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Policy practice in incorporated spaces:
Social work organisations influencing policymaking in China

Ph.D Thesis

Tian Cai

Department of Sociology

Durham University

2022

Abstract

Social work policy practice, which refers to social workers using their knowledge and skills to influence policymaking, has drawn increasing attention from social work practitioners and researchers in Western democratic countries. However, it is still an overlooked field of practice and research in China. The literature reveals that the development of social work in China is characterised by the strong intervention of the Party-state, which purposefully involves nongovernmental social work organisations (SWOs) in social governance through contracting out social services and exercises strict control over SWOs. This raises the question of whether or to what extent SWOs can participate in policy practice under an authoritarian regime. The academic discussion around participatory spaces indicates that social organisations' participation in policymaking takes place in the intangible spaces that are filled with power relations, which define the opportunities, rules, and boundaries for participation. As policy practice in China has not been widely researched, the study adopts grounded theory methodology to explore in what spaces SWOs participate in policy practice and how they try to influence policymaking in China. Based on the research fieldwork in two Chinese cities, including intensive interviews with 26 senior social workers and researchers, the study develops a new concept of "incorporated space" to understand SWOs' participation in policy practice in China. Incorporated spaces refer to those incorporated into the Party-led social governance system in which SWOs become a skilful and loyal arm of the Party-state assisting with policymaking. Incorporated spaces are created through the mechanisms of contractual incorporation and political incorporation, which provide opportunities for SWOs to use collaborative methods to influence policymaking on the one hand, but also reinforce the superior-subordinate relationship between SWOs and the Party-state on the other. The incorporated spaces for policy practice have great implications for the autonomy and political agency of China's social work profession. Drawing on the research findings, the thesis provides recommendations on how to transform incorporated spaces and widen the participation of social workers and service users.

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List of abbreviations

BCA: Bureau of Civil Affairs

CCCPC: The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China

CPC: Communist Party of China

CPPCC: The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

DCA: Department of Civil Affairs

MCA: Ministry of Civil Affairs

NPC: The National People's Congress

PC: People's Congress

SC: State Council

SWO: Social work organisation

UK: United Kingdom

USA: United States of America

Declaration

Tian Cai confirms that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. For the figures and tables without further explanation about the source, they are made by the author.

Statement of copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

“If you want to study society, you should choose sociology as your major. But if you want to change society, then you should choose social work.” This was what my classmates and I were told by a social work lecturer at Sun Yat-sen University in China in 2013 when we had to decide what we would major in for the rest of our bachelor’s degree study. I was inspired by the lecturer’s speech and motivated by social work’s strong commitment to social justice and social change. With passion and hope, in a time when social work was still very new and unfamiliar to most Chinese people, I decided to become a social work major after a year’s participation in both sociology and social work modules. To achieve the ambition of changing society, I started to equip myself with social work knowledge and skills by taking part in a range of courses including casework, group work, community work, youth work, elderly service, social work values and ethics, social administration, social policy, etc. I was confident of social work’s ability to help the disadvantaged when I was about to start my first field practicum in a low-income community. I was tasked with organising a community mid-autumn festival celebration and facilitating group work with children that aimed to promote their self-confidence and teamwork skills. However, when I went into the lives of these children, I got to realise how poorly they and their parents were supported by policies and how little social workers’ services could make a difference to the structural barriers they faced.

This feeling even grew stronger when I was involved in my second field practicum in an experimental child protection service in a suburban area. At that time, there was no formal reporting system for child maltreatment in China, and social workers lacked statutory power and necessary resources to effectively intervene in child maltreatment cases (Lei et al, 2019). Although my colleagues and I worked very hard to mobilise community resources (eg. referrals, mutual support and care, money, daily necessities,

etc.) and coordinate the work among different government bureaus that separately shared the responsibilities of child protection in a fragmented institutional system, we made limited progress in improving the conditions of our service users. This made me rethink the missions of social work: how could social workers change society if they were confined to the role of service providers while policies were inadequate, defective and even unjust? Could social workers play a more active role in shaping the policy and the structural environment of their service users? A similar concern is shared by social work academics around the world and leads to increased awareness of social workers' role in policymaking (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Klammer et al, 2019). The thesis is inspired by the notion that social workers should actively engage in policy practice: using their social work skills to propose and change policies to promote social justice (Cummins et al, 2011).

However, in China, social work policy practice is still an overlooked field of practice and research, with very few empirical studies looking into how Chinese social workers make their efforts to influence policymaking (Cai et al, 2020; Cai et al, 2021). Also, although my classmates and I received training on social policy during professional education, we were never taught how to take part in policymaking. Is the policy-making process accessible to social workers in China? Is policy practice feasible in the authoritarian context? Can social workers promote public participation in the policy arena and even democratise policymaking? This vision sounds ambitious, but I still believe in social work's commitment to social justice and social change. These questions led me to start my PhD study with a focus on social work policy practice in China. By exploring how Chinese social work organisations (SWOs) participate in policy practice within specific spaces, this thesis tries to fill in the gaps in the literature and provide some suggestions for social workers that are committed to making changes in China. This introductory chapter first provides background information on the study and explains the research topic and research questions. Then it discusses the significance of the study and outlines the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Research background and research topic

Social work is regarded as a new and imported profession in China. It was first introduced to China by missionaries and scholars from the USA, UK and other Western countries in the 1920s (Yuan, 1997; Peng, 2010; Zhang, 2014). However, social work as both a subject in universities and a field practice was abolished by the Communist Party of China (CPC) after it came into power in 1949, as it started to ban social activities that were identified with the "Western bourgeoisie" (Wang, 2011). Since then, social work in China had gone through a long period of suspension until the CPC implemented the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) and the State Education Commission decided to resume social work education in universities, with the aim of training professionals to provide social services and solve social problems resulting from the rapid economic and social transformation (Shi, 2004; Li *et al*., 2011).

In 2006, social work in China witnessed its historic moment when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) announced its plan to build "a well-structured and high-quality workforce of social work professionals" (CCCPC, 2006). This was the first time that social work was put onto the ruling party's core agenda (Feng and Peng, 2016). Guided by the CCCPC's top policy direction, the central government and local governments across China have made comprehensive policies regarding the establishment of non-governmental social work organisations (SWOs) and the development of various social services. Nowadays, the majority of Chinese social workers are employed by SWOs, which refer to the non-governmental organisations that are mainly made up of certificated social workers and specialise in a range of social work practices (MCA, 2009). Through contracting, thousands of SWOs are involved in the delivery of a variety of social services, which marks an unprecedented reform to China's social welfare system (Lei and Chan, 2018).

Despite the rapid development of the social work profession as well as various types of

social services, SWOs are criticised for focusing on individual-oriented services and becoming the Party-state's social governance tool used to manage marginalised population (Leung et al, 2012; Gao and Yan, 2015). According to MCA (2009), SWOs should carry out a range of professional practices including social relief, conflict mediation, rights protection, psychological counselling, behaviour correction, and relationship adjustment. Most of the missions of SWOs described by MCA are about intervening in individuals and interpersonal relationships. Similarly, according to the Organisation Department of the CCCPC and other seventeen government departments (2011), social workers are mainly tasked with providing individual-oriented services such as marriage and family services, mental health services, services for the disabled, employment support, crime prevention, drug abuse prevention and rehabilitation, criminal justice, family planning, conflict mediation, etc. It is noteworthy that policy practice is not included in the Party-state's policy documents that define social work in China, which seems to suggest that policy practice is not officially recognised by the Party-state as part of the mission of the social work profession in China.

However, policy practice is deemed an essential element of social work practice across the world. Cummins et al. (2011, p.2) define policy practice as "using social work skills to propose and change policies in order to achieve the goal of social and economic justice". Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015, p.1084) view policy practice as "activities undertaken by social workers as an integral part of their professional activity in diverse fields—those that focus on the formulation and implementation of policies as well as on existing policies and suggested changes in them". According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), social work practice spans a range of activities including various forms of therapy and counselling, group work, and community work, policy formulation and analysis, and advocacy and political interventions. The Code of Ethics of the British Association of Social Workers (2021) defines social work interventions as ranging from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. In the US, the Council for Social Work Education identifies engaging in policy practice as one of the nine core

competencies of social workers (Council for Social Work Education, 2015). The core values of social work have formed a strong motivational base for social workers' engagement in policy practice (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013): to promote human rights and social justice, social workers should not only help individuals and groups overcome the difficulties and challenges they face but also try to change society by actively influencing policymaking at the macro level.

Social workers' participation in policy practice varies from country to country and context to context. The policy-making process is shaped by specific political institutions, which determine how accessible policymaking is to social workers and affect what forms of policy practice can take place (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2015). Also, citizens and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) participate in the public sphere in certain intangible spaces that are filled with power relations. According to Gaventa (2006, p.26), participatory spaces refer to the "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests". Shaped by different types of power relations, participatory spaces can have different boundaries and layouts, setting who are eligible to enter, how issues are presented and debated, and what actions are possible within these spaces (Cornwall, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). Thus, different types of spaces incubate different types of participation.

This raises questions about what SWOs' participation in policy practice looks like in China, where the state-SWO relationships are subject to the authoritarian regime that rejects conflict and plurality as normal elements of politics, and places NGOs under strict surveillance and control (Howell, 2012; Howell and Pringle, 2019). Although social work in China has witnessed dramatic development in recent years, policy practice is still an overlooked field of practice. Reflecting on the "technicalisation" and "clinicalisation" of social work in China, He (2020) calls on social workers to increase their participation in policy practice and other forms of macro-level social work practice. However, SWOs' actual participation in policy practice has not been widely studied.

Do they have the intention and opportunities to take part in policymaking? If yes, in what kind of spaces do they engage in policy practice? How do they influence policies? What are the results of their actions? So far, little is known about Chinese SWOs' experiences of policy practice.

To fill this research gap, this study adopts a grounded theory methodology to promote the knowledge of social work policy practice in the Chinese social and political context. The aim of the study is to construct a grounded theory or conceptual framework to understand how SWOs participate in the policy process and what shapes their participation. To achieve the research aim, the following research objectives are specified:

1) Conduct in-depth interviews to investigate Chinese social workers' experiences of policy practice, and systematically analyse the interview data.
2) Develop an explanatory theory or conceptual framework to understand the participatory spaces for SWOs' policy practice.
3) Investigate the methods used by SWOs to influence policymaking.
4) Analyse how SWOs develop their influence over policymaking.
5) Examine the impacts of the participatory spaces on SWOs' professional role.

1.3 Significance of the study

This thesis is based on one of the first empirical studies to investigate SWOs' participation in policy practice in China. Policy practice is an important aspect of social work practice, but it has been overlooked and poorly studied in China, where social workers are mostly involved in direct service delivery. This study contributes to the knowledge about Chinese SWOs' role in the policy-making process in an authoritarian regime. This study uses the concept of "space" to examine the power relations and interactions between SWOs and the Party-state, and develops a new concept of

"incorporated spaces" to understand SWOs' engagement in policy practice. The thesis also reports the methods used by SWOs to influence policymaking, analyses the sources of their policy influence, and discusses the implications of incorporated spaces for China's social work profession. In addition, this study not only contributes to filling the research gaps in the academic literature but may also raise Chinese social work professionals' awareness of policy practice and benefit their future efforts to influence policymaking. Drawing on the research findings, the thesis critically reflects on SWOs' participation in policy practice and provides practical suggestions about widening the spaces for public participation and empowering social workers and service users.

1.4 Sequencing of the study

Grounded theory research is quite different from other types of conventional qualitative research in terms of the sequence of doing the literature review, sampling, data collection, data analysis, etc. To help readers better understand the research process, Figure 1.1 is presented below to illustrate the chronology of the study. My education and research experiences in China led to my great interest in social work policy practice in the Chinese context. I started my PhD study with some initial research questions in mind: do SWOs ever try to influence policymaking? How do SWOs engage in policy practice? What affects the way they influence policymaking? What results from their policy practice? After deciding my PhD research topic, I did a preliminary literature review on social work in China and policy practice in the Western context, which became part of my research proposal and my nine-month review report. The preliminary literature review, undertaken during October 2018 to May 2019 showed no empirical research on policy practice by SWOs in China to date. This became an important reason for using grounded theory methodology in this exploratory study, in order to develop theory from the research. With no intention to test a theory or use a well-developed theory to guide my study, I decided not to do a comprehensive literature review until embarking on fieldwork and theory development.

Figure 1.1 Sequencing of the study

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I conducted initial sampling and recruited some SWO leaders as the research participants, who had experience in policy practice. During fieldwork, intensive interviews and data analysis were conducted simultaneously, which informed and guided further data collection. The data analysis process enabled me to generate and explore more research questions, and guided me to conduct theoretical sampling: to collect data from more participants that would "maximise opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.143). Through theoretical sampling, I recruited several independent SWO leaders and social work researchers in Hong Kong, who provided a different perspective on the SWO-government relationship in China. Then, the data collected from fieldwork was systematically analysed using the grounded theory coding

procedure and techniques (more details will be reported in the methodology chapter). Through data analysis, I constructed the theoretical concept of "incorporated spaces" and organised research findings around this central concept.

After theory development, I conducted a more comprehensive literature review, which covered a range of topics relating to the theme of the thesis, including social work and social governance in China, policy practice and participatory spaces, the Party-state's control over SWOs, and policymaking in China, etc. The literature review provides important contextual information for the readers of my thesis, so that they can follow the research findings and discussions more easily. It also enabled me to refine my theory and make a dialogue with existing studies. Finally, I brought all chapters together and completed the writing of the thesis. The order of the chapters in the thesis does not represent the order in which the different parts of the study was undertaken, but rather the order in which I judged it would be easier for readers to follow. Some of the information from the fuller literature review is included in the literature review chapters to assist the reader in understanding the context of the study.

1.5 Thesis structure

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 "Social work in China" provides an overview of what social work is and how it is developed in the Chinese context. It reveals that the development of social work in China features the strong intervention of the Chinese Party-state and connects closely to its political agendas of "building a harmonious socialist society" (CCCPC, 2006) and "making innovations in social governance" (CCCPC, 2013). Boosted by the Party-state's supportive policies on cultivating and promoting the social work profession, an increasing number of nongovernmental social work organisations (SWOs) have been established and involved in social service delivery across China. After reporting the range of social services that SWOs provide through government contracting, chapter 2 presents a

chronological review of the Party-state's major policies on social management and social governance. These policies have had significant impacts on the SWO-state relationship and SWOs' roles in both social service delivery and policy practice. As a professional force equipped with knowledge and techniques for promoting psychological functioning and fostering interpersonal relationships, SWOs are viewed as a useful tool to govern the marginalised populations left out by economic and social reforms. At the end of chapter 2, I discuss the impacts of the Party-state's political agenda of social governance on cultivating and shaping the social work profession in China.

While chapter 2 helps readers understand what social work is in the Chinese context, chapter 3, "Policy practice and spaces for participation", turns to the field of social work policy practice and reviews the existing theoretical and practical discussion around policy practice and participatory spaces. It starts with a review of the definitions and rationale of policy practice. It goes on to review how social workers participate in policy practice from an international perspective. The literature suggests that social workers play an important role throughout the policy process, where they can actively influence agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. The literature also indicates that policy practice can take various forms that feature different methods and strategies. The concept of "space" is then introduced to explain why there are diverse types of participation in policy practice. The intangible spaces for public participation are filled with power relations. They produce opportunities as well as restrictions, thus shaping actors' actions within specific spaces. Finally, this chapter concludes with the clues and insights provided by the literature that help understand how SWOs participate in policy practice in China.

The discussion in chapter 3 indicates that power relations permeate and shape the spaces for policy practice. Therefore, chapter 4 "The relationships between SWOs and the Party-state in China" presents a literature review on the SWO-state relationships and discusses their possible impacts on the creation of spaces for SWOs' policy practice. It

reveals that the Party-state's strategies of contractual control and political control have played an important role in shaping the relationships and interactions between the two sides. This chapter first examines how contracting out social services has provided support for the development of SWOs on the one hand and placed SWOs in a subordinate role on the other. Then it looks into the Party-state's political control strategy and reports how the Party-state attempts to co-opt social organisation leaders into the establishment and involve social organisations in Party-building work. Due to the contractual control and political control, SWOs' independence and autonomy have been restricted. Nevertheless, existing studies suggest that social organisations can still find spaces to influence policymaking, as these two forms of control generate closer SWO-state collaboration on social governance. This chapter summarises some salient features of social organisations' participation in policy practice. In the end, this chapter is concluded with the insights provided by existing studies and the research gaps identified in the literature.

