access to public school, medical care and other services.

So what can we do then? Perhaps NGOs can fill in the gap. Part of this conference [World Philanthropy Forum] is about trying to connect different NGOs working in philanthropy, and trying to come up with innovative ways to provide services to migrant children in the cities, especially thinking more from the perspective of social exclusion.

So it's not the migrant children, not their own behaviour, it's not their own fault if they are falling behind in terms of their academic achievements. The main reason is that they are not integrated into the city, it is the whole system, the structure, that is set up to exclude them. From a social service perspective, I think it's very critical to provide an environment such that we can facilitate or promote social integration, not necessarily through the formal public school system because it is not feasible to do that now, but by creating after-school programs and support networks based on the interests of the migrant children, so we can provide the type of services that can better meet their needs.

That is also related to another question that you raised. How do we know what their needs are? Quite often the public social service system tends to think "we know what you need", so they design programs and provide them, but whether it fits people's needs is another matter. It will be important for policymakers and service providers to pay more attention to how to engage the communities. From their own perspective, what is important? And from there hopefully we will be able to come up with some strategies. If the public sector cannot do that, then the private sector or the NGOs must step up to fill in the gap and meet the community's needs.

CDB: That's all fascinating. We publish a lot of material on left-behind children, because it is one of the main social issues in China and it is also an issue that lots of NGOs are focusing on. So it is very interesting to hear your perspective.

JC: Yes, but at the same time, I think it is important not to label left-behind children. When most people think of that term in Chinese they associate it with kids who have poor academic achievement, don't want to go to school and have a high level of psychological difficulties.

On the one hand we need to recognize the difficulties and adversities they face, on the other hand we should also look at their strengths and their resilience. What do they have in order to perform

well? We have to think about how to provide a larger, supportive environment to nurture them. So I think for the social service system it is very critical and important to think about how we can do better.

CDB: You've spoken a lot about how NGOs can help left-behind children, but when it comes to the official government-run social service sector, do you see much hope of them taking up a more positive role in this?

JC: Good question. Many NGOs right now rely on the government purchase of social services (政府采购). In this regard we, social workers, educators, researchers and practitioners alike, need to educate the government on how to purchase services appropriately. It is not simply passing responsibility from the public sector to the private: just give you a hundred thousand dollars, then you have to do a laundry list of stuff that is impossible to accomplish.

What is more important, going back to my earlier point, is that the government purchase of services has to be targeted to some specific objectives. So how do we know what those objectives should be? We should learn from the stakeholders and service users about what is important from their perspectives.

Then we can decide a program within the budget limit. Certainly the government has some expectations on how well you deliver the service and what kind of change you can make, what would be the outcome that you can achieve and so on. It relates to another important aspect for social service providers, that is to learn about evaluation and how to better evaluate our program.

When I say evaluation I am not narrowly looking at some quantitative, measurable indicators. As I see it, it is a process to engage the government, which is to say the funder, the NGO, which is the organisation that receives the funding, the provider, that would be the social worker, and the users. What I would like to promote is a community participatory approach, collectively trying to come up with if not a consensus at least some commonly agreed points, strategies and methods to design the particular programs that would meet the community's needs better.

Such a participatory model would change the whole dynamic, so it would no longer be just top-down, where you get one or two hundred thousand dollars to do whatever the government or the public sector wants you to do. Instead, you change the dynamic: ok, let's sit down to see what kind of services we could provide that will meet your needs as the public sector, as the government. And at the same time, we will meet the needs of our users.

Through this process we will create a system of checks and balances through which the government knows the money is well spent, but at the same time, the NGO will not overly commit itself to do something that is impossible to deliver. Similarly, the service user will be more likely to benefit from the services because they are one of the parts involved in the process of developing the program.

CDB: Who are the local partners of the center you have in Guiyang?

JC: For now we are primarily working with the government. There are different phases, and we are still at the early stage. Phase one is to build a data-clearing house, so we are going to different departments and asking for their data. And that in itself is a complicated process.

Each department has hundreds of different data sets, and each one of them is not comparable to another, since they use different systems and they may have different ways of organising the data. As an example, say we want to know if people living alone are more or less likely to develop some kind of chronic disease, or what kind of chronic diseases they may have. And we get the data and

say, all right, this person has hypertension. But hypertension, how do you define it? How high is the blood pressure in order to be classified as hypertension? It used to be 130 over 90. A few weeks ago, in the US, they adjusted it to 120 over 80. If someone's blood pressure is 125 over 85, they would not have been categorised as having hypertension last month, but they would be now.

From a researcher's perspective it is important to understand the precise definition of the variables we can use, so we are spending a lot of time right now building up the database. Once we have the database and have conducted the analysis, the next step is to work with officials from the government and different departments to design or to identify the priority areas for intervention. For example, they may say we need to do an outreach program for those who have hypertension. We will then engage the local NGO service provider, so we will create a team from the health bureau, the NGO and possibly the patients. And then there's my center's role as the researcher.

