

Local experience and implications of youth affairs social work in China

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Abstract: Youth affairs social work represents an exploration by the Communist Youth League to manage youth affairs through professional social work and undertake government youth affairs. The pioneering practices in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have provided important experience for the development of youth affairs social work nationwide. At the institutional design level, it has been gradually integrated into the macro system of local social construction, forming a sound government-league-society tri-level cooperation model. It emphasizes promoting development through management innovation, stresses community-based youth service delivery, conducts youth brand services through projects, and implements prevention and development-oriented service provision. Meanwhile, it has established sound resource mobilization relationships among government, society, and the third sector, building a multi-dimensional and diversified service system.

Keywords: youth, social work, youth affairs, Communist Youth League

1. Introduction

Youth affairs social work refers to social service activities conducted around comprehensive matters such as youth education, supervision, management, protection, rights maintenance, and development, guided by the values and professional ethics of social work, with the aim of maintaining and promoting youth survival and development (Qiu Fu Bing & Tang Yong, 2015). It can be understood as an application of social work intervention in youth affairs. As a subsystem within the social welfare system, it constitutes an important component for promoting healthy youth growth and enhancing youth well-being. Its purpose is to "extensively introduce professional social work into youth work and effectively meet the personalized social service needs of youth" (Lu Shi Zhen et al., 2016). From the perspective of social governance theory, youth affairs are also a component of social public affairs management, involving both the provision of public goods—such as the promotion of public welfare activities—and the expression of public will, particularly reflected in the shaping and advocacy of specific values. As a comprehensive public service, it has become an important approach to innovating social governance in the construction of a harmonious society.

In recent years, the state has attached great importance to the assistance, care, and protection of disadvantaged youth groups, accelerating the development of social work and social services. The Central Committee of the Communist Youth League and relevant ministries have successively issued specialized policies for the development of youth affairs social work, including Opinions on Launching Pilot Work for Youth Affairs Social Workers and Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Professional Talent Teams for Youth Affairs Social Work, comprehensively deploying, planning, and standardizing the youth social service system, youth social work institutions, and the construction of professional talent teams for youth affairs social work. Developed regions such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have taken the lead in piloting and exploring youth social work, establishing corresponding social work systems and mechanisms. Through organized resource mobilization, they have formed a number of youth affairs social work teams, thereby driving the vigorous development of this work and forming distinctive models and experiences.

2. Youth social work models in major Chinese cities

2.1. Beijing: Community-based platform support model

As the capital, Beijing is a destination that attracts numerous young people. With the increasing mobility of the youth population, an ever-growing number of young people have become detached from the traditional Communist Youth League organizational system. To address the effective coverage of League work among youth and enhance the attractiveness and cohesion of League organizations, the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League began constructing territorial activity platforms and regional grassroots youth organizations led by the League in 2010. These platforms rely on communities and take areas where youth live and work as the primary service venues, providing activities such as school training, urban integration, cultural and sports health, social networking, volunteer public welfare, entrepreneurship and employment, legal education and rights protection, and cultivation of youth self-organizations, thereby creating "a fun club and a reliable circle of friends" for young people. Currently, the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League has established over 500 community youth centers across 17 districts (Wang Chunhui, 2016).

Beijing's youth affairs social work primarily uses community youth centers as its vehicle, forming a backbone work team of "Communist Youth League + full-time social workers" (Su Yidui, 2013). Specifically, the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League commissions multiple professionally qualified social work organizations to select and manage youth affairs social workers through government purchase of social work service positions. Targeting community youth, they carry out personalized, distinctive, and professional services, with detailed work indicators established for full-time social workers. The Beijing municipal finance provides funding support of no less than 80,000 yuan per community youth center annually, while district/county and street/township finances provide annual funding at levels no lower than the municipal investment.

One important characteristic of the community youth center operation model is that each center is equipped with at least one full-time social worker. To promote the development of Beijing's youth social work industry, in March 2014, the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League led the establishment of the Beijing Youth Social Work Association, formulated the Guidance Standards for Position Setting and Remuneration of Full-Time Social Workers in Beijing Youth Social Work, and established the Community Youth Center Social Work Service Assessment and Evaluation Indicator System.

Currently, the number of social workers on duty at Beijing's community youth centers is nearly 700. This youth affairs social work team, entirely cultivated and developed by the Communist Youth League, has become the largest professional social work service team in Beijing. They engage in professional community, group, and case work in their positions, while also actively participating in grassroots Communist Youth League work such as regional League building, serving as an important force for carrying out grassroots youth work.