Chapter 5 "Research methodology" reports the research design and analytic process of this study. This study adopts grounded theory as the research methodology, as it has several merits that are very helpful in achieving the aim and objectives of the research. Chapter 5 begins with an introduction to grounded theory methodology, which details the different versions of grounded theory analytic procedures and methods. Then, I explain why I adopt grounded theory in this study and how I plan to use the analytic methods and techniques to investigate SWOs' participation in policy practice. After that, this chapter demonstrates the overall research design and the actual research process, including sampling, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Last but not least, it discusses key ethical issues involved in the research and reports the measures taken to protect the rights of research participants.

Chapter 6 "The creation of incorporated spaces" presents the research findings concerning how participatory spaces for SWOs' policy practice are constructed in China. It first examines the role of contracting out social services in expanding SWOs'

influence over the policy process, creating channels for SWOs' interactions with policymakers, and reinforcing the superior-subordinate relationship between the Party-state and SWOs. I term this mechanism for space creation "contractual incorporation", as SWOs are incorporated into the Party-led social governance system through contracting and are involved in policymaking as a professional arm of the Party-state. Next, chapter 6 examines another mechanism of space creation: political incorporation. It includes three aspects: co-opting SWOs leaders into the political establishment, requiring SWOs to establish the CPC branches within their organisational structures, and suppressing and marginalising the independent SWOs. The research findings reveal that while contractual incorporation and political incorporation create opportunities for SWOs to participate in policy practice, they also define the boundary of participatory spaces by limiting SWOs' independence and autonomy.

Following chapter 6's analysis of the creation of incorporated spaces, chapter 7 "Policy practice in incorporated spaces" delves into how SWOs participate in policy practice in these spaces. First, it reports SWOs' perception of social work policy practice, which emphasises influencing service-related policies, taking part in the experimentation-based policy process, and collaborating with the government. Second, it reveals that SWO leaders, rather than front-line social workers or service users, are the main policy actors in incorporated spaces, as the Party-state's incorporation selectively targets social work elites. Then, this chapter reports the main methods used by SWOs to influence policymaking. These methods range from institutionalised methods (eg. participating in policy consultations, submitting motions and proposals to the PCs and CPPCCs, etc.) to those non-institutionalised ones (eg. conducting research, using media, etc.). It is noteworthy that in incorporated spaces, SWOs always use cooperative and non-confrontational policy practice methods, instead of radical and confrontational ones.

After chapter 7 depicts SWOs' participation in policy practice, chapter 8, "SWOs' policy influence in incorporated spaces", further discusses the sources of SWOs' influence over policymaking. It first examines how SWOs' social service performance

and professional expertise help them gain recognition from the Party-state. Then this chapter goes on to reveal that a trusting relationship with the Party-state is essential for SWOs' successful policy practice. The policymakers' trust in SWOs is also a kind of control. To maintain a trusting relationship, SWOs need to comply with the dominating political agenda and adjust their missions and behaviours accordingly. More importantly, whether SWOs can develop and exercise their policy influence depends on whether their policy practice contributes to the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and authority. Next, this chapter presents a comparison between an incorporated SWO and an independent SWO regarding their engagement in policy practice, which indicates two types of policy influence. Without the permission and authorisation given by the Party-state, SWOs may find it difficult and even risky to exert influence over public issues. Finally, this chapter concludes with an analysis of the power dynamics of policy practice in the incorporated spaces, which reveals that SWOs' influence over policymaking is gained through the Party-state's top-down delegation of power.

Drawing on the research findings reported in the previous chapters, chapter 9 "Discussion and conclusion: Implications for social work policy practice in China" discusses the implications of incorporated spaces for China's social work profession and its involvement in policy practice. The final chapter begins with a comparison between incorporated spaces and invited spaces, which indicates that although these two types of spaces are both created by authorities that are in a more powerful position, incorporated spaces show more authoritarian features in terms of the purpose of participation, the process of space creation, and the role of participants. Next, this chapter discusses the implications of incorporated spaces for SWOs' relationships with the Party-state, their independence and autonomy, and their ethical commitments to the core values of social work. Based on the critical discussions, this chapter provides several recommendations for transforming incorporated spaces into those featuring more strength and autonomy of social workers and service users. After that, I reflect on the research journey and offer some suggestions for future research. Finally, the chapter

concludes the thesis with a summary of the key research findings and their contributions to knowledge.

Chapter 2 Social work in China

2.1 Introduction

Despite the pursuit to produce a global definition of social work and unify social workers across the world who are believed to have similar goals, values, knowledge, and skills (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), the actual forms of social work practice vary in different countries (Payne, 2005). It is widely accepted that social work is contingent upon different social, cultural, economic, political, and welfare contexts, which define social problems in different ways and generate different solutions to these problems (McDonald et al, 2003; Payne, 2005). To understand how social workers and social work organisations in China participate in policy practice, it is important to look at what social work is and how it is constructed in the Chinese context. This chapter aims to provide an overview of social work in China. It begins with a brief review of the development of social work in China, which features the Party-state's strong intervention in cultivating and shaping the profession. It then reports how nongovernmental social work organisations are involved in social service delivery through government contracting. The fourth section of this chapter provides a chronological review of the Party-state's major policies on social management and social governance, which have significant impacts on the SWO-state relationships and SWOs' roles in social service delivery and policy consultation. Finally, this chapter concludes with observations about the impacts of the Party-state's political agenda of social governance on the development of social work in China.

2.2 The development of social work in China

Modern social work practice and education were introduced to China in the first decade of the 20th century. Since then, social work in China has gone through a winding journey that includes the process of importing, suspending, then rebuilding, and rapid development in terms of public expenditure and the number of professional organisations.

Missionaries and scholars from Western countries were the first to develop social work education programmes and social services in China. In 1912 John Burgess, the officer of the Young Men's Christian Association of Peking who came from the USA, established the Peking Association of Social Advancement[1] together with students in Yenching University. This association aimed at organising students to participate in social services, which at the same time introduced social work methods to China (Peng, 2010). In 1921 Peking Union Medical College Hospital established the department of social service, which provided medical assistance and other medical social work services to patients in need (Zhang, 2014). In 1925, with the help of John Burgess, Yenching University set up the department of sociology and social service, which is followed by dozens of universities establishing social work education programmes (Yuan, 1997). However, due to civil wars and the Second World War, the scattered social work practice and education programmes did not bring social work development into the Chinese government's agenda at that time (Wang, 2011), and social work remained undeveloped during the import period (the 1910s – 1949).

Professional social work was abolished after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Soon after coming into power, the CPC started to abolish social activities that were deemed to have the characteristics of the "Western bourgeoisie". Social work, which is characterised by its foundation of "humanism of bourgeoisie",

[1] "北平实进社" in Chinese, *Bei Ping Shi Jin She*.

was also on the list (Wang, 2011). In 1952 the Chinese government conducted the reform of higher education, in which social work and sociology were regarded as capitalist pseudoscience and useless in a socialist country where there were no social problems (Yuan, 1997; Li *et al*., 2011). As a result, sociology and social work programmes were removed from the higher education system and had gone through 30 years of suspension since then. From 1949 to 1979, the state, mass organisations (e.g., youth leagues, trade unions, women's federations) and public institutions (e.g., public schools, and public hospitals) were the primary providers of welfare in China. During the Maoist period (1949-1976), revolutionary collectivism and the value of "serving the people wholeheartedly" encouraged people to help each other. This prevailing ideology also required cadres of the state to be concerned about the living of the people and take care of the disadvantaged groups (Wang, 1995). Those services provided by CPC cadres formed the indigenous social work practice in communist China, which is now defined as "administrative nonprofessional social work" (Wang and Yuen-Tsang, 2009; Wang, 2011). However, at that time, social work was not a recognised profession, and the cadres who provided social service lacked social work knowledge as they did not receive any professional training (Wang, 1995).

China implemented the reform and opening-up policy in 1978 and gave up the Maoist ideology of class struggle, which ushered in opportunities for rebuilding social work in China. In 1983 the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) proposed the mission of re-establishing the civil affairs training system and began to provide training to cadres who worked with disadvantaged groups (Yuan, 1997). Before long, MCA realised that social work education could be useful. In 1987 MCA held a historic meeting on rebuilding social work education. After consulting with a group of sociologists, MCA and the State Education Commission decided to recognise the status of social work as a discipline and to rebuild social work education programmes in universities (Shi, 2004). The following year, Peking University developed the first social work education programme after the suspension period *(*Li *et al., 2011)*. In 1994, the China Association for Social Work Education was founded, which is the first national professional organisation of

social work in China. By 2001 there were almost 100 universities in China providing social work education (Shi, 2004). The rebuilding of social work in China began with education. However, social work practice remained undeveloped, which provided only limited practicum and job opportunities, either in the public sector or nonprofit sector, for social work students and graduates (Li *et al*., 2011).

This situation has changed since 2006 when the Central Committee of the CPC (CCCPC) pointed out in the *Resolutions of the CCCPC on major issues regarding the building of a harmonious socialist society* that China is in urgent need of "building a well-structured and high-quality workforce of social work professionals" (CCCPC, 2006). This document marked the first time that social work was put into the central government's core agenda (Feng and Peng, 2016). CPC identifies social work as an important governance tool to tackle the social problems resulting from the rapid social transformation and to build a harmonious socialist society. To put the central government's policy design into practice, in 2011, the Organisation Department of the CCCPC and other 17 government departments issued the *Opinions on promoting the building of the social work professional workforce*, which provided a definition of social workers in China:

> Social work professionals are those equipped with social work professional knowledge and skills and provide direct social services in a range of fields, including social welfare, social assistance, charity work, community building, marriage and family services, mental health services, services for the disabled, education, employment support, employee assistance, crime prevention, drug abuse prevention and rehabilitation, criminal justice, family planning, conflict mediation, responses to disasters and crises, and others. (Organisation Department of the CCCPC et al, 2011)

Although the Party-state did not directly define what social work is in the Chinese context, its elaboration of the roles of social workers indicates that social work is

connected to all aspects of China's existing social service, health and education systems (Gao and Yan, 2015). The central government has continued to release a series of policies relating to the development of social work (e.g., Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and MCA, 2006a; Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and MCA, 2006b; MCA, 2007; MCA, 2009; CCCPC and State Council, 2010; Organisation Department of the CCCPC *et al*, 2011; Organisation Department of the CCCPC *et al*, 2012; MCA and Ministry of Finance, 2012; MCA, 2014). These policies mainly focused on four tasks: 1) building a workforce with professional expertise in social work; 2) establishing a qualification system for social workers; 3) facilitating the development of nongovernmental social work organisations (SWOs); 4) developing the mechanism of contracting out social services to SWOs.

Boosted by these policies, social work in China has experienced explosive development. As shown in figure 2.1, by the end of 2018, the number of certificated social workers has exceeded 439,000, in comparison to only 43,600 in 2010. The number of SWOs has increased to almost 10,000 in 2018 from only 2000 in 2013 (see figure 2.2). The government funding for social work services has increased to 611 million Yuan, which almost tripled the amount in 2014 (see figure 2.3). As shown in figure 2.4, the number of social work service posts has also increased rapidly, from 113,900 in 2014 to 383,000 by 2018 (General Office of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016, 2017, 2018; China Association of Social Workers, 2019).

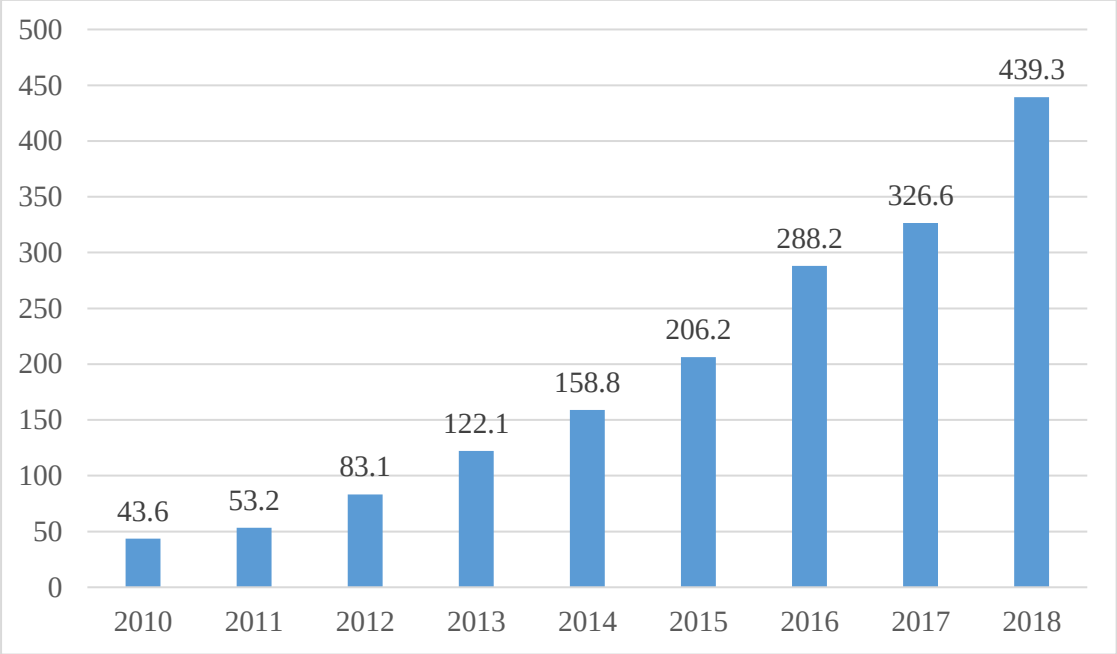

Figure 2.1 Numbers of certificated social workers during 2010-2018 (thousands)[2]

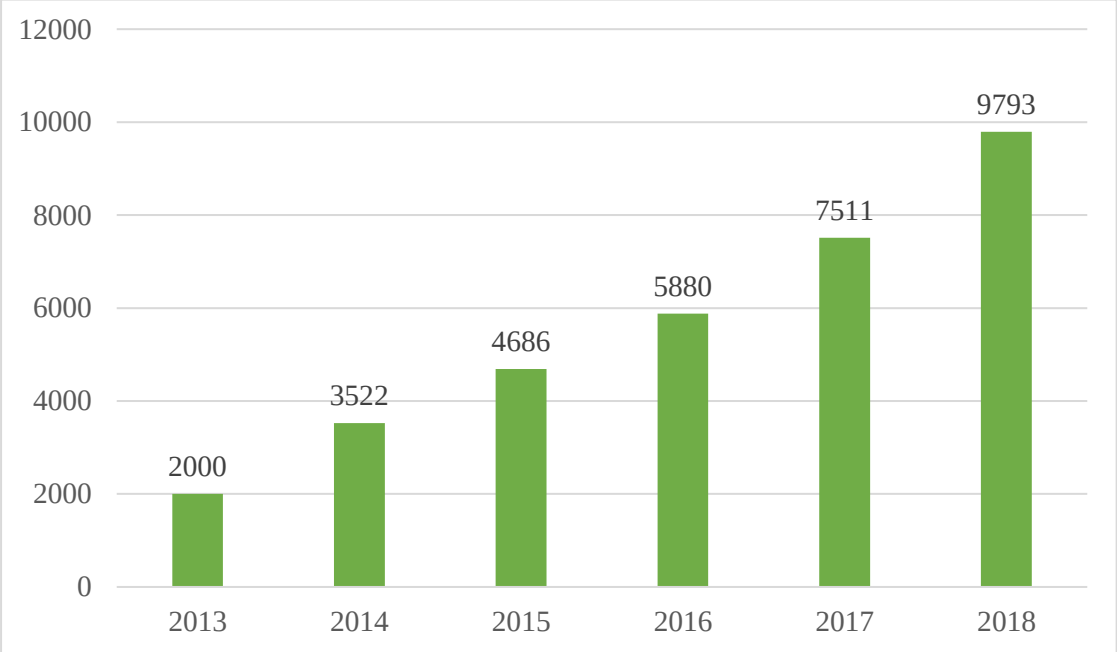

Figure 2.2 Numbers of SWOs during 2014-2018

[2] The data shown in Figures 2.1 - 2.4 are provided by the General Office of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (2016 and 2017) and the China Association of Social Workers (2019). Due to the limitation of data sources, the figures for 2019, 2020, 2021 and other years are not available.