In the past, in a project like this all the decisions might simply have been made by the government, or by whoever sits at the head of the health department. They are likely to be the one who makes all the decisions. But now we want to change that process. We create a system in which your decisions are to be made based on information, and the information that we provide is based on some solid research. What we refer to as an information-based decision.

Then we will work with the NGO, or the service provider, to identify the appropriate strategies for intervention. Taking the earlier example, the best way to decrease someone's blood pressure would be to change their behaviour. For some older adults, maybe changing their eating habits would do, but for some others it might not. Others may need to exercise, but if they have some type of disability it is difficult for them to exercise, and they can only take medication. So not all people with hypertension should be treated the same way. That's where professional social work and social services come in.

We will also collaborate with university researchers, so as to create a partnership between the public sector, the university, the service provider and the service users. So again it's a different way of thinking about how to approach program development. We are only in stage one right now, so maybe next year I can share some of the findings with you on how successfully we are able to engage the public sector. At this point we are very optimistic, because the local officials in Guiyang are open-minded, and they are willing to make an effort to try something new. For them it could be a pilot, and if it is successful, then we can create more sustainable long-term plans and models about how to do this kind of collaborative work.

Reverse migration: an important future trend

CDB: You also mentioned the hukou, the household registration system, which is a crucial issue in the area of provision of social services for migrant workers. From your perspective, how do you see this issue? Do you think there will be any developments in this area in next few years?

JC: My own read is that having a massive shift towards a completely open hukou might not be well received at the moment. Different local cities are trying to use different initiatives to make migrant workers eligible to receive more publicly-funded social services. So the question also is that urban and rural areas are developing rapidly. No matter whether it is the first generation of migrant workers who primarily focused on construction work, or the newer generation primarily working in manufacture or assembly lines, or the third wave of migrant workers, who work in restaurants or the service industry, no matter which type of migrant workers, most of the studies that we know of looking at their intention with regards to returning to their hometowns or not tend to lean towards

them returning at some point, due to the social exclusion I mentioned earlier. So they are seeing themselves as people in temporary transit. Certainly this is part of the reason they do not see the possibility of changing their hukou from a rural area to an urban area in the short term.

From the central government's perspective, the way they look at it is that on the one hand, they know it's getting more difficult to find a decent job in the urban setting for low wage workers, the majority of whom are migrant workers. Now they also need to create an economic system to address this inequality, both in terms of regional inequality and economic inequality among the haves and the have-nots. They would like to invest more in the mid-western and western regions.

How to handle the returning migrants will become an important aspect of social policy in the next few years. The central government and the local government have to be thinking more proactively about what they can do if the majority of migrant workers return to their hometowns. Are there employment opportunities? Do they have sufficient resources for education? In many rural areas, they have closed down their elementary schools and middle schools because they don't have enough students. But if there's a major return, a reverse migration, then what are you going to do? Everything from employment and education to health care, all these issues are directly or indirectly related to the hukou system. At some point, from the social policy perspective, you have to think about a plan ahead of time. Right now China is in a position where they could actually carry out this type of social planning to prevent some of the problems that they anticipate, social problems, economic problems and education-related problems.

So if you ask me what I think, I would say there ought to be more policy research to anticipate when there is a reverse migration, and what the local governments can do in response to these challenges.

CDB: You spoke about the trend of reverse migration, and how when people go back to their hometown there are limited resources. What should the government anticipate, what should they do to deal with those problems? It seems like migration to the cities is still mainstream in China. People are still rushing to the city, but the government has started to take steps to reduce the population in the biggest cities. What do you think NGOs could do to help in this situation?

JC: Some of this is related to what we talked about earlier, reverse migration may happen naturally anyway. I think from an urban planning and social services perspective, the issue that we are dealing with is what kind of migrant workers would the city's residents be willing to accept? If a massive number of migrant workers leaves Beijing in a short period of time, I cannot imagine how this could change the whole service industry. How would this change the day to day convenience that most of the middle class in Beijing enjoy from their lower wages, long working hours, and the labor-intensive, dirty jobs that they perform?

It is always easy to identify a scapegoat. It's easy to identify someone and tell them they don't belong here. When it comes to what NGOs can do, they can act through public education, which can come from many different sources. If someone runs a campaign to force people out, NGOs can run a counter campaign. Let's assume all migrant workers left, what will happen to Beijing? Beyond that, we can think about what kind of resources the government can provide once they get back to their hometown. That's another discussion and another campaign. You don't have to fall into a sensational argument with the group who wants to force people out, you can just tell the story. Let's look at the Chinese spring festival, and the drop in GDP over those few days. Think of some creative stories from the point of view of storytelling, narrative, photos, pictures, and so on. Run a balanced message, let the public think about the issue.