2.2. Shanghai: NGO-oriented government-society cooperation model

Shanghai is the earliest city in mainland China to explore youth affairs social work. Its landmark event was the establishment in 2004 of the Shanghai Sunshine Community Youth Affairs Center (hereinafter referred to as "Sunshine Center"), a private non-enterprise organization that marked the starting point for the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League to introduce professional social work for youth affairs management.

Initially, Shanghai's youth affairs social work was launched from the starting point of preventing and reducing youth crime, following the overall approach of "government-led promotion, autonomous NGO operation, and multi-party social participation" (Fei Meiping, 2014). In this process, collaborative coordination mechanisms played an important role, with 27 relevant municipal departments participating in the "Shanghai Special Task Force for Preventing Youth Crime and Delinquency." Beginning in 2003, Shanghai took the lead nationwide in establishing a "youth affairs social worker" working mechanism, creating the Shanghai Community Youth Affairs Office—a deputy bureau-level agency under the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League—to be responsible for work with idle youth in

Shanghai. In terms of practical operation, the Shanghai Community Office purchased services from the Sunshine Center to provide professional social services for community youth in the city, defined as young people aged 16–25 without fixed employment, not in school, and lacking supervision. All specific affairs were entrusted to the Sunshine Center, with funding primarily sourced from the Shanghai municipal finance. The Sunshine Center established headquarters, social work stations, and social work points according to a three-level management model at municipal, district, and street (town) levels, and has currently built a professional youth affairs social work talent team of 500 members (Zhou Zhijian, 2009).

To promote the development of the social work talent team, beginning in 2015, the Shanghai municipal government adjusted the purchase of social work services from 60,000 yuan to 80,000 yuan per person annually. Meanwhile, it was clarified that by 2020, every 100 resident community youth in Shanghai would receive services from at least one youth affairs social worker, with a ratio of no less than 80 youth affairs social workers per 100,000 youth. It was also proposed to extend the professional services of youth social workers within the crime prevention and reduction system to migrant youth at a ratio of 150:1. The introduction of this system represented a significant breakthrough, further enhancing team stability (Zhang Zheng, 2016).

2.3. Guangzhou: Government purchase model with communist youth league coordination

Due to its unique advantage of proximity to Hong Kong and Macau, the development of social work in Guangzhou has been profoundly and persistently influenced by Hong Kong. In October 2007, Guangzhou was designated by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, the Central Comprehensive Social Management Office, and other relevant units as one of the first pilot cities nationwide for youth affairs social workers. Beginning in 2008, Hai Zhu District in Guangzhou started piloting the "Youth Zone" project, primarily providing various professional social work services for youth, their families, and schools in Hai Zhu District. The project was funded through government purchase of social work services by both the Hai Zhu District Government and the Guangzhou Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, with the Hai Zhu District Committee of the Communist Youth League responsible for supervision, including fund allocation, distribution, and service effectiveness evaluation. The Guangzhou Hai Zhu District Qi Chuang Social Work Development Association was commissioned to implement the project, forming a youth affairs social work pattern of "party and government-led promotion, Communist Youth League organizational management, autonomous NGO operation, and multi-party social participation" (Zhou Xiao Geng, 2013). The pilot concluded in 2012 and was subsequently promoted district-wide and city-wide.

The vehicle for Guangzhou's youth affairs social work is mainly reflected in the "Youth Zone" community and school social work stations. They serve marginal youth through case work, establish various types of groups through group services, and promote youth personal growth and development through community activities. In terms of service philosophy and methods, "Youth Zone" draws on the experiences of Hong Kong's integrated service centers and specialized service institutions for youth and the elderly, combining the "comprehensiveness" and "professionalism" of youth services, while simultaneously carrying out case referral services for youth and families. Currently, "Youth Zone" focuses on six categories of youth groups based on their different characteristics: school dropouts and unemployed youth, single-parent families, migrant worker families, youth with disabilities, Asperger's syndrome, and dyslexia, providing refined and in-depth professional social work services. It has conducted a large number of case and group services, organized nearly 4,000 community activities and over 2,000 outreach sessions. As of 2015, it had cumulatively served 1.403 million youth person-times. Municipal and district-level finances jointly invested 28 million yuan in special funds for project service purchase and management expenses, with self-raised funds reaching 3.466 million yuan (NetEase News, 2015). It is the largest youth social work service project in Guangdong Province, becoming a branded project for the Communist Youth League's participation in social governance innovation and an exclusive platform for Communist Youth League youth services.