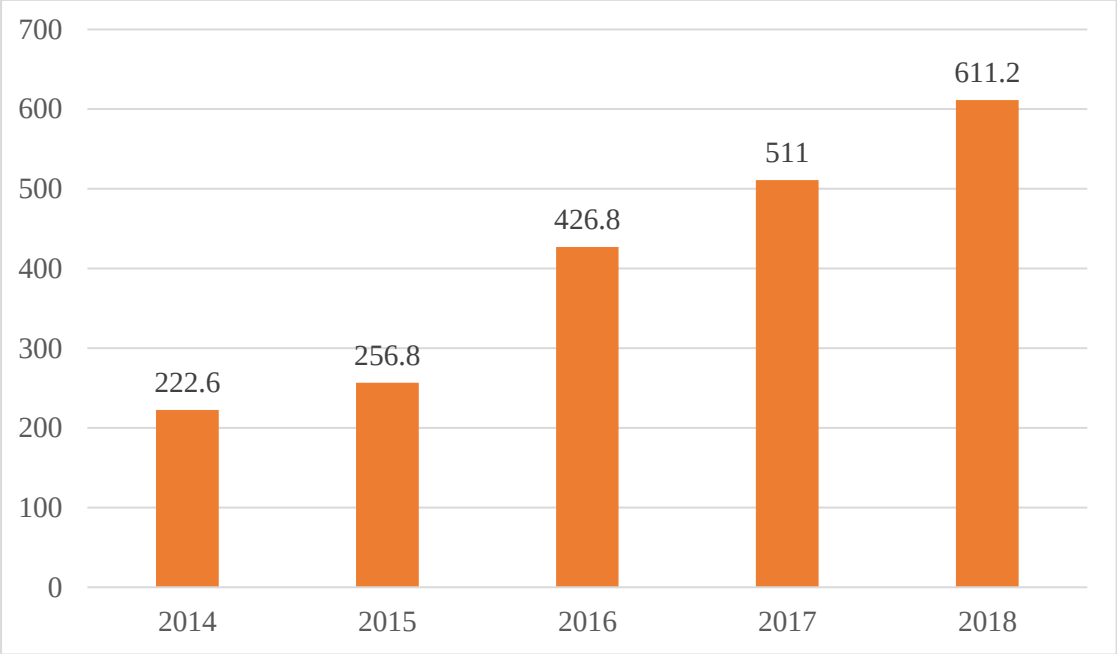

Figure 2.3 Amount of government funding for social work services during 2014-2018 (million Yuan)

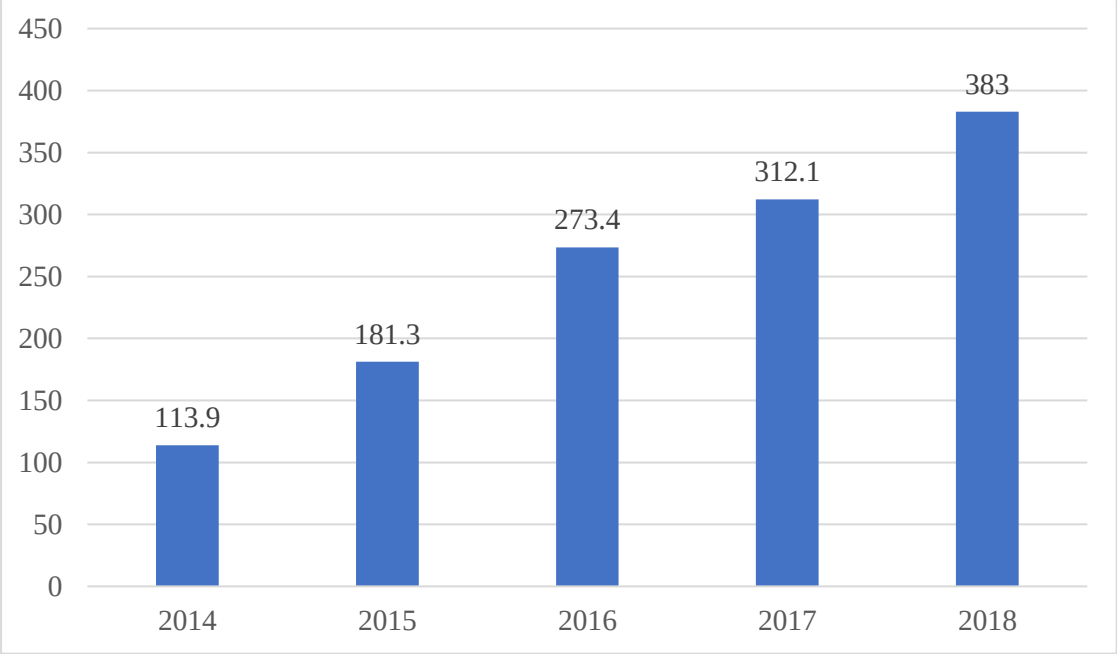

Figure 2.4 Numbers of social work service posts during 2014-2018 (thousands)

It is worth noting that the Chinese government does not choose to develop a state social work in which social workers work as public servants. Instead, China embraces state-nonprofit collaboration and has intentionally placed the social work profession in the

nongovernmental sector. As a result, the majority of social workers in China are employed by nongovernmental SWOs and are tasked with delivering contracted-out social services. According to the MCA, SWOs refer to:

> the non-governmental and non-enterprise units[3] mainly made up of social workers, which adhere to the principle of "helping others to help themselves [4] ", and follow the ethical norms of social work, and comprehensively apply the professional knowledge, methods and skills of social work to provide social services such as social relief, conflict mediation, rights protection, psychological counselling, behaviour correction, and relationship adjustment. (MCA, 2009)

It can be seen from the definition provided by the MCA that SWO is a particular type of social organisation in China whose primary mission is to undertake social work practice. In China, "social organisation" is the official name used by the government to refer to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and nonprofit organisations (NPOs). This thesis adopts the term "social organisations" to refer to the organisations that are usually defined as NGOs or NPOs in the Western context. As a specific type of social organisation, to set up a SWO and renewing its registration requires the following: 1) the organisation's aims, activities, and methods of delivering social services should be related to social work and should be articulated in its charter; 2) At least one of the founders should have obtained a professional certificate of Social Worker, or at least two of them should have obtained a professional certificate of Junior Social Worker[5]; 3) At least one-third of the employees should have obtained a professional certificate of Social Worker or Junior Social Worker, or they should have obtained a bachelor's/master's/doctoral degree in social work (MCA, 2009; MCA, 2014). SWOs

[3] The non-governmental and non-enterprise unit is one of the three forms of social organisations in China (the other two are foundations and social groups). Its main mission is to provide non-profit social services (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 1998).

[4] "助人自助" in Chinese, *Zhu Ren Zi Zhu.*

[5] In China, there are currently two levels of certificates for social workers: Junior Social Worker and Social Worker. These certificates can be acquired through examination (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and MCA, 2006b).

are more competitive than other types of social organisations in terms of receiving government funding because governments usually demand that social services are contracted out to SWOs and delivered by certificated social workers. Therefore, the increasing public expenditure on contracting-out social services has resulted in the rapid development of SWOs. It is believed that the most powerful driving force behind the rebuilding and development of social work in China comes from the Party-state, which intentionally develops the social work profession and involves it in social service delivery.

2.3 SWOs' involvement in social service provision

The Chinese government has adopted the strategy of outsourcing social services to nongovernmental SWOs to develop social work practices and reform its welfare service policy (Lei and Chan, 2018). The Chinese government believes that facilitating the emergence of SWOs and contracting out social services to SWOs contribute to improving modern social governance, transforming the government's functions, promoting the quality of social services, and building a harmonious socialist society (MCA, 2009; MCA and Ministry of Finance, 2012).

In 2012, the MCA and the Ministry of Finance (2012) enacted the *Guiding opinions of government purchase of social work services* which stipulated that social work services contracted to SWOs should cover and benefit the following social groups: "urban floating population[6], rural left-behind people[7], disadvantaged groups, special groups[8], and people suffering from natural disasters" (MCA and Ministry of Finance, 2012). More specifically, according to the government's plan, SWOs should get involved in

[6] "城市流动人口 *Cheng Shi Liu Dong Ren Kou*". This term refers to the domestic migrant population who leave where their households are registered and reside and work in urban areas.
[7] "农村留守人员 *Nong Cun Liu Shou Ren Yuan*". This term is used to describe the children, women and older people who remain in rural areas while their parents, husbands or grown-up children leave to work in urban areas.
[8] "特殊人群 *Te Shu Ren Qun*". This term usually refers to socially marginalised people, including drug abusers, offenders, people with mental disabilities, etc.

providing the following social services:

Implement social integration projects for the urban floating population, provide them with services including social assistance, employment assistance, career development, and rights protection, and help them integrate with urban life and live in harmony with urban residents.

Implement social protection projects for rural left-behind people, help rural left-behind children, women and older people solve their difficulties in daily life, and construct well-developed social protection and support networks.

Implement social care projects for older people and people with disabilities, provide them with services including physical care, psychological support, social participation, and generational communication, and construct systematic, humane and professional mechanisms of services for older people and people with disabilities.

Implement social support projects for special groups, help special groups, including drug abusers, delinquent teenagers, people with AIDS, people with mental disabilities, people on probation, imprisoned people, and ex-offenders, correct their behaviours, relieve difficulties in life, improve psychological and emotional health, improve their relationships with families and communities, and recover and develop their social functions.

Implement life-reconstruction projects for people suffering from natural disasters, provide professional social work services, including life assistance, psychological support, community rebuilding, resource linking, and livelihood development, to meet their economic, social and psychological needs, help them rebuild their confidence in life, repair their social connections, and resume their work and life. (MCA and Ministry of Finance,

2012)

Following the central government's top-level policy design, local authorities across China have developed a wide range of social services that are contracted out to SWOs and delivered to various policy target groups. The book *China's social welfare revolution: Contracting out social services* edited by Lei and Chan (2018) provides many examples of how municipal governments in China involve SWOs in welfare service innovation and provision through contracting. For example, the city of Guangzhou has developed about 200 Integrated Family Service Centres providing counselling services, youth development services, parent-child activities, daycare for older people, volunteer training, community activities, and other services for older people, teenagers, women, and people with disabilities (Lu and Cai, 2018). Shenzhen has contracted out drug prohibition services to SWOs, which play an important role in providing counselling services for drug abusers and their family members, linking welfare and social resources, providing employment support, mediating family relationships, and organising public education on drug abuse and drug prohibition (Li and Lin, 2018).

In Shanghai, some SWOs are involved in community corrections through contracting and are responsible for assessing offenders' social networks and social needs, monitoring and recording offenders' participation in community corrections, providing offenders with education on law, policy, morality, psychological health, providing referrals to other resources, and assisting with the work of judicial officers (Zhao, 2018). In the city of Foshan, by signing service contracts with the government, SWOs have sent medical social workers to hospitals to provide social and psychological support for late-stage cancer patients and genealogical patients, rehabilitation service for disabled patients, social care and emotional support for medical workers, and recruit and develop volunteers (Law, 2018). To promote social integration and social harmony, the city of Jinhua works with a SWO on a contracted-out social service project which provides domestic migrant children with various opportunities to participate in urban life,

develop self-protection skills, and realise their potential (Li, 2018).

It can be seen from the central government's policy design that contracted-out social services in China have been characterised by the focus on socially marginalised groups and individual changes, which seems to reveal the Party-state's intention of social control. For example, as stipulated in the document above, SWOs are expected to provide psychological support for older people, people with disabilities, drug abusers, and other social groups that are deemed to have psychological or behavioural problems. However, it was not included in the policy discourse that SWOs should work with their service users to overcome structural barriers or even promote social changes. Previous studies have indicated that the Party-state's purpose of involving SWOs in social service delivery is to govern the marginalised populations left out by the economic and social transformation featuring industrialisation, marketisation and urbanisation, and the aim of social work services is largely guided towards achieving individual changes and promoting the ability of the disadvantaged to manage their difficulties in a changing social context (Leung et al, 2012; Leung, 2012; Gao and Yan, 2015). In other words, the Chinese Party-state intentionally promotes social work as a professional force that can help with its political agenda of "making innovations in social governance".

2.4 Social work in the Party-state's scheme of social governance

The making of the social work profession in China has mostly been a government-led social-engineering project, in which the Party-state's intervention is massive, multifaceted and unprecedented (Gao and Yan, 2015). The central government endorsed the development of SWOs for the first time when it decided to build a harmonious socialist society. Later, collaboration with SWOs has become in accordance with the Party-state's agenda of "making innovations in social governance" (CCCPC, 2013; Wang, 2014). The discourse used in the policies relating to the social work profession shows that the Chinese government treats SWOs as a crucial instrument that serves the

Party-state's interest in settling social unrest and maintaining political stability. The Party-state's agenda of making innovations in social governance has assigned the social work profession the political functions of maintaining social stability and strengthening the legitimacy of the communist regime (Gao and Yan, 2015). Leung et al (2012) adopt the governmentality perspective to examine the development of social work in China and how it contributes to the Party-state's political agenda of managing individual troubles, settling social unrest, and maintaining social and political stability. In the context of rapid economic and social changes, the Chinese government views moral failures (eg. crimes and drug addiction) and individuals' inability to manage their lives as the obstacles to social harmony and believes that social work, with its expertise in intervening in individual and interpersonal problems, can be contributive to social governance (ibid). As Leung et al (2012) observe:

> From the governmentality point of view, social work is an appropriate technology for governance. With rich knowledge in personal psychological functioning and sophisticated techniques for fostering interpersonal relationships, social work fits neatly into the prevailing problem of personal failings. (Leung et al, 2012, p.1039)

As the political structures determine the degree to which the policy process is accessible to social workers and the forms that policy practice can take (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2015), analysing the spaces in which SWOs can engage in policy practice calls for an examination of the political context and how it shapes the government-SWO relationships in China. Why would an authoritarian regime open up spaces for nongovernmental SWOs that may have a certain degree of autonomy from the Party-state to get involved in policy design and implementation? How does the ruling party frame SWOs' involvement in policymaking in its political discourse and rhetoric? An analysis of the Chinese Party-state's political agenda of "making innovations in social governance" may provide clues to answering these questions.

This section provides a chronological review of major policies adopted by the CPC on "social management" and "social governance" to trace the development of the Party-state's political agenda of incorporating SWOs into its social governance system. Meanwhile, this section analyses how these policy discourses stimulate and frame the creation of spaces in which SWOs are involved in not only service delivery but also policymaking. The analysis of these policies helps us understand the rationale behind the Party-state's efforts to promote the development of social work and how these efforts create opportunities as well as constraints for SWOs' involvement in policymaking.

China has experienced dramatic changes since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy in the 1980s. The unprecedented economic growth was accompanied by increasing social problems generated by the rapid marketisation, industrialisation and urbanisation, including the deficiencies and defects of social welfare, income distribution, education, health care, housing, public administration etc. (CCCPC, 2006). Some of the unsolved social problems even resulted in "mass incidents" — protests joined by a large number of citizens — bringing serious challenges to the ruling party. Additionally, the interests and values of people were diversifying, exposing the inefficiency of the Party-state's traditional methods of ruling the population. In this context, responding to the massive emerging social issues and improving public administration began to enter the top policy agenda of the CPC. In response, the CCCPC put forward a new political agenda: "making innovations in social management". This discourse was first articulated in 2006 when the CCCPC published the *Decision of the CCCPC on several major issues concerning the building of a harmonious socialist society*. In this document, the CCCPC not only pointed out the importance of building a professional social work workforce but also used a whole chapter to present its resolution and action plan to "improve social management and maintain the security and stability of society". According to the policy document:

> Enhancing social management and maintaining social stability is a

> prerequisite to building a harmonious socialist society. We will make innovations in the social management system, integrate social management resources, and promote the quality of social management.
>
> (CCCPC, 2006)

Although the CCCPC did not give a clear definition of "social management" in this document, it discussed a range of topics under this title, including the building of a service-oriented government, community construction, the mitigation of social conflicts, crime prevention, disaster prevention, national security and defence, and the development of social organisations. Therefore, "making innovations in social management" is a comprehensive political agenda about tackling social issues and managing the population in a more efficient and effective way, with the intention to enhance the Party-state's ability to maintain social stability and harmony, in other words, social control.

To do so, the Party-state puts its focus on redrawing its relations with society and promoting collaboration with social organisations. As Yue and Deng (2017) observe, the use of "social management" indicates closer collaboration between the government and social organisations on managing public issues. The policy documents relating to social management indicate four aspects of the Party-state's efforts to adjust and define its relationship with the social organisations. First, the CCCPC identifies four groups of stakeholders involved in social management --- the Party, the government, society, and the public --- and defines their roles and relations. More specifically, the CPC plays the role of the top leader in the planned social management system, setting out goals and plans, and giving orders to other stakeholders. The central and local governments are responsible for implementing the CPC's decisions, while social organisations need to collaborate with the Party and the government in social management, which also calls for the participation of the public. This policy discourse defines the role of SWOs and other social organisations as cooperating with the Party-state. In other words, collaboration is hierarchical. How collaboration and participation can take place is

restricted and subject to the absolute leadership of CPC and the authority of the government. According to the CCCPC:

> (We will) improve the social management system in which the Party leads, the government takes charge, society collaborates, and the public participates[9].
>
> (CCCPC, 2006)

Second, the document explicitly pointed out the importance of supporting the development of social organisations and involving them in social management, in which they are expected to provide social services, identify and report social needs, and help with social control. As articulated by the CCCPC:

> Develop social organisations and enhance their function of serving society. We will support social organisations to participate in social management and public service. We will improve the policies on cultivating as well as regulating social organisations, and support them to fulfil their functions of providing social services, reflecting social demands, and regulating social behaviours.
>
> (CCCPC, 2006)

As society is becoming more complex and social needs more diverse in the context of industrialisation, marketisation and urbanisation, the CPC realises that the government alone is not capable of efficiently providing necessary social services to meet the needs of a variety of social groups including older people, people with disabilities, children and teenagers, domestic migrant workers, etc. It then finds that social organisations, including SWOs, can be helpful resources that could improve social management. The Party-state has identified three main functions that social organisations can perform in

[9] "党委领导，政府负责，社会协同，公众参与" in Chinese, *Dang Wei Ling Dao, Zheng Fu Fu Ze, She Hui Xie Tong, Gong Zhong Can Yu.*

the social management system: providing social services, reflecting social demands, and regulating social behaviours. In this sense, the CPC not only views social organisations as the alternative social service providers other than the state (including the government and the state-run welfare institutions) but also expects them to provide the Party-state with information regarding the demands of the public, so that the Party-state could develop new policies or improve the existing ones to tackle the emergent social issues. Additionally, by stating that social organisations should regulate social behaviours, the CPC perceives them as agents of social control. For the Party-state, social service and social management are two sides of the same coin, as the ultimate goal of involving social organisations in social management is to maintain social stability and strengthen the legitimacy of the regime, according to the CCCPC:

> Management should be implemented in service, and service should be reflected in management.
>
> (CCCPC, 2006)

Third, while the Party-state decides to involve social organisations in social management, it at the same time emphasises the regulation and supervision of these organisations. The Party-state is still wary of these non-governmental agents, keeping an eye on their potential for mobilising citizens and challenging the authority of the ruling party, which may lead to "social disharmony". According to the CCCPC and Jintao Hu, the former president of China:

> We must place equal emphasis on the cultivation and development as well as the regulation and supervision of social organisations.
>
> (CCCPC, 2006)

> We must maximize the creativity and vitality of society, maximize the elements of harmony, and minimize the elements of disharmony… We must attach equal importance to the construction as well as regulation of social

organisations.

(Former President of China, Jintao Hu, 2007)

Fourth, “making innovations in social management” requires the Party-state to improve and reform its ways to work with social organisations and citizens. For example, the task of enhancing social management was included in *the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) for National Economic and Social Development* adopted by the National People's Congress (NPC) in 2011. The *Five-Year Plan* is the top and most comprehensive policy document in a communist regime, which sets targets and plans for development in all aspects in China. This document not only reaffirmed the CPC’s resolution to involve social organisations in social management but also put forward a more detailed plan for enhancing their participation in tackling social issues. The 12th *Five-Year Plan* included a list of measures to support the development of social organisations, including improving social organisation registration procedures, transferring some functions of the government to social organisations, providing more public resources, opening up more domains for social organisations to participate in, and developing the policy of tax reduction (NPC, 2011). Meanwhile, the 12th *Five-Year Plan* also included several measures to enhance the government’s regulation of social organisations: improving relevant laws and regulations, setting up an information system for the management of social organisations, and setting up an assessment system for social organisations (NPC, 2011).

Besides social organisations’ participation in providing social services, their functions of reflecting social demands and contributing to policymaking were also mentioned in the 12th *Five-Year Plan*. This showed the Party-state’s intention of creating spaces in which selected social organisations, experts, and citizens can participate in policymaking under the leadership of the Party.

Broaden the channels for the expression of public opinions. We will improve the social announcement system, the public hearing system, and the expert

> consultation system for public decision-making. We will promote public participation. We will improve the mechanism for petitions, and pay attention to the collection of public opinions and the feedback on policies.
>
> (NPC, 2011)

After Jinping Xi came into power in 2012, the CPC put forward a new policy concept --- "social governance" --- to replace "social management". The new task of "making innovations in social governance" was first articulated in the *Decision of the CCPCC on some major issues concerning comprehensively deepening the reform* adopted by the Third Plenum of the 18th CCCPC. According to this document:

> To make innovations in social governance, we will direct our primary attention to safeguarding the fundamental interests of the broadest masses of the people, increase the factors of harmony to the maximum… ensure that the people live and work in peace and contentment and that the society is stable and orderly.
>
> (CCCPC, 2013)

What is the difference between social management and social governance? According to President *Jinping Xi*, compared to social management, social governance is more comprehensive and systematic, it is implemented according to laws, and it targets the roots of social issues (Xinhua News Agency, 2016). However, it should be noted that it is very common to see changes in political rhetoric and policy discourses after a new leadership of CPC comes into power. For example, the slogan of "building a harmonious socialist society" was soon abandoned by the *Xi* administration, which invented a new vision of "realising the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". The change from "social management" to "social governance" was another example. As some researchers observe, the transformation from social management to social governance does not change the practical implication of the former: they are both about the Party-state playing the leading role to manage society

with more collaboration with social organisations and the public (Wang, 2014; Yue and Deng, 2017). The goal of making innovations in social governance, according to the CCCPC (2013), is still ensuring that the society is stable and orderly.

To promote its capacity for social governance, the Party-state has attached great importance to involving social organisations in the provision of public services while upholding the leadership of the CPC. According to the CCCPC:

> We will persist in implementing systematic governance, strengthen the leadership of the Party, enhance the leading role of the government, and encourage and support the participation of all sectors of the society, so as to achieve positive interaction between the governance by the government on the one hand and the self-governance by the society and residents on the other… We will kindle the vigour of social organisations… Social organisations should be commissioned to provide the public services that they are apt to provide and to tackle the social issues that they are able to tackle.
>
> (CCCPC, 2013)

With "social governance" becoming a popular word in the Party-state's policy discourses, its practical implications regarding the participation of social organisations in the public sphere have been further developed. In 2016, "enhancing and making innovations in social governance" was included in *the 13th Five-year plan (2016-2020) for national economic and social development*, in which the Party-state explicitly proposed that local governments should collaborate with social workers and social organisations to provide social services through contracting (NPC, 2016).

In addition to social service provision, social organisations' role of "expressing social demands" was also mentioned in the *13th Five-Year Plan*, as the Party-state decided to "improve the institutional channels for public participation in social governance" and "extensively collect public opinions for decision-making through resident meetings,

consultations and democratic hearings" (NPC, 2016). These statements indicate the Party-state's increasing intention to create spaces for social organisations to participate in policymaking. With the endorsement from the central government, local authorities began to enhance their collaboration with SWOs and other social organisations in terms of policy formulation and improvement.

However, although words like "participation" and "collaboration" have been more frequently used in many policies, the CPC has no intention to not give up its unchallengeable authority and leave space for the emergence of a completely autonomous civil society that aims to promote democratisation in China. In this context, the Party-state has been seeking to put the participation of social organisations under more sophisticated management and control. As a result, a new idea of incorporating social organisations and citizens into a "community of social governance" was put forward. In 2019, the CCCPC held an important session focusing on strengthening the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist regime and adopted the *Decision of the CCCPC on some major issues concerning how to uphold and improve the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and advance the modernisation of China's system and capacity for governance.* As stipulated in this document:

> We will uphold and improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation and common interests, maintain social stability and defend national security… We must enhance and make innovations in social governance, and improve the social governance system that is characterised by the leadership of the Party, the responsibilities of the government, democratic consultation, social cooperation, public participation, legal protection, and scientific and technological support[10]. We will construct a community of social governance in which everyone has responsibilities,

[10] "党委领导、政府负责、民主协商、社会协同、公众参与、法制保障、科技支撑 *Dang Wei Ling Dao, Zheng Fu Fu Ze, Min Zhu Xie Shang, She Hui Xie Tong, Gong Zhong Can Yu, Fa Zhi Bao Zhang, Ke Ji Zhi Cheng*" in Chinese.

everyone takes responsibilities, and everyone shares the benefits of good governance[11].

(CCCPC, 2019)

Although some words have been repeated again and again in the CPC's policies on social governance over the past decade, such as "maintain social stability" and "the leadership of the Party", the CPC did not stop developing this policy concept further. For example, as shown in the statement above, "democratic consultation" was added to the latest elaboration of the social governance system as one of its main features, which might help to open up more spaces for social organisations' participation in policy consultations.

Another new idea that attracted researchers' attention was the "community of social governance". This new concept provokes people into imagining a community equally joined by various stakeholders --- including the Party-state, social organisations, and citizens --- who share the same goal of solving social problems and achieving better governance based on their common interest and collaboration (Yu, 2019; Wang, 2020). The connotation of the community of social governance reflects a functionalist understanding of society, that all actors involved in social governance are indispensable for the long-term stability of the society. From the perspective of the Party-state, the new political agenda of "constructing a community of social governance" entails an in-depth combination of the state's governance of society, the self-governance of society, and the co-governance by the state and society together (Yue and Deng, 2017). However, as there is obvious hierarchy and dominance within the proposed community of social governance, it is questionable how inclusive and equal it is. Who sets rules for the community of social governance? Who can enter the community? What are their roles within the community of social governance? These questions are similar to those about spaces for public participation, which will be discussed in the next chapter. As a

[11] "人人有责，人人尽责，人人享有 *Ren Ren You Ze, Ren Ren Jin Ze, Ren Ren Xiang You*" in Chinese.

political concept coined by the Chinese Party-state, the community of social governance implies a CPC-led state-society collaboration model.

As for the question about who may enter the community of social governance, it is explicitly stated in the Party-state's latest policies that SWOs and social workers are important social forces involved in social governance. In 2021, the NPC adopted *the 14th Five-year plan (2021-2025) for national economic and social development and the long-range objectives through the year 2035*, which required SWOs' contribution to social governance. In addition, the government is determined to promote the development of SWOs by means of service contracting and other supportive measures. According to the NPC:

> Actively guide social forces to participate in grassroots governance. We will encourage mass organisations and social organisations to play a role in social governance, and broaden and regulate the channels through which market forces, new social classes, social workers and volunteers can participate in social governance… We will provide more policy support for social organisations, including government subsidy, service contracting, tax reduction, and employee support. We will support and develop social work service organisations and voluntary organisations.
>
> (NPC, 2021)

Besides, Premier *Keqiang Li*, when delivering the *Report on the work of the government* at the fourth session of the 13th NPC, once again articulated the government's plan to support the social work profession in playing a more important role in social governance by providing services to the disadvantaged population and resolving social disputes:

> We will enhance and make innovations in social governance… We will enhance social work, and support the development of social organisations,

> humanitarian assistance, volunteer service, public-interest activities, and charity. We will protect the lawful rights and interests of women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. The system for handling public complaints will be further refined and more efforts will be made to resolve social disputes through multiple channels.
>
> (Premier Li Keqiang, 2021)

By analysing the Party-state's policies on social governance, we can see how this political agenda, in a top-down manner, has boosted the development of the social work profession in China and defined the relationships between social organisations and the Party-state. In response to the increasing social issues, the Party-state puts forward a new agenda for enhancing social governance, which requires the participation of SWOs and social workers. To contribute to better social governance, SWOs are not only expected to take up the role of social service providers but are also provided with increased opportunities for orderly participation in policy consultations. Meanwhile, in the social governance hierarchy, SWOs' activities are guided and regulated by the CPC and the government. The Party-state attaches great importance to the regulation and supervision of social organisations, as the latter could otherwise be the "elements of disharmony" that undermine the leadership and authority of the CPC. In other words, on the one hand, the Party-state intends to use the techniques and skills of social work to strengthen its capacity for social governance and maintain social stability; on the other hand, it seeks to remove the social work profession's potential for promoting fundamental political and social changes (Leung et al, 2012; Yan, 2013; Gao and Yan, 2015). However, as Leung et al (2012) point out, as social work is a combination of technology (eg. professional knowledge, skills, methods) and ideology (eg. values, ethics, visions), it is not an easy task for the Chinese Party-state to extract the governance techniques from social work and at the same time abandon its value base. According to Leung et al (2012):

> Having a nice fit with the portrayed problematisation of government (as

> arising from personal failings and shortcomings), the psychological and interpersonal focus of social work is attractive to the Chinese government, so much so that it allows oversight of the liberalist undertone of social work… social work is a technology of change that has an indicative ideological orientation. Technology and ideology cannot be clearly separated in social work practice. To break this ideology-technology entanglement requires governing techniques that can foster self-help and mutual help, but remain immune from invoking the quest for autonomy and self-government. (Leung et al, 2012, p.1056)

Nevertheless, the Party-state has made an effort to manipulate the social work profession for its own political interests. For example, to address the ideology-technology divide, the Chinese government attempts to define the indigenised social work in China which features a combination of social service techniques imported from the West and cultural and political values in China (Tsang and Yan, 2001; Yan and Cheung, 2006; Yan, 2013). In addition, the Party-state has developed several measures to promote the development of SWOs and at the same time hold them in control. A more comprehensive review of the literature on this topic will be presented in chapter four.

2.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter contextualises the development of social work in China. The literature has revealed that the intervention of the Party-state has significant impacts on the ups and downs of the profession, which has experienced dramatic development since it was put into the Party-state's agendas of building a harmonious socialist society and making innovations in social governance. Boosted by the policies aimed at promoting the development of social work, an increasing number of nongovernmental SWOs, which employ the majority of certificate social workers in China, have been established and

involved in social service provision through government contracting. As a professional force equipped with knowledge and techniques in promoting psychological functioning and fostering interpersonal relationships, SWOs are viewed by the Party-state as a useful tool to govern the marginalised populations left out by economic and social reforms. The chronological review of the policies on enhancing social management and social governance further indicates that SWOs are expected to play an important role in the Party-state's social governance scheme. There are three observations about the impacts of the Party-state's political agenda of social governance on the development of social work in China.

First, making innovations in social governance requires the government to support the development of social organisations and promote collaboration with these non-state actors on managing public issues. The CPC realises that the government alone is no longer capable of providing the full range of public services and tackling the problems resulting from rapid economic and social transformation, and it is necessary to involve social organisations in "providing social services, reflecting social demands, and regulating social behaviours" (CCCPC, 2006). Collaboration with social organisations is considered contributive to enhancing the government's social governance capacity and promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. In its scheme of making innovations in social governance, the Party-state intentionally permits and encourages social organisations to play a more important role in the public sphere, which has expanded the spaces where social organisations can obtain more opportunities and resources to thrive. The Party-state has adopted a series of policy tools to support the development of social organisations, including relaxing and improving social organisation registration procedures, providing funding for social organisations, involving social organisations in contracting out social services, etc.

Second, while the Party-state increasingly involves social organisations in social governance, it at the same time attaches great importance to upholding the leadership of the Party and ensuring social organisations' subordination to Party. The CPC

explicitly defines the role of each stakeholder in the social governance system: the Party leads, the government takes charge, social organisations collaborate, and the public participates (CCCPC, 2006). In other words, social organisations are placed in a supplementary role which is to collaborate and assist with social governance under the leadership of the Party. The Party-state is cautious about social organisations' potential for mobilising citizens and challenging the authority of the ruling party. Therefore, to ensure its leadership, the Party-state has developed and improved regulation and supervision mechanisms to put social organisations under more sophisticated management and control. In this sense, social organisations are not only the Party-state's assistants or tools in social governance, but also the objects of social governance. There are hierarchy and power inequality within the "community of social governance" (CCCPC, 2019) that the Party-state intends to build.