We should do more systematic research to identify the economic and other contributions these

migrant workers without a hukou make to Beijing. I think most people will symbolically and rationally recognise that. But emotionally I don't think they would convert that recognition into a social value that can raise their consciousness. The root causes of the problems that we have seen are not really created by the migrant workers, it's more structural, systemic, it might even be a product of this semi-capitalistic system that we highly value. Migrant workers make significant contributions, but at the same time they are victimised. They are being victimised by the success of our society. So if you get this type of story out to some extent it might change the dynamic of the discussion.

The development of Chinese social work: focusing on education

CDB: Since you have been focused on the sector of social work in China in recent years, how would you describe the overall development of social work in China. Do you feel that the recently passed charity law has had an impact on the sector?

JC: Social work certainly has been publicised, but not necessarily recognised or understood, in China. After thirty or forty years of economic success, now in a sudden we realise social problems do exist. Who would be in a position to help address these issues? Social workers, as a profession learned from the Western societies, are able to provide some type of support and services, but by no means are they able to resolve all the problems. Thinking social work can completely solve social problems is like thinking doctors can completely cure cancers. It's impossible.

From a higher education perspective, we see many social work departments established all over China, but at the same time, most social work faculty members are not trained in social work. Many of the professors have been recruited from a related field, sociology, psychology, journalism, you name it. On the one hand, we see that there's a big demand for having more professional social workers who can provide services and address social problems. On the other hand, we see an increase in social work and education program in colleges or universities. But the faculty who are going to train the students are not trained in social work themselves. So you see there's a gap there. Most practitioners have not necessarily gone through professional social work training in colleges or in the field. So for overall social work development, the way I myself look at it is that there has to be a better integrated system.

First, in higher education, we ought to conduct research, and more specifically look at the benefits of social service programs of professional social work in addressing many of the problems that we have talked about. Research is an important area, without providing research-based evidence that social services make a difference, it will be difficult to convince others to provide sufficient resources. Research is the priority area that forms the foundation of education. You ought to develop a social work education curriculum that will fit into the Chinese social context, and which addresses many of the problems we have talked about. And then, through research and education, we will be able to better prepare the student in a social work program to work in the field. If you do not have the first two it will be difficult to obtain additional resources, jobs, or sufficient pay to maintain the workforce. All these are actually highly related, you cannot isolate them and say one is more important than the other.

Right now we see a massive increase of social work programs without having the adequate infrastructure in terms of education, research and training, and that would be something we have to address. Social work as a discipline is relatively new, but at the same time it creates terrific opportunities to engage other departments and professional schools collaboratively, working in more of an interdisciplinary environment on education and research. My own wish is that China can create

a system, a unique social work program that would be different from the West, but also different from the traditional social science discipline or public administration.

CDB: You were saying social work education is very important, and that we need to improve our social work program to train more social workers. I feel like in China the problem is there are not a lot of people willing to study in social work programs, a lot of universities don't have a major called social work, and we have a huge dearth of social workers. There's a lot to be done but we don't have enough people willing to study in social work programs. So I totally agree that we should improve the programs, but what if there are too few people who want to study in them? It is not a well-paid job compared to other jobs and you have to have skills and knowledge, so I wonder how you see this problem.

JC: That's exactly what I was trying to say earlier. We see a growing number of social work education programs, and it is either because the government thinks or feels it will be the future profession that can help address social problems. Now there are about 300 undergraduate programs in social work, but few independent departments, if any. There are also 70 something Master of Social Work programs, I believe. But as you said, the crucial question is that many students do not know what social work is, and it is a low-paid job. What's worse, if you graduate from a social work program you still may not be able to find a social work position. But as I said earlier, part of the problem is that we do not have a solid research or knowledge base to make the case that social work is effective, both professionally and academically. The system is set up so that social work is not a tier-1 discipline, rather it's a tier-2 one, under sociology.

We social work educators and researchers have to be able to conduct high-quality research, whether it is policy-based research or service-based research, to demonstrate that social work intervention makes a difference. And we have to establish a reputation, and then create the educational curriculum and the structure to train the students to have the necessary skills and capacities to help resolve or address these problems. When we are able to do that, certainly jobs will be available and the pay scale might increase, something which is happening in many other fields already.

In Shanghai, for example, each hospital now has to create a social work department, and there is a ratio of patients to social workers depending on the size of the hospital. So now they are creating employment opportunities that are all related to medical social work. In Guangzhou the city government uses the government purchase services structure to establish a comprehensive family center in every street (社区). Through these kind of efforts, I am personally quite optimistic that social work as a field of practice and as a discipline will be recognized. Not only in practice, but also in academia and in the public policy-making sector. But if you ask me how long this might take, I don't know. It took the US over 100 years to develop social work professional training and education programs. For example in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley, where I teach, we will celebrate our 75th anniversary in 2018. Just remember that Rome was not built in one day.

P.S.

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* China Development Brief:

<http://chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/articles/social-services-in-china-an-interview-with-professor-julian-how/>