3. Youth social work models in China's major cities

3.1. Gradually Integrated into the macro system of local social construction

Youth services have become an important field of social work, and their development is constrained by social institutional conditions. The pioneering practices in the "Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou" region in youth affairs social work have constructed an overall development framework in terms of talent team cultivation, utilization, and guarantee, as well as the nurturing and development of social organizations. Particularly by incorporating youth affairs social work into the scope of government purchase, providing funding and resource support, the youth affairs social work service system has been established and integrated into the macro system of social construction, receiving high attention from party and government authorities, and becoming an indispensable component of social governance innovation. Taking Shanghai as an example, youth affairs social work has received strong support from the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which promoted the establishment of the Shanghai Community Youth Affairs Office as a functional department, issued opinions on strengthening youth affairs social work, and distributed them in the form of joint circulars from two offices. The annual government purchase of youth affairs social work services amounts to nearly 50 million yuan. The strong support from party and government authorities ensures the normal operation of the Sunshine Center.

3.2. Formation of a sound government-league-society tri-level cooperative operation model

From the operational models in the Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou region, social work services targeting youth groups all demonstrate the characteristics of a "government—Communist Youth League organization—social institution" tri-level operation during the implementation process. They collectively reflect the guiding principle of "party and government leadership, League organization management, NGO operation, and social participation," ultimately achieving a working situation where management and operation are separated while government and society are integrated. Around this working pattern, various regions have formed organizational operation mechanisms and management models adapted to local conditions. For instance, in the Beijing model, the Communist Youth League exercises stronger control: on one hand, through social work agencies incubated by the municipal committee of the Communist Youth League, it cultivates and manages all on-duty social workers at youth centers; on the other hand, by leading the establishment of the Beijing Youth Social Work Association, it formulates industry standards. In the Shanghai model of youth affairs social work, the management mechanism has completely formed a three-level management system consistent with the government administrative system, covering municipal, district/county, and street/town levels. At each administrative level, there are comprehensive social management offices and League organizations, respectively playing the roles of work leadership and service supervision, while social work agencies specifically carry out service projects and absorb extensive participation from civil organizations and individuals.

3.3. Emphasis on promoting development through management innovation

The active development of youth affairs social work in the Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou region is inseparable from institutional management and innovation. For example, Shanghai has successively issued multiple important municipal-level documents, specifically researching and formulating a series of supporting systems such as the Shanghai Youth Affairs Social Worker Assessment Measures to achieve refined management of youth affairs social workers. At the same time, it strengthens career planning and design for youth affairs social work talent, establishing a three-level career advancement system (junior, intermediate, and senior) within the youth affairs social work sequence to meet their needs in terms of rights, achievement, remuneration, and self-actualization, thereby stabilizing and promoting the development of the social work team. Beijing and Guangzhou have also successively formulated and issued the Beijing Youth Social Work Full-Time Social Worker Position Setting and Remuneration Guidance Standards and the Guangzhou Youth Affairs Social Worker Management Measures, clarifying the development paths and advancement spaces for youth affairs social workers. In terms of fund raising, measures such as public welfare venture capital and bidding/tendering have been introduced to expand project financing channels.

Guangdong Province has specifically established a Youth Affairs Social Work Public Welfare Development Fund to support the development of youth affairs social work in the public welfare service field.

3.4. Building public welfare service brands through project-based operation

Project-based operation is an action measure for government management departments to stimulate civil vitality and strengthen effectiveness management, as well as an action strategy for youth social work agencies to obtain service funds and enhance service levels (Wang Xin et al., 2014). Particularly when providing professional services for new service targets, project-based operation is indispensable. In promoting youth affairs social work, the Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou region has adopted project-based approaches for application, management, and evaluation, and has also carried out various forms of cooperation through projects. Since 2009, Shanghai has implemented a public welfare project bidding/tendering mechanism and public welfare venture capital activities. The establishment of this social public welfare platform has greatly promoted the implementation of project-based operation methods. Meanwhile, in terms of innovating service projects and shaping brand images, the Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou region has conducted explorations, extending from the branding of work vehicles to the branding of service projects. In terms of work vehicles, Beijing's "Youth Center," Shanghai's "Sunshine Center," and Guangzhou's "Youth Zone" have formed regional brands for youth affairs social work. In terms of work projects, these regions have created nationally renowned public welfare project brands such as Shanghai's "Xiao Qin Studio" and "Little Dolphin," and Guangzhou's "Public Welfare Base," combining local realities to support the development of youth social work through brand effects.