Third, in the Party-state's scheme of making innovations in social governance, social organisations are not only expected to take up the role of social service providers but also encouraged to identify the needs of the people and channel public opinions into the decision-making process in an orderly manner. This may broaden the spaces where social organisations, including SWOs, can participate in policy practice. Meanwhile, as the Party-state's social governance system features the leadership of the CPC and the compliance of social organisations, the spaces where social organisations can participate in policymaking may be characterised by both participation and control. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the spaces for participation entails examining how the power relations between these two parties frame SWOs' policy practice by creating both opportunities and restrictions. The next chapter will present a literature review on social work policy practice and spaces for public participation, and discuss how these practical and theoretical concepts are helpful in researching SWOs' policy practice in China.

Chapter 3 Policy practice and spaces for participation

3.1 Introduction

In recent years, social work policy practice has attracted increasing attention from social work academics, who have produced a number of studies to explore social workers' participation in the policy-making process (Cummins et al., 2011; Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013, 2015; Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2016; Fargion, 2018; Ritter, 2018; Strier and Feldman, 2018; Feldman, 2020). This chapter aims to provide an overview of the existing theoretical and practical discussion around social work policy practice. It starts with a review of the definitions of policy practice. It then goes on to explore the rationales of social workers' engagement in policy practice, the roles of social workers in the policy process, and the methods and strategies they adopt to influence policymaking. The literature shows that policy practice can take a variety of forms, which are affected by a range of factors. More importantly, the literature on the intangible space for public participation indicates that social workers participate in policy practice within certain kinds of space, which is filled with power relations and defines the opportunities for policy practice as well as the restrictions on policy actors' actions. Finally, this chapter discusses the clues and insights provided by the existing literature which help to investigate how social work organisations (SWOs) participate in policy practice in China.

3.2 Definitions of policy practice in the literature

Social workers have long been policy practitioners although the term "policy practice" used to be neglected (Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Ellis, 2008). In recent decades, this term has been increasingly employed in social work discourse by social work academics and front-line practitioners who propose that policy practice is crucial in walking towards social change and social justice (Wyers, 1991; Figueira-McDonough,

1993; Rocha and Johnson, 1997; Saulnier, 2000; Ellis, 2008; Jansson, 2014; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2016; Strier & Feldman, 2017; Weiss-Gal, 2017; Klammer et al, 2019; Weiss-Gal et al, 2020; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2020;). Jansson (2014, p.15) defines policy practice as "efforts to change policy in legislative, agency and community settings by establishing new policies, improving existing ones, or defeating the policy initiatives of other people". Cummins et al. (2011, p.2) define policy practice as "using social work skills to propose and change policies in order to achieve the goal of social and economic justice". Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015, p.1084) define policy practice as "activities undertaken by social workers as an integral part of their professional activity in diverse fields—those that focus on the formulation and implementation of policies as well as on existing policies and suggested changes in them". It can be seen from these definitions that policy practice refers to a specific part of social workers' professional activities which seeks to influence policies at various levels.

In the literature, policy practice is sometimes confused with policy advocacy. Cummins et al. (2011, p.9-10) view policy advocacy, which refers to "interacting with policymakers in order to influence their policy decisions on particular proposals", as one activity within the broader field of policy practice. According to them, policy practice also includes policy analysis, building coalitions and launching campaigns besides policy advocacy (Cummins et al., 2011). Jansson (2014, p.485) distinguishes policy practice and policy advocacy similarly. For Jansson (2014, p.485), policy advocacy is one aspect of policy practice that represents traditional social work advocacy on behalf of powerless groups who seek to improve their resources and opportunities (Cummins et al., 2011, p.8).

However, in many studies, the term "policy advocacy" is used with the same meaning as "policy practice". A widely-accepted definition of policy advocacy is given by Jenkins (1987, p.297), who defines it as "any attempt to influence the decisions of an institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest". In the nonprofit sector literature,

policy advocacy also encompasses a range of activities that seek to influence policy directly or indirectly (Pekkanen & Smith, 2014). The activities that are not regarded as policy advocacy by some researchers, such as policy analysis and coalition building (Cummins et al., 2011), are often viewed as indirect policy advocacy by other academics (Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; Reid, 2000; Kimberlin, 2010). In addition, "policy practice" seems to be more widely used in recent social work studies while "policy advocacy" is more popular in the studies of NGOs. Therefore, this study uses the term "policy practice" to explore how Chinese SWOs seek to influence policy directly and indirectly, as using this term enables the researcher to follow the discussion in the social work literature. At the same time, the researcher will also refer to studies on NGOs' policy advocacy, because they provide insights regarding the policy engagement of SWOs, which is a specific type of NGO in China.

3.3 Social work and policy practice

The history of the social work profession is replete with examples of social work practitioners and academics seeking to influence policies across the world (Cummins et al, 2011; Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013; Klammer et al, 2019). For example, the early practice of social work in the UK, such as youth justice, Charity Organisation Society and Settlement House Movement, showed enthusiasm for influencing policy. In addition, the post-war welfare reforms in the UK were inspired by, and some directly crafted by, people with a social work background (Simpson, 2013). The social work profession has shown its commitment to changing policies for the well-being of disadvantaged groups throughout its history.

A few assumptions underpin SWOs' engagement in policy practice. First, the key values that lie at the very foundation of social work, such as social justice, human rights, and social change, form an important motivational basis for the social work profession's involvement in social policy formulation (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013, p.2). This

motivation is reflected in the social work discourse, more specifically, in the definition(s) of social work, professional codes of ethics, professional educational policy, and other formal documents and declarations from a range of social work professional associations (IFSW, 2014; The British Association of Social Workers, 2012). For instance, the Council for Social Work Education (2015) in the USA requires that graduates should acquire the competency of engaging in policy practice, which is one of the nine core competencies of social workers. More specifically, the competency of engaging in policy practice requires that:

> Social workers understand that human rights and social justice, as well as social welfare and services, are mediated by policy and its implementation at the federal, state, and local levels. Social workers understand the history and current structures of social policies and services, the role of policy in service delivery, and the role of practice in policy development. Social workers understand their role in policy development and implementation within their practice settings at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and they actively engage in policy practice to effect change within those settings. Social workers recognise and understand the historical, social, cultural, economic, organisational, environmental, and global influences that affect social policy. They are also knowledgeable about policy formulation, analysis, implementation, and evaluation. (Council for Social Work Education, 2015, p.8)

In the USA, the notion that social workers should seek to engage in policy practice is also supported by the National Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics. Although not explicitly, sections "6.01 social welfare", "6.02 public participation", "6.04 social and political action", and "3.07 administration" all indicate that being involved in policy practice and advocacy is an important part of a social worker's job (Hoefer, 2013, p.167). These professional documents provide a powerful statement regarding the need for policy practice as one vital component of social work practice.

The second assumption that supports SWOs' involvement in policy practice relates to the person-in-environment perspective. This perspective is based on the belief that the relations between individuals and their environments are interactive and reverberating, in which people are affected by their environments – whether they are informal, formal, micro, macro, societal, political or economic – and people also have the capacity to change these systems (Hare, 2004). Social policies are a crucial environment for people because they distribute welfare resources that affect the well-being of individuals. The population that SWOs work with is likely to receive welfare benefits and social services, and is reliant on and affected by the design, funding, and implementation of social policies (Kimberlin, 2010). Some policies can help relieve distress by promoting access to resources and services, while others may aggravate existing problems or create new ones (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013, p.3). Using the person-in-environment perspective, social workers recognise that the well-being of service users is affected by social policies, either positively or negatively, and to better serve their service users and fulfil their espoused mission, they need to become major actors in the arena where policy decisions are made (Schmid et al., 2008).

Third, social workers often play an essential role in the social policy implementation process. They are expected to deliver welfare services, coordinate the implementation of social policies, and identify the people who are eligible for services and benefits provided by social policies (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013, p.3). In this way, SWOs not only work with service users but also possess access to policymakers through relationships between executive staff or board members and government administrators or elected officials (e.g. contracting social service enables nonprofit direct service organisations to build working relationships with government officials). SWOs' role in policy implementation allows them to stand in a unique position to make connections between policymakers and service users who are affected by policies (Donaldson, 2008; Kimberlin, 2010). In addition, social workers' experience of working with disadvantaged groups is often valued by state institutions. As a result, they are given

many opportunities to participate in deliberations of social policymaking (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2014). Therefore, SWOs are expected to make good use of their first-hand knowledge of social problems and take advantage of their roles as intermediaries between service recipients and policymakers.

Fourth, as one of the critical components of the NGO sector, nongovernmental SWOs' engagement in policy practice is believed to be crucial for democracy. Policy practice is regarded as one of the most important roles played by NGOs in a democratic state (Kimberlin, 2010; Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2014). Policy practice activities allow NGOs to engage and represent underrepresented and disempowered groups; identify neglected social problems; give voice to diverse views and demands; monitor and push for changes in public policies; promote economic and social justice; and strengthen democracy and civil society (Chaves et al, 2004; Kimberlin, 2010; Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2014; Lu, 2018). By fulfilling these functions, NGOs serve as vital vehicles and intermediaries that voice public concerns and help maintain the quality of a democratic government and its responsiveness to the needs of all its constituents (Reid, 2000; Salamon, 2002; Boris & Krehely, 2002; Chaves et al, 2004; Kimberlin, 2010). Nonprofit policy practice is an essentially political activity that allocates and balances power and resources, especially in public decision-making.

Finally, involvement in policy practice can also benefit SWOs themselves. Policy practice may empower SWOs by providing them with more political, social and economic resources, and may even weaken their government counterparts (Fyall, 2016). NGOs sometimes seek to influence policy on behalf of their own interests, and their efforts are defined as "self-interested advocacy" (Donaldson, 2008). In many cases, when NGOs advocate for the welfare and rights of their constituencies or service users, they at the same time promote their own interests. For example, if an organisation successfully advocates for a new policy that proposes more services for its service users, it is likely to obtain more funding from the government. Therefore, policy practice has the potential for enhancing the financial capacity and autonomy of NGOs.

3.4 Social workers' engagement in policy practice

The literature has investigated how SWOs and social workers influence social policy. Generally, researchers have adopted two main approaches. The first approach focuses on SWOs' roles in the policy process and how their engagement in the different stages of the policy process leads to a range of outcomes and impacts. The policy process is normally conceptualised as comprising a series of stages — usually agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Howlett et al, 2020, p.8–11). Although the stages model was subjected to many criticisms, including those focusing on its legalistic style and its inability to explain the simultaneous, multiple, and interacting policy cycles (Sabatier, 2019, p.6-7), it is useful for analysing social workers' efforts to influence policymaking as it disaggregates the complex policy process into several stages that can be investigated alone or in relation to other stages (Howlett et al, 2020, p.12–13). For example, drawing on the policy cycle model, Klammer et al (2019, p3-4) develop a conceptual framework for understanding how social workers influence policy-making along the different stages of the policy cycle (see figure 3.1).

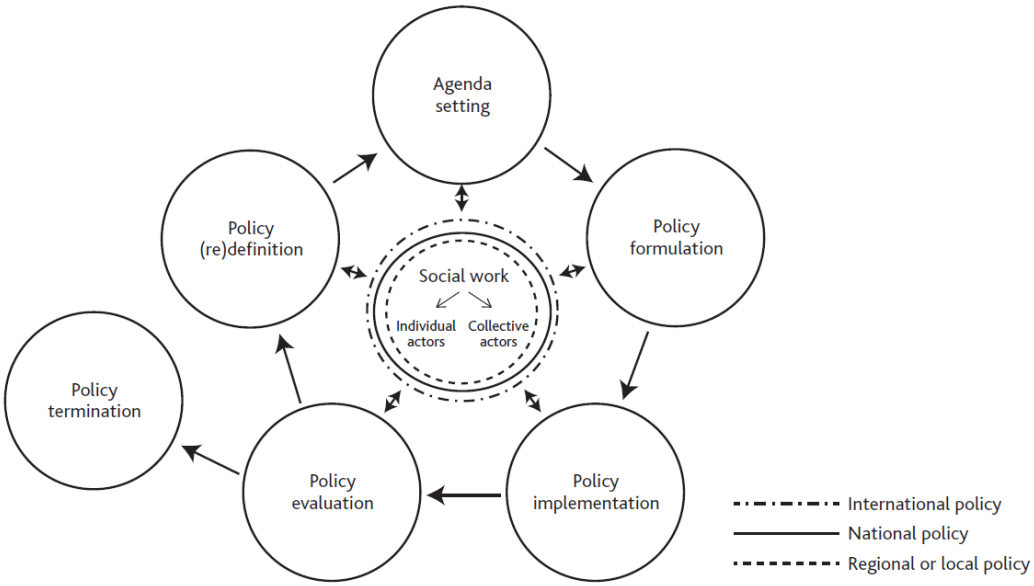

Figure 3.1 Social work in the policy cycle of social policymaking
Source: Klammer et al, 2019, p3-4.

More specifically, to become an effective advocate in the policy process, social workers need to strategically place issues on the policy agendas of decision-makers, develop policy proposals through policy analysis, persuade decision-makers to adopt specific policies, improve policy implementation and evaluate the outcome of policies (Jansson, 2014, p.173–484). As shown in table 3.1, Cummins et al (2011) give a detailed description of social workers' roles in each of the stages of the policy process.

Table 3.1 Stages of the policy formulation process and social workers' roles

Stage		**Essential tasks**	**Social worker roles**
1	Problem identification and case finding	Case finding documentation	Direct service worker Advocate
2	Data collection and data analysis	Develop a factual knowledge base	Researcher Organiser
3	Inform the public and identify stakeholders	Present the problem in a forum to relevant parties	Community organiser Communication planner/spokesperson
4	Select policy options and develop policy goals	Develop broad-based goals in a policy statement	Planner Cost/benefit analyst
5	Build public support and develop coalitions	Bargain with groups in the larger system to cultivate leadership and consensus	Community organiser Communication planner/spokesperson
6	Programme design	Plan the allocation of responsibility, organisational structure, and programme operations	Planner Organiser Manager
7	Policy implementation	Deliver services to client groups	Administrator Direct service worker Monitor implementation
8	Policy evaluation	Assess the effectiveness of the programme	Researcher Direct service worker

Source: Cummins et al, 2011, p.201

By playing an active role in the policy process, social workers can have important effects on the different stages of policymaking. Casey (2011) proposes a model that consists of six levels of outcomes of policy practice: a) access: the voices of previously excluded stakeholders are now heard; b) agenda: powerful decision-makers support the desired policy change; c) policy: the desired policy option is translated into new legislation or regulations; d) output: the new policy is implemented as proposed; e) impact: the new policy has the intended consequences; f) structural: the new policy is widely accepted as the new norm. However, whether social workers' engagement in the policy process can lead to the desired policy and social outcomes depends on a lot of factors. Drawing on several case studies on social workers' engagement in the policy cycle across the world, Klammer et al (2019) have identified several furthering and inhibiting factors affecting social workers' capacity to make changes to the different stages of the policy process. The furthering factors include the legitimate role of social work as a policy actor, the teaching of critical theories in social work education, social workers' political positions, political opportunity structures and policy windows, network building and cross-sectional alliances, organisational support, etc. The inhibiting factors include the individualising tendency in social work, unfavourable working conditions, insufficient training, unreasonable workload, social workers' compliance with existing policies and procedures, and the lack of organisational support, etc (Klammer et al, 2019).

Another approach for examining social workers' engagement in policy practice focuses on the methods they use to influence policymaking and the styles of their policy practice. SWOs and other nonprofit organisations adopt a wide range of methods to engage in policy practice. Figueira-McDonough (1993) categorises policy practice into four types of activities: legislative advocacy, reform through litigation, social action and social policy analysis. Similarly, Cummins et al (2011, p. 9-10) have identified four categories of policy practice activities: 1) policy analysis, which requires social workers to "study the policy to understand its goals, strategies and potential impact"; 2) advocating for

policy change, which is about “interacting with policymakers in order to influence the policy decisions on particular proposals”; 3) building coalitions, through which social workers “develop relationships with other groups to develop a coordinated advocacy message and strategy”; 4) launching a campaign, which requires social workers to “create an overarching strategy and message to influence not only policymakers but the public about an issue”. Guo & Saxton (2010) have concluded 11 main methods of policy practice used by NGOs in the USA: 1) research; 2) media advocacy; 3) direct lobbying; 4) grassroots lobbying; 5) public events and direct action; 6) judicial advocacy; 7) public education; 8) coalition building; 9) administrative lobbying; 10) voter registration and education; 11) expert testimony.

It can be seen from these policy practice methods that NGOs not only engage in direct policy practice, which refers to lobbying and other appearances before key decision-makers by organisational representatives on behalf of others (Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2014), but also use indirect methods to influence policies, such as promoting civic participation, providing public voices, building social capital, public education, conducting research on community needs, and monitoring policy implementation, etc (Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; Kimberlin, 2010; Reid, 2000). Some researchers believe that the indirect methods describe the participatory aspects of policy practice, particularly the capacity of NGOs to stimulate individual citizens to take actions on their behalf (Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2014). From the literature on policy practice by NGOs and social workers, which is mainly based in the USA and Europe, a total of eight direct and 12 indirect policy practice methods have been identified (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014; Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Avner & Wise, 2002; Berry & Arons, 2003; Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; Casey, 2011; Donaldson, 2007; Donaldson, 2008; Figueira-McDonough, 2013; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2016; Guo & Saxton, 2010; Jordan et al 2018; Kimberlin, 2010; McCarthy & Castelli, 2002; Reid, 2000; Onyx et al, 2010; Schmid et al, 2008; Weiss-Gal, 2017; Weiss-Gal et al, 2020). These methods are summarised in table 3.2:

Table 3.2 Methods of policy practice

Direct methods	1. Legislative lobbying
	2. Administrative lobbying
	3. Testifying at legislative hearings
	4. Holding elected office
	5. Monitoring policy implementation
	6. Providing the information requested by the government
	7. Releasing research reports to policymakers
	8. Drafting legislation, regulations, and bills
Indirect methods	1. Social actions (eg. demonstrations, strikes, protests, etc.)
	2. Facilitating civic participation
	3. Litigation
	4. Public education
	5. Research
	6. Participating in conferences and meetings
	7. Coalition building
	8. Media advocacy
	9. Election campaign activity
	10. Service delivery and innovation
	11. Internal advocacy
	12. Informal discussion on policy issues

Source: summarised by the author from the literature

In addition to the specific methods of policy practice, many researchers have adopted a typology approach to examine diverse styles and types of policy practice. Jansson (2014) identifies four styles of policy practice: electoral style, legislative style, analytic style and troubleshooting style. The electoral style is used when social workers "want to get someone elected to office or when they want to initiate or contest a ballot initiative" (p.81), while in legislative style policy practice, social workers aim to "secure the

enactment of meritorious legislation or defeat ill-convinced measures" (p.82). With the analytic style, social workers work with think tanks, academics, government agencies and other organisations to "use data to develop policy proposals or evaluate how existing policies are working" (p.82). The troubleshooting style focuses on the improvement of existing policy programmes. It usually involves low conflict as it requires social workers to collaborate with government officials, funders, service users and other stakeholders to "increase the effectiveness of operating programmes or evaluate them with an eye to improving them" (p.82).

Based on the neo-institutional theory, elite theory, resource mobilization theory and interdependent power theory, Feldman (2020) develops a conceptualisation of four types of policy practice: institutional policy practice, elite policy practice, resource-based policy practice and radical policy practice. Institutional policy practice focuses on the institutional constraints and opportunities facing social workers who attempt to influence policymaking. It requires social workers to seize opportunity windows (political and economic crises) to pursue incremental changes in policies rather than to "pursue transformative goals that break out of a path dependency" (p.1095). Elite policy practice focuses on the crucial role of economic elites in achieving policy outcomes and requires social workers to strategically interact with elites. In some cases, social workers should "identify and create conflicts, tensions and cleavages among elites that would challenge and destabilise their dominance" (p.1097), while in other cases, social workers should try to form a coalition with elites, seek their support, and "convince them that the policy preferences of oppressed groups serve and would not harm their own interests" (p.1097). Resource-based policy practice is built upon resource mobilisation theory, which assumes that "policy change is achieved when people are organised into an effective political force and different types of resources are deployed" (p.1098). Therefore, social workers not only need to get involved in lobby activities themselves, but also need to work with grassroots communities and help them form or join "formal, mass-membership organisations that can be part of a larger social movement" (p.1099). Radical policy practice believes that "social movements can win

changes in policy when they are disruptive, unorganised and engage in unconventional political action" (p.1100). It requires social workers to encourage the relatively powerless groups to discover and exercise their power and participate in disruptive social actions, which should be defended and justified by social workers.

The literature has also revealed that the strategies for policy practice range from more institutional, administrative and cooperative activities to more aggressive, confrontational and radical actions. Berry and Arons (2003) identified two groups of policy practice methods: the first comprises more legislative, aggressive, and confrontational tactics such as lobbying for a bill or policy, testifying in hearings, releasing research reports, and encouraging members to write or call policy-makers; the second group comprises administrative and less aggressive tactics, such as meeting with government officials, working in a planning or advisory group, responding to requests for information, and networking with government officials. Similarly, Onyx et al. (2010) distinguished between radical and institutional policy practice: radical policy practice is associated with external democratic processes that are overtly political and therefore open to contestation, its methods include staging protests and sit-ins; institutional methods include responding to government policy developments (such as through green and white paper processes) and participating in government committees and inquiries.

The literature suggests that the majority of NGOs in the West tend to use more administrative, cooperative and institutional methods rather than aggressive and radical methods, as the former ones allow them to establish trust with government officials and to be increasingly integrated into the public decision-making process (Berry and Arons, 2003; Onyx et al., 2010). The study by Donaldson (2007) on advocacy strategies of NGOs in the USA also revealed that NGOs prefer elite strategies, which rely more on the expert power of professionals, to mass advocacy involving "civil society" and empowerment strategies that involve the participation of service user groups. The findings raise concerns about the power relations behind the different types of policy practice: who is eligible to enter the public decision-making process and what is doable

in the policy arena? If service users are excluded from the policy process, it would be doubtful whether policy practice can fulfil its mission of representing disempowered groups and promoting social justice.

It can be learnt from the literature that policy practice does not always evoke the same image of social workers' engagement in the policy arena. It includes a variety of activities that can be very different in essence. This calls for an in-depth analysis of the features of social workers' actual behaviours in the policy process. Also, the diversity of policy practice raises some important questions: why do social workers adopt different strategies to influence policy-making? What affects their engagement in the policy process?

3.5 Factors affecting the forms of policy practice

Some researchers argue that the actual engagement in policy practice can be best understood within the social context where political structures and welfare regimes influence the government-SWO relationships as well as strategies adopted by SWOs and other nonprofit human service organisations (Bass et al., 2007; Jordan et al., 2016). With the rise of neoliberalist ideology and new public management, grants and contracts with nongovernmental organisations have been increasingly used by governments around the world to deliver social service. As a result, many human service organisations not only work closely with the government, they also depend on government funding (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Salamon, 1995 & 2002; Chaves et al., 2004). A comprehensive study on global civil society revealed that government funding is the main source of income among human service organisations, accounting for 42% of their total income (Salamon et al, 2004). The financial dependence on government and the government-SWO cooperation in social service have constructed an important context within which SWOs participate in policy practice. Several theories have been proposed to help understand the government-SWO relationships that influence the

intention and strategies of SWOs to engage in policy practice. They include neo-institutional theory, resource dependence theory, partnership theory, and self-interest theory (Schmid et al, 2008; Kimberlin, 2010; Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2013; Chaves et al., 2004; Lu, 2018).

The neo-institutional theory assumes that the structures and activities of certain groups of organisations, including human service organisations, are determined by rules and procedures emanating from the institutional environment (Schmid et al., 2008). To ensure legitimation and resources, NGOs adjust their ideology and espoused goals to the expectations of the institutional environment and the directives of the regulator as expressed in the "iron cage" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Schmid et al., 2008). As the dominant political-economic logic of our time, neo-liberalism, with its restructuring of the state, processes of marketisation and valorisation of the entrepreneur, has both precipitated the conditions for policy practice but also limited the efforts of social workers to influence policy (Strier and Feldman, 2017). The sophisticated government funding requirements increase complexity, formalization, professionalization, and bureaucratization in human service organisations (Chaves et al., 2004). Besides, the government may perceive NGOs as competitors and seek to suppress their advocacy to maintain the government's dominant societal position (Kimberlin, 2010). Driven by these forces, SWOs may concentrate more on organisational self-interest and service delivery which meets the expectation of government funders, overshadowing their traditional roles as social change agents (Alexander et al., 1999; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Stone, 1996). According to the neo-institutional theory, SWOs receiving more government funding demonstrate less participation in advocacy.

Resource dependence theory, similarly, proposes that organisations often become dependent on their environments for resources that are critical for their survival, which generates uncertainty (Schmid et al., 2008). NGOs respond more to the demands of those organisations or groups that control critical resources (Pfeffer, 1982). Following the principle of "do not bite the hand that feeds you", NGOs that depend on government

funding might refrain from oppositional political activity or advocacy not welcomed by the government funders (Chaves et al., 2004). Research findings indicate that when human service organisations are highly dependent on governmental resources, they tend to provide services mandated by the law and in accordance with government policy (Schmid et al., 2008; Davis-Smith & Hedley, 1993). Adopting conformist behaviours may result in the loss of organisational identity and erosion of ideology and values, which may also inhibit the organisation's capacity to protest and advocate for social justice (Schmid et al., 2008).

Partnership theory proposes that NGOs and government have a complementary and cooperative relationship, dominated by the drive to work together to bolster support for policies and secure resources (Salamon, 2002; Kimberlin, 2010). They are mutually dependent on each other. On the one hand, NGOs dependent on government funding have an incentive to advocate to preserve and increase their income; on the other hand, government agencies may also depend on NGOs to deliver social service, assist with the implementation of social policy, and provide policy feedback and recommendation (Chaves et al., 2004; Lu, 2018). In fact, under institutional arrangements such as third-party government or contracting regimes, the implementation of government programmes to achieve desired policy goals becomes heavily dependent on NGO's operations (Salamon, 1995; Smith & Lipsky, 1993; Lu, 2018). The mutual dependence between government and nonprofits strengthens the bargaining capacity of nonprofit organisations and creates spaces where NGOs' engagement in the policy process is feasible.

Monetary self-interest theory argues that NGOs receiving public funding have an objective incentive to increase their participation in the political process to protect or enhance their funding streams or otherwise improve their working conditions (Chaves et al., 2004). This theory especially accounts for self-interested policy practice by NGOs. Nonprofit human service organisations attempt to shape and control their resource environment instead of reacting passively (Chaves et al., 2004), which creates

an incentive for them to participate in the policy process on behalf of their interests.

These theories reveal that new public management and contracting out social service has both positive and negative influence on policy practice by SWOs and other nonprofit human service organisations. Research findings also reveal the contradictory impact of government funding. While some researchers report that government funding motivates nonprofit organisations to become active in policy practice (Lu, 2018; Berry & Arons, 2003; Chaves et al, 2004; Donaldson, 2007; Jenkins, 1987; Leech, 2006; McCarthy & Castelli, 2002; Mosley, 2011; Silverman & Patterson, 2010), another group of researchers argues that dependence on government funding neutralizes and obstructs policy practice activities in these organisations (Bass et al., 2007; Grogan & Gusmano, 2009; Guo & Saxton, 2010; Maddison & Dennis, 2005; Schmid et al., 2008; Smith & Lipsky, 1993).

These contradictory research findings indicate a complex mechanism of policy practice by SWOs. The different effects of the government-SWO relationships on policy practice can be attributed to the different contexts and political environments in which SWOs operate (Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2008). Besides, how policy practice is defined or perceived by SWOs as well as what strategies and methods are adopted may result in different pictures of government-SWO interaction in the policy process. For example, if SWOs view policy practice as a cooperative approach and use non-confrontational strategies to provide recommendations for the government, their effort to influence policymaking is less likely to be suppressed by the government. However, if SWOs engage in policy practice using a radical approach which seeks to protest against the decisions of the government, their radical role may be held down by the state. Therefore, besides the institutional factors, SWOs' organisational culture and individual social workers' characteristics also influence the forms that policy practice can take.

Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015) propose a more comprehensive policy practice engagement conceptual framework to explain why and how social workers participate in policy

practice. This framework comprises three types of factors that influence the level of social workers' involvement in policy practice and the strategies and methods they adopt to influence policy-making: opportunity, facilitation, and motivation (see figure 3.2). According to this framework, the policy process takes place within specific political institutions, which constitute the opportunity factor that influences policy practice. Political institutions not only "determine the degree to which the policy process is accessible to social workers", but their diverse forms and features also explain "the distinctive forms that policy practice can take" (p.1087). As the facilitation factor, organisational culture "reflects dominant values, norms and expected modes of behaviours within a specific workplace" (p.1089). It determines whether social workers' work environment can facilitate certain forms of policy practice. The final component of the framework focuses on individual social workers' motivation to participate in policy-making. The motivation factor includes professional socialisation which has an impact on "professionals' values, attitudes, professional identity and their sense of efficacy", and social workers' individual characteristics including "particular values, capabilities and traits" (p.1090). According to Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015), these three types of factors not only determine the degree to which social workers are involved in policymaking but also decide the routes and strategies of their policy practice. This conceptual framework is supported by a quantitative study, which shows that organisational support (e.g., availability of information on methods that social workers can use to contact policymakers, and the holding of staff meetings about policy issues) and motivational factors (e.g. psychological engagement, recruitment networks, and resources) influence social workers' policy practice involvement in Israel (Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2016).

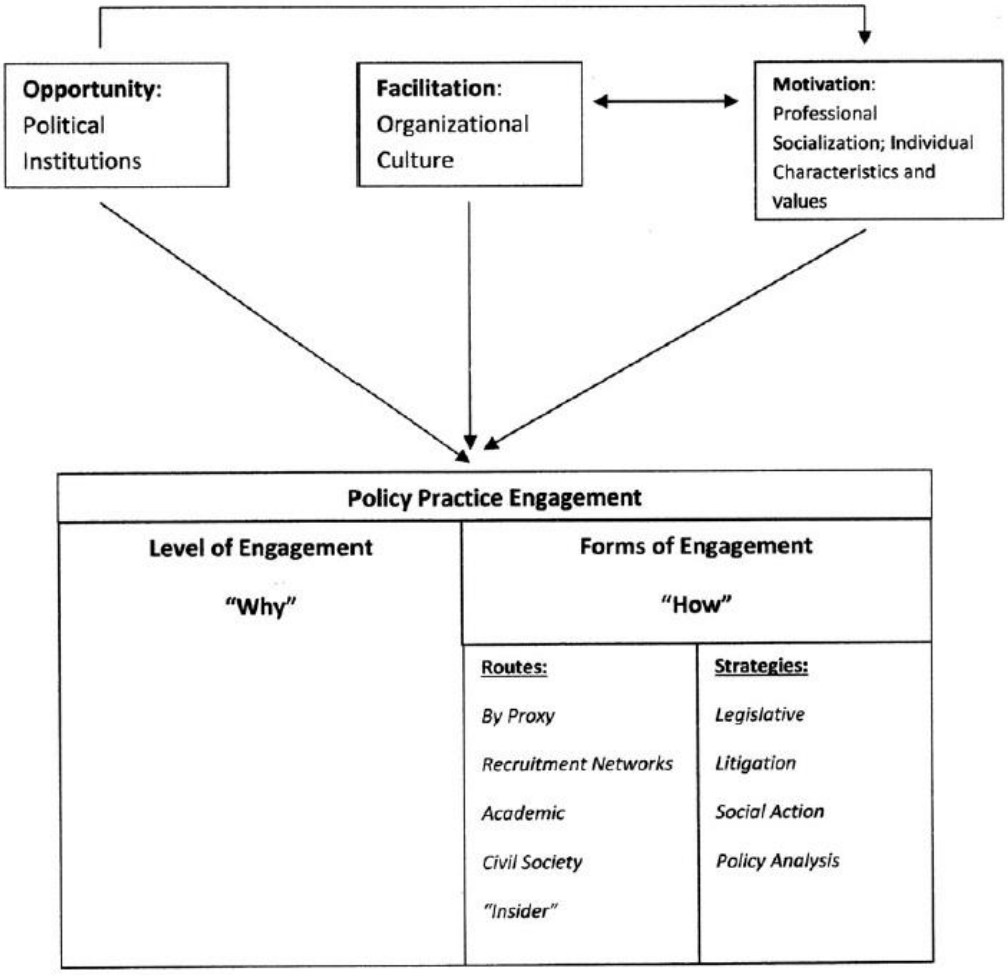

Figure 3.2 Policy practice engagement conceptual framework

Source: Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2015, p.1088.

The above theories and conceptual framework provide important insights into social workers' different kinds of participation in policy practice, as they have discussed a range of institutional, organisational, and individual factors that may determine what SWOs can do to influence policymaking. However, they all overlook or give an insufficient discussion on the role of power in shaping SWOs' policy practice, although the political institutions and the government-SWO relationship both imply certain power relations in the policy arena. Therefore, the following sections will introduce the concept of "space", which helps to analyse who possesses the power to create spaces for policy practice, set rules for SWOs' engagement, and define the boundaries of participatory spaces.

3.6 Understanding the space for policy practice

The concept of "space" enables researchers to analyse how the power relations between policymakers and social actors create and circumscribe the opportunities for participation in policy practice. Participation in the public sphere is often conceived of as having a spatial dimension. This is not only because diverse forms of public participation take place in a range of physical and virtual places, for example, a consultation in a real or online meeting room, or a protest on the street, but also because these encounters are bound by and filled with intangible social and power relations. As such, the term "space" is used to describe the intangible arena where actors, including the powerful and those who are traditionally perceived as less powerful, interact with each other to create certain social, political, cultural and economic outcomes. In this sense, enhancing people's participation in public domains, such as the policy process, politics, social movements, etc., is about "creating spaces where there were previously none, making room for different opinions to be heard where previously there were very limited opportunities for public involvement, and enabling people to occupy spaces that were previously denied to them" (Cornwall, 2002, p.2). The connotation of space reminds us of the importance of analysing how spaces for public participation are created and shaped as well as how participation in policy-making takes place in these spaces.

The notion of "space" pervades the literature on power, policy, and citizen actions, with many researchers making their efforts to define and analyse a variety of spaces. Grindle and Thomas (1981, cited in Cornwall, 2002, p.2) define "policy space" as "sites shaped through the exercise of agency, in which different actors, knowledges and interests interact and in which room can be made for alternatives, but from which some people and ideas remain excluded". McGee (2004, p.16) uses the term "policy spaces" to examine "the moments and opportunities where citizens and policymakers come together, as well as actual observable opportunities, behaviours, actions and interactions … something signifying transformative potential". When looking into the

spaces for poverty reduction, Webster and Engberg-Petersen (2002, cited in Gaventa, 2006, p.26) refer to "political spaces" as the "institutional channels, political discourses and social and political practices through which the poor and those organisations working with them can pursue poverty reduction". Cornwall (2004) examines the emergence of new "democratic spaces" which are characterised by more direct forms of citizen engagement in governance as a means of strengthening liberal democratic institutions. Gaventa (2006, p.26) focuses on "citizen spaces" which are seen as "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests". It is noteworthy that these definitions of spaces encompass citizens' agency and the potential for actions and changes. In this respect, Cornwall (2002) connects the notion of space with empowerment, which is, in spatial terms, about moving out of constrained places and isolated spaces, broadening horizons, moving into new terrain, widening the scope for action and multiplying potential sites for engagement.

It can be seen from these definitions that space, as a geographical metaphor for the intangible arena where public participation takes place, encompasses two essential elements: one is about the agency and actions of individual and organisational actors, which lead to the changes in governance, policies, discourses, and relationships that affect their lives and interest; the other is about the structures of spaces that incubate or circumscribe these actors' actions and interactions, such as institutional and non-institutional opportunities, channels, and moments. Understanding the relations between the actions and interactions of actors and the structures of spaces helps analyse the dynamics within spaces for public participation.

On one hand, spaces, as well as their structures, are created and shaped through the actions and interactions of diverse actors. As Cornwall's (2002) work reminds us, spaces are not something taken up, assumed or filled, but something that can be created, opened and reshaped. In other words, spaces do not pre-exist or appear as external to human action. They are the results of the intentional actions and interactions of various

actors who seek to influence public issues and the decision-making process in diverse settings. For example, some spaces are brought into being by various kinds of authorities and external resource-bearing actors, while some emerge more organically out of sets of common concerns or identifications through public mobilization (Cornwall, 2002).

On the other hand, once created, the structures of spaces have an impact on how participation can take place within these spaces. The literature indicates that participatory spaces have their boundaries and layout, setting who are eligible to enter, how issues are presented and debated, and what is possible within these spaces (Cornwall, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). Actions and interactions within a specific space are regulated by its rules, which actors involved are supposed to follow. It should also be noted that the structures of spaces can both incubate and circumscribe public participation. For example, a policy consultation convened by the government provides opportunities for citizens to participate in the decision-making process. However, this type of participatory space is bounded by formal procedures and tacit norms regarding the recruitment of participants, the agenda of the meeting, speech order, language and terminology, what opinions are allowed and how they will be taken, etc.

Therefore, the actions and interactions of actors and the structures of spaces constitute a dialectic relation. The actions and interactions of diverse actors lead to the creation of participatory spaces and the construction of their structures; the structures in turn set boundaries and rules for the actions and interactions within these spaces, and actors draw upon these structures to participate in the public sphere. Also, new actions and interactions within the existing space through which actors flout or violate the existing rules may change the structures of that space and thus resulting in a new form of space. For example, imagine that a group of citizens who are invited to a policy consultation decide to violate the procedures and occupy the government office. As a result, a consultation convened by the government can turn into a citizen-led protest. When new actions and interactions occur, the structures of spaces are likely to change accordingly.

As Lefebvre (1991, p73) contends, space is both the outcome of past actions and what "permits new action to take place, enabling some and prohibiting others". In this sense, spaces are not static and are always open to mutation and transformation. Spaces can be created, expanded, widened, and broadened through citizens' strategic efforts to strengthen their influence over decision-making. However, it should also be noted that spaces do not always evoke positive images of public participation, as spaces can also be limited, narrowed, and even closed (Gaventa, 2006). Therefore, the production of spaces is a dynamic process, in which spaces are constantly shaped and reshaped by various actors with diverse identities, perspectives, interests, and agendas.

More importantly, these actors are in different positions in power relations. In other words, within a specific space, some actors are in a more advantaged position to exercise their power to influence the policy-making process, while others are faced with more obstacles and constraints. If we perceive the making of spaces as a dynamic process, then power is the fuel that drives the process. As such, analysing spaces for participation entails the examination of the configuration of power relations within which actors exercise their agency and power to shape and reshape spaces.

3.7 Space and power

Geographical and social theorists' analysis of spaces has offered important insights that are helpful in understanding spaces and the power relations they contain. David Harvey (2009, p.31) makes connections between social justice and space, arguing that physical sites often "signify much about the nature of the social order and the nature of the social processes which are supposed to go on inside it". He further contends that to better understand space, we need to integrate the geographical and sociological imaginations to understand the symbolic meaning of space and its complex impact on behaviours (Harvey, 2009: 36). Foucault's (1977) analysis of the social mechanism behind the changes in penal systems reveals that architecture and the organisation of physical space

can serve as a means of domination and control. Lefebvre (1991: 33), in his examination of urbanisation under capitalism, conceives space as a complex social construction that "incorporates social actions". According to Lefebvre:

> (Social) space is a (social) product … the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. (Lefebvre 1991: 26)

The literature from human geography and sociology indicates that spaces are not only reflective of power relations but are also created and changed through the exercise of power. The intangible spaces of public participation are no exception. As Cornwall (2002, p.8) contends: "Power relations pervade any spaces for participation… Analysing participation as a spatial practice helps draw attention to the productive possibilities of power as well as its negative effects, to the ways in which the production of space in itself creates as well as circumscribes possibilities for agency." In Gaventa's (2006, p.26) conceptualisation of the "power cube" framework, spaces constitute an essential dimension of power analysis, as "power relations help to shape the boundaries of participatory spaces, what is possible within them, and who may enter, with which identities, discourses and interests". According to Cornwall (2002), spaces created by the powerful can enable them to maintain the status quo and disempower and marginalise the disadvantaged:

> Spaces made available by the powerful may be discursively bounded to permit only limited citizen influence, colonising interaction and stifling dissent. Spaces fostered as a way of amplifying marginalised voices may end up being filled by gatekeepers, who speak for but not with those they represent; attempts at the widest possible involvement can go away when no one can be bothered to take part. The intervention of powerful actors in

> creating an ever-expanding number of spaces into which citizens are invited to participate may have the effect of neutralising energy for engagement outside them and may render other spaces for voice illegitimate. And participatory processes may serve simply to reproduce echoes of dominant knowledge rather than to amplify the alternative, "bottom-up" perspectives that are claimed for them. (Cornwall, 2002, p.8-9)

Therefore, understanding how power relations permeate and produce the spaces for policy practice calls for examining who creates spaces, who sets the agenda for policymaking, and whose discourse dominates. First, identifying who is in a more advantaged position to set the rules and boundaries of participatory spaces is critical for assessing the power dynamics embedded in the interactions among different actors. Participatory spaces can be created by various kinds of authorities – those identified as external resource-bearing agents and the powerful – or citizens and organisations that are previously excluded from the decision-making process (Cornwall, 2002). Spaces created by different actors are animated by different kinds of power relations, as actors always tend to create and shape spaces according to their own agendas and interests. By doing so, the architects of spaces can create favourable conditions for the exercise of their power to achieve the desired outcome. As Cornwall (2002) observes, spaces made available by the powerful may serve to reproduce dominant knowledge and unequal power relations, while the spaces created or claimed by the previously excluded actors themselves involve more "radical possibilities" which enable concerned citizens to join together to defend their rights and interests. Further discussion on the differences between these two kinds of spaces and their transformative potentials will be held in the later section. Here, the discussion on who creates spaces leads to the following questions about who has the power to set agendas for policy-making, and who benefits from SWOs' policy practice.

The second question relating to the power analysis of spaces is about who sets the agendas for policymaking and whose interests are prioritised in participatory spaces.

Spaces are always filled with cooperation, negotiation, and even confrontation among diverse actors who want to maximise their interests through the mechanism of participation. In many cases, while the powerful want to increase public participation to promote their performance, they are reluctant to actually share power with those who are marginalised (Patel et al, 2016). A case study in South Africa reveals how spaces for public participation are used by local political elites to serve their own interests (Katsaura, 2015). Instead of being effective in solving real local challenges, spaces may become ritualistic and be used by local leaders to reproduce the status quo by controlling policy agendas and keeping the powerless groups busy with meaningless political tautology (ibid). In addition, spaces of public participation sometimes operate as a gateway through which local aspiring elites compete for access to mainstream politics and pursue political, social, and economic upward mobility (ibid). Therefore, understanding the effects of spaces entails a careful examination of the impacts of policy practice: whether the processes or institutions created to enhance participation challenge or reproduce existing structures and hierarchies of power (Cornwall, 2002).

Third, the literature has indicated that power is exercised through discourses that play a crucial role in making spaces. According to Foucault, discourse does not simply translate struggles or systems of domination but is the thing for which and by which there is a struggle. In other words, discourse is the power that is to be seized. As the power, discourses set what is sayable and do-able in participatory spaces, and constitute what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts (Cornwall, 2002). By reviewing how "poverty" and "the poor" is framed within mainstream development policies, Brock et al (2001) reveal the shifts of discourses of poverty alleviation from "economic growth" and "capital investment" to "rational economic agents" and "beneficiary participation", and then to "participation" and "empowerment", which create different kinds of spaces for the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction policies. Their observation of how "the poor" is constructed also indicates that discourses define what roles actors can play in any given social space. For example, framed by different discourses, the poor can be those who suffer from insufficient

physical infrastructure, beneficiaries who are involved in development projects funded by authorities, or political individuals with rights and agency (ibid). Discourses are invented and used by actors – including diverse kinds of authorities and those who are traditionally regarded as the powerless – to create and shape spaces where they can have more power over the issues on the table and thus can better serve their own interests. As such, discourses provide an entry point for researchers to examine the power relations permeating spaces.

3.8 The continuum of spaces

Spaces of participation can be categorised according to the configuration of power relations. Gaventa (2006) identifies a continuum of spaces which includes closed spaces, invited spaces, and created spaces. In closed spaces, "decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretence of broadening the boundaries for inclusion" (Gaventa, 2006, p.26). These spaces are controlled by power elites, including bureaucrats, experts or elected representatives, while the powerless are excluded from any kind of consultation or participation (ibid).

Invited spaces refer to spaces created and framed by various kinds of authorities, in which citizens are invited to participate (Cornwall, 2002). Invited spaces may take the form of regularised institutions (for example, consultative committees established by the government) or transient institutions, such as "one-off meetings, events or exercises aimed at opening up deliberation over policies or service delivery priorities, rather than making decisions" (ibid). Invited spaces are usually created to complement representative democracy and enhance the state's performance by functioning as an interface between citizens and authorities, through which citizens become part of the machinery of governance (ibid). It is worth noting that invited spaces can have both positive and negative effects on citizen participation. For example, Aiyar (2010) reviews the institutional reforms in India and presents a diverse and complex picture of

invited spaces: while some top-down, state-created institutions in some regions have contributed to improved development outcomes and provided citizens with equal access to social, cultural, and political capital; the others have drawn little responses from citizens and only served to strengthen the existing power inequality. Aiyar (2010) further points out that the effectiveness of invited spaces is closely linked to the access to information, citizens' awareness of participation, and the government's effort to promote democratisation. In addition, as Cornwall (2002) observes, although invited spaces enable some citizens to get involved in deliberation and decision-making, these opportunities remain restricted to a small group of representatives, whether nominated, self-selected, co-opted or elected.

Created spaces, which are sometimes identified as "claimed spaces" (Gaventa, 2006), "popular spaces" (Cornwall, 2004), "autonomous spaces" (Brock et al, 2001), "action spaces" (Berberton et al, 1998), and "free spaces" (Evans & Boyte, 1992), are those created by less powerful actors who share similar concerns or identifications and join together for common pursuits (Cornwall, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). Created spaces also have a temporal dimension: they may be regularised and institutionalised in the form of groups, organisations or associations; they may also be transient expressions of public dissent (Cornwall, 2002 & 2004). Compared to invited spaces, created spaces are made by citizens with their political agency, thus involving more radical possibilities: citizens can seek to influence public policy through advocacy and the mobilisation of dissent, or even assume some of the functions of the government by providing the needs of other citizens (Cornwall, 2002). However, created spaces may also have negative effects on public participation. As Cornwall (2002) points out, created spaces can be exclusionary because they are only open to people who share a particular identity. They may even work to deepen the exclusion of minorities by representing the voice of the majority.

Besides the three types of spaces discussed above, there are also other possibilities of spaces. The categories of spaces for participation may vary across different contexts

and settings, where more spaces can be added to the continuum (Gaventa, 2006). For example, drawing on a case study in South Africa, Katsaura (2015) identifies ritualistic spaces which are characterised by political tautology and self-centred politicking. In Colombia, Pearce and Vela (2005, cited in Gaventa, 2006) identify five types of spaces: formal by invitation, formal by right, created by non-state institutions, created by civil society organisations, and collective transitory action.

It is also noteworthy that spaces of participation are not static. They are full of transformative potential and strategic reversibility (Gaventa, 2006; Cornwall, 2002). As spaces are constantly opened and closed, shaped and reshaped by different actors, they may be created with one purpose in mind, but changed by those who come to fill them with alternative visions (Cornwall, 2002). On one hand, this reminds us that without countervailing power, new institutional designs for participatory governance may simply be captured by authorities (Gaventa, 2006). On the other hand, the strategic reversibility of spaces implies that citizens and social workers can open up previously closed spaces, or transform invited spaces into more autonomous ones where they can proactively influence the decision-making.

3.9 Chapter conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of social work policy practice by reviewing the literature on the definitions and rationale of policy practice, social workers' roles in the policy process, the methods and styles of policy practice, the various factors affecting the forms that policy practice takes, and the spaces for public participation in policymaking.

As a value-laden profession, social work is built upon its commitment to social justice and social change. This requires social workers to not only take actions to promote changes at the micro-level but also engage in macro practice. Policy practice, as an

important part of social work professional practice, requires that social workers use their expertise to participate in the policy process, and propose and change policies at various settings and levels in order to achieve the goal of social and economic justice (Cummins et al, 2011; Jansson, 2014; Klammer et al, 2019).

Despite the common definition, social work policy practice may take different forms in practice. The literature has revealed the diversity of social workers' actual engagement in policymaking. The methods and strategies used by social workers to influence policy range from the more institutional, cooperative, and incremental ones to those that are more aggressive, confrontational and radical (Berry and Arons, 2003; Onyx et al, 2010; Feldman, 2020). Why does social workers' engagement in policy practice vary? When do social workers adopt certain strategies to influence policy and when do they adopt others? Researchers have used several theories and conceptual frameworks to explore the roles of several institutional factors, organisational factors and individual factors in shaping policy practice (Schmid et al, 2008; Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2008; Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2015; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2016; Strier and Feldman, 2017). The concept of "space", which refers to the "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests" (Gaventa, 2006, p.26), contributes to the discussion by introducing power analysis into the research on policy practice. Different types of spaces incubate and circumscribe different forms of policy practice, as they are created by different actors who attempt to exercise their power to define what actions, discourses and policy possibilities can take place within specific spaces for policy practice (Cornwall, 2002).

The existing theories and conceptual frameworks have provided important clues and insights regarding how to understand SWOs' policy practice in China. However, this study does not intend to test these theoretical assumptions and conceptual frameworks in the Chinese context or use them to explain SWOs' policy practice in China. Given the unique political institutions and state-society relationships in China, it is doubtful

whether the theories and conceptual frameworks developed in the Western democratic countries can be directly applied to the local political and social context. Also, so far little is known about social work policy practice in China. Therefore, this study is largely exploratory and aims to use the grounded theory methodology to explore whether and how Chinese SWOs participate in "policy practice".

The largely Western literature on policy practice has helped sharpen the researcher's awareness and promote theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978; Elliott & Higgins, 2012). Some of the key concepts covered in this chapter, including the diverse forms of policy practice and the spaces for participation, have provided important clues to understanding social work policy practice in China. To help guide the reader at this point, I will summarise some key elements of the study, drawing on the insights gained from the literature. First, this study focuses on how spaces for social work policy practice are constructed in China. It looks into the space-making process in which the political institutions, social service system, and government-SWO interaction constantly create and reshape the opportunities and channels where SWOs can participate in social policy formulation. Second, this study explores SWOs' actual engagement in policy practice by researching what policies they attempt to influence and what methods and strategies they adopt. The features and forms of SWOs' policy practice can reflect the configuration of power relations within the spaces for participation in policy-making. Third, this study hopes to analyse the power relations between the Party-state and SWOs in the spaces for policy practice by answering the following questions: who controls the construction of spaces for policy practice? Who sets agendas for policy-making? What discourse dominates? What is the impact of SWOs' policy practice? And where does SWOs' policy influence come from? Last but not least, this study aims to explore the features and nature of spaces for policy practice in China by comparing these spaces with other types of spaces discussed in the literature. The next chapter reviews the literature on social work in China and the relationships between SWOs and the Party-state, which set the context in which spaces for policy practice are created.

Chapter 4 The relationships between SWOs and the Party-state in China

4.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, power relations permeate and shape the spaces for policy practice. To analyse the spaces in which SWOs interact with state policymakers and influence policymaking, it is important to look at the power relations between SWOs and the Party-state in the Chinese context. This chapter presents a review of the literature on this topic. The literature has revealed that the Party-state has enhanced its control over social organisations through two sophisticated mechanisms: contractual control and political control. These two forms of state control have significant impacts on the power relations between SWOs and the Party-state and are very likely to affect the creation of spaces for social work policy practice. The second section of this chapter reports how contracting out social services has provided support for the development of SWOs on the one hand and placed SWOs in a subordinate role on the other. The third section focuses on the Party-state's strategy of political control and reports how it manages to co-opt social organisation leaders into the establishment and massively involve social organisations in Party-building work. Despite the strict state control, social organisations still find spaces to participate in policy practice. The fourth section of this chapter first provides a brief overview of policymaking in China, and then it summarises some salient features of Chinese social organisations' participation in policy practice in the social and political context of China. Finally, this chapter concludes with insights provided by existing studies and research gaps identified in the literature.

4.2 The Party-state's contractual control over SWOs

To make innovations in social governance and encourage the regulated participation of

social organisations, the Party-state has adopted the policy instrument of social service contracting to involve SWOs in welfare provision and redraw the state-society relationships to better manage social issues. Howell (2015) defines China's strategy of state-NGO cooperation as "welfarist incorporation", which is characterised by the relaxation of registration regulations for NGOs and the increasing use of contracting out social services to NGOs. By giving new roles to the government and social organisations in welfare provision, contracting is believed to have brought about revolutionary changes to China's welfare system, which is adjusted to be more compatible with China's mixed economy under the name of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Chan, 2018; Lei and Cai, 2018). The literature reveals that contracting has a great impact on SWOs and their relationships with the government. These impacts have two facets: support and control.

The first impact of contracting is that it has provided SWOs with increasing resources and support from the Party-state, which significantly promote their professional ability and social influence. Current research evidence shows that contracting has not only boosted the scale and coverage of social services in China, increased the number of SWOs, and improved the quality of social services, but it has also greatly strengthened the capacities of the government as well as the nonprofit sector for addressing unmet social needs and improving people's wellbeing (Cortis et al, 2018; Lei and Chan, 2018). The strategy of welfarist incorporation and the building of a new civic welfare infrastructure featuring social service contracting have provided increasing opportunities for service-oriented NGOs to access resources, legitimacy and influence (Howell, 2015 & 2019). The study by Zhao et al (2016) reports several positive impacts of social service contracting on the development of social organisations, including an increase in their financial resources, an expansion in their service provision, and the acquisition of legitimacy and accountability from the government.

Also, contracting has created more opportunities for SWOs to collaborate with the government on social governance — meeting social needs and tackling social problems.

Drawing on a qualitative study in Shanghai, Jing and Hu (2017) contend that social service contracting is mutually beneficial for both government agencies and SWOs. For SWOs, contracting has provided opportunities for them to exchange information, develop trust, and discuss and tackle the issues of common concerns with government officials. As such, contracting can ultimately lead to collaborative governance, in which SWOs and government agencies can "jointly make decisions, enforce regulatory functions, set rules, and improve community governance" (Jing and Hu, 2017, p.191). Jing (2018) discovers that SWOs participate in social service contracting with dual identity — as both social actors and state agents that are subject to the government's administrative and supervisory system. Influenced by their dual identity, SWOs seek to serve their funders and the society at the same time through contracting, which not only supports SWOs in promoting their professional capacities and social reputation but also enables them to strategically collaborate with government agencies to secure political capital and support (Jing, 2018). Similarly, based on policy analysis and field research, Fang and Walker (2020) argue that contracting has contributed to the forming of a supportive relationship between SWOs and the government, in which SWOs have obtained legitimacy and crucial resources for their development.

Teets (2012) argues that the development of contracting out public services signifies China's political reforms towards "small state, big society", as it empowers social actors to take over aspects of the local governments' former responsibilities for providing public goods and services. However, Teets' (2013) later research indicates that the development of NGOs and the increasing use of contracting in China has not led to democratisation but the improvement of social governance under authoritarianism. The new changes in the state-society relationships have generated "consultative authoritarianism", which "encourages the simultaneous expansion of a fairly autonomous civil society and the development of more indirect tools of state control" (Teets, 2013, p.19). Within the model of "consultative authoritarianism", on the one hand, NGOs possess a certain degree of independence and autonomy in terms of recruiting staff, securing resources and establishing projects; on the other hand, social

organisations are subject to more sophisticated and indirect control mechanisms developed by the Party-state, which strategically creates positive and negative incentives — for example, government grants and support, new registration laws, restrictions on activities — to direct social organisations towards meeting the Party-state's goals (Teets, 2013). In this sense, contracting has introduced new mechanisms of control through which the Party-state can exercise its power over SWOs (Martinez et al, 2021).

The literature has provided plenty of evidence for the second impact of contracting on SWOs: the evolving state control over SWOs. Many studies have indicated that the welfare partnership framework fails to explain the complicated contractual relationships between SWOs and the government in China. For example, Zhu and Chen's (2013) case study of a contracted-out Integrated Family Services Centre in Guangzhou shows that SWOs failed to establish an equal partnership with street-level bureaucracy and gradually lost their autonomy and professional influence. Huang and Yang's (2015) research finds that SWOs delivering contracting-out social services are often subordinated to the requirement from the government rather than service contracts or professional values. Similarly, the study by Chan and Lei (2017) shows that social workers are treated as multipurpose and cost-efficient foot soldiers and lower-ranking semi-government units by local government agencies, rather than independent welfare providers. Because of the unequal power relationships between SWOs and the government and the lack of legal protection of SWOs' contractual rights, SWOs are often asked to do extra administrative work beyond their service contracts to meet the government's needs (Chan and Lei, 2017; Chen and Zhao, 2019).

SWOs' predicament seems to indicate that the Party-state brings in its political agenda while using contracting to collaborate with SWOs, and does not intend to yield up its overwhelming power. As Mok et al (2021) observe, the Chinese government has adopted a pragmatic instrumentalism approach when introducing contracting into the provision of social services, as it carefully manages and controls the scale, scope and

extent of the participation of social organisations, which are used as a policy tool to achieve the Party-state's political goals. In addition, "once the government realised the potential political risk of bringing in diverse social forces and social work profession in diversifying social services, the expansion was withheld with caution" (Mok et al, 2021, p.76). In other words, SWOs' participation in welfare provision through the mechanism of contracting has not lent them more political power or enabled them to obtain an equal status (Mok et al, 2020). Instead, SWOs are placed in a subordinate role and treated as assistants of local governments (ibid, p.687). Cho's (2017) ethnographic fieldwork in Shenzhen's industry areas found that the social work positions created by the increasing contracting out of social services were filled with low-paid migrant youth from the countryside, who were placed at the bottom of the welfare system. Cho (2017) questions whether front-line social workers have the political agency and power to challenge, or just perpetuate, the existing types of social inequality within the neoliberal dynamics.

Besides turning SWOs and social workers into the government's foot soldiers (Zhu and Chen, 2013; Chan and Lei, 2017; Huang and Yang, 2015), the government also exercises its power to manipulate SWOs' behaviours and activities through contracting. In the context of service contracting, SWOs are often criticised for depending on governmental funding, lacking autonomy, and losing the power to take collective action with grassroots communities (Zhu and Chen, 2014). The study by Lin (2016) indicates a government-led model in contracting out social services, which features purchaser-oriented rather than service user-oriented service provision. By controlling SWOs' financial resources and creating a dependency culture, the government can restrict SWOs' autonomy and manipulate their behaviours and activities, thus creating pressure for SWOs to align with the government's agendas (Lin, 2016). Similarly, drawing on a study on social organisations engaging in governmental purchasing of social services for industrial workers, Howell (2015) finds that contracting in China has a state logic of maintaining social control and requires NGOs to stymie their radical edges. According to Howell (2015):

> Aware of the services that labour NGOs provided to migrant workers, relevant government departments and local trade unions sought proactively to draw selected labour NGOs into welfare-focused cooperation. In this manner, they could incorporate labour NGOs in a qualitatively different way into the political system, stymie their radical edges by emphasising services to the exclusion of rights, and wean them off external funding… Labour NGOs face additional constraints in becoming effective, namely the structural problems of a large, shifting worker population, access to factories, and continuing governmental suspicion. Furthermore, the subsumption of labour NGOs under a trade union-led federation might be the death kiss of labour activism, as labour NGOs become embroiled in providing services rather than engaging in strategic agendas. (Howell, 2015, p.719-720)

These findings have raised the concern that the government's intention of social control and its dominating role in the SWO-government relationships may undermine the potential of social work for realising social justice and social change (Zhu and Chen, 2013; Li and Chen, 2014; Zhao et al., 2016). Although the Party-state has increasingly involved SWOs in service delivery, it suppresses their roles as parts of civil society and weakens their ability to mobilise the public and their potential for challenging the state's authority through the service contracting process (Zhao et al., 2016). For example, Zhao et al (2016) report a case in which a social organisation providing services for migrant children lost its service contract from the government just because the organisation received an American journalist who criticised China's education policy for children of migrant workers in social media. In this context, to obtain a government contract, Chinese NGOs have to carefully refrain from any political infractions and constantly demonstrate that they are "apolitical" (Zhao et al, 2016, p.2247).

Studies have used the concept of "depoliticisation" to describe the impact of the Party-state's contractual control on SWOs' missions and behaviours. Leung's (2012) study discovers that to maintain the Party-state's endorsement and secure social service

contracts, Chinese social workers tend to depoliticise their practice by working with non-threatening service user groups, adopting individualist approaches for intervention, and refraining from addressing structural causes of social problems. Yan (2013) finds that in the Chinese discourse of the indigenisation of social work, social work academics and practitioners tend to devalue the core values of social work that are connected to liberal democratic ideology. Similarly, based on a fuzzy Delphi study, Lei and Huang (2018) identify a tendency of "pragmatic professionalism" within the social work profession in China. The senior social workers and social work academics in Guangzhou prefer practical and technical competencies with de-politicising techniques and tend to devalue the core values that are regarded as politically sensitive in China, such as human rights, social justice and promoting social change (Lei and Huang, 2018). In addition, it is not surprising to learn that Chinese social work academics have a very low level of political engagement, and seldom organise or speak at demonstrations or protests (Jin et al., 2017). A preliminary study on social workers' role in policymaking in China indicates a depoliticised form of policy practice, which is characterised by social workers' compliance with the state's agenda, adoption of nonconfrontational tactics, and the use of professional expertise as their influence over policymaking (Cai et al, 2021).

As I have observed in a preliminary study on social work policy practice in China, the depoliticisation of social work discussed in the literature is about social workers avoiding involvement in politically controversial values, discourses and practices (Cai et al, 2021). Depoliticisation can be defined as "the removal of the political agency and autonomy of SWOs" (Cai et al, 2021, p.5). However, in a highly political context in which the Party-state incorporates its political agendas in the development of social work, depoliticisation can lead to the re-politicisation of social work in the Party-state's interest. In other words, depoliticisation and re-politicisation constitute a dialectic relation, as "only by removing SWOs' political autonomy and agency can the state re-politicise the social work profession: replacing SWOs' professional values with its own political agenda and co-opting the profession into the establishment" (Cai et al, 2021,

p.15). The discussion reveals the complexity of the power dynamics behind the depoliticisation tendency within the social work profession in China. In response to the subordinate role of SWOs, some social work scholars call on social workers and their organisations to hold to their "professional conscience" and to fulfil the vision of social justice through action research and policy practice (Li and Chen, 2014).

To summarise, the literature has revealed the dual impacts of the Party-state's contractual control over SWOs. On the one hand, contracting has enriched SWOs' resources, improved their ability to deliver social services, and created more opportunities for them to collaborate with the government on tackling social issues. On the other hand, contracting becomes the Party-state's new tool to exercise control over SWOs. Through contracting, the government can turn SWOs into lower-ranking semi-governmental units, influence their professional activities, remove their political autonomy, and even direct them towards meeting the government's political needs. Given the complex effects of social service contracting on SWOs and their relationships with the government, how contracting influences the creation of the spaces for social work policy practice is worth an in-depth analysis.

4.3 The Party-state's political control over SWOs

Besides contractual control, the Party-state also develops strategies of political control to ensure SWOs' allegiance and subordination to the Party-state. In many authoritarian states, governments are concerned that NGOs may convey political discontent and provide organisational channels through which citizens would be mobilised to challenge the authoritarian rules (Bratton, 1989). In mainland China, the state-social organisation relationships are subject to the authoritarian political system and the lack of a robust and autonomous civil society, which leads to government-dominated relationships and even the non-existence of autonomous social organisations (Foster, 2001; Hsu et al, 2017; Yang et al, 2016). In 2013, the General Office of the Central

Committee of the CPC circulated the *Communiqué on the current state of the ideological sphere* within the Party, which sent a strong warning of the perils of an independent civil society. According to the Communiqué:

> Civil society is a socio-political theory that originated in the West. It holds that in the social sphere, individual rights are paramount and ought to be immune to obstruction by the state. For the past few years, the idea of civil society has been adopted by Western anti-