3.5. Emphasis on community-based youth service delivery

The community-oriented development of youth social work has become a trend. Whether in Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou models, youth affairs social work emphasizes community-based and locally-grounded service delivery models. This community-based intervention strategy embedded in youth life networks inevitably promotes the efficiency and popularization of youth services. For example, Guangzhou mainly relies on "Youth Zone" community social work stations and expanded school social work stations; Beijing's "Youth Center" is deeply rooted in communities; and Shanghai took the lead in creatively proposing the concept of community youth across the entire League, carrying out services and management for community youth. Through surveys and case file establishment for youth within their jurisdictions, they accurately grasp the survival and development status of community youth. By providing professional and personalized services for youth, they offer assistance in life, academics, psychology, and behavior, enhancing youth social adaptability and achieving effective coverage of services for this group.

3.6. Implementation of prevention and development-oriented service provision

Along with rapid social changes and the deepening development of youth services, youth affairs social work, which originally developed from the starting point of preventing and reducing youth crime and delinquency, is also undergoing transformation. From the practical explorations in the Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou region: First, the service targets of youth affairs social work have expanded from five categories of key youth groups to include the general youth population. For example, Beijing has incorporated business building youth groups into its service scope; Shanghai's youth service groups have gradually extended to migrant workers and their accompanying children, school students, and enterprise youth employees; Guangzhou has also gradually expanded the age range of service targets. Second, as traditional youth social work service venues change, their professional methods are also evolving. In addition to comprehensively utilizing case, group, and community techniques, they emphasize the refinement of local methods, including outreach services and family therapy methods that are gradually being applied. Therefore, purely remedial goal-oriented youth services can no longer satisfy their diverse needs. Treating youth as passive service recipients is instead unfavorable for problem resolution. In terms of service content and goal design, the Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou region has gradually formed a diverse, multi-dimensional service system that focuses on treatment while giving consideration to preventive and developmental services.

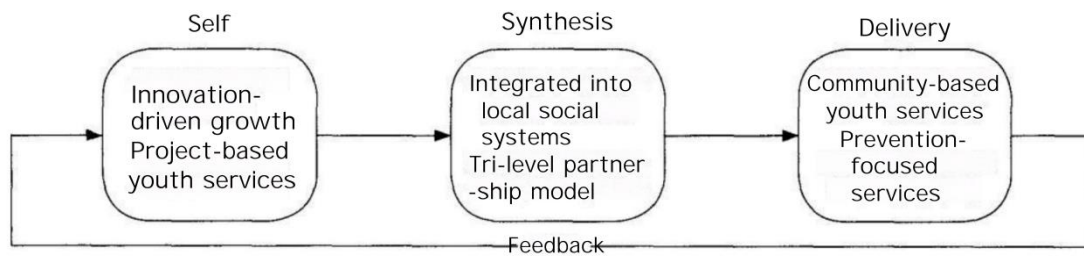


Figure 1 Logical Framework of Basic Experience in Youth Affairs Social Work Models in the "Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou" Region

4. Conclusion

The rapid and comprehensive physiological and psychological transformations during youth development, along with the various growth crises they trigger, constantly test youth adaptability. In this adaptation process, youth urgently need support from different systems such as family, school, and community (Li Hai et al., 2009). Serving youth growth and development, safeguarding youth legitimate rights and interests, and preventing youth crime and delinquency are the core tasks and primary objectives of youth affairs social work. Introducing new work concepts, mechanisms, and methods to continuously break traditional youth service approaches represents the innovation requirements and working ideas of youth affairs social work. In China's "Beijing-Shanghai-Guangzhou" region, youth affairs social work is highly demonstrative and leading in responding to and integrating with local youth actual needs, in investing in and guaranteeing professional social work team construction, and especially in boldly exploring and innovating its working patterns and methods. It possesses strong representativeness, which is certainly inevitably connected with its developed local economy and geographical advantages. However, in sorting out their respective characteristics and success factors, we can still distill some regular patterns and summarize experiences worth learning from.

In the summarization process, it can be found that gradually integrating youth affairs social work into the macro system of local social construction is an effective foundation for obtaining basic guarantees and a necessary prerequisite for achieving positive interaction with local society. In specific practice, government-League-society tri-level cooperation promotes efficient service operation; promoting development through management innovation ensures smooth practice and orderly growth; emphasizing community-based service transmission enables maximum rooting in society and serving the public; conducting brand services through projects promotes innovation and breaks new ground; implementing prevention and development-oriented service provision continuously empowers the growth and innovation of youth affairs social work. In the process of operation or functioning, these elements must primarily possess government/society integration functions, self-driven functions, and output functions relying on certain vehicles, thereby forming a closed loop that starts from self-construction, through continuous resource integration and service output, achieves orderly operation and positive feedback. In practice, these factors are indispensable, progressing layer by layer and interacting with each other, jointly promoting the development of youth affairs social work, and possessing extremely strong enlightening significance and reference value.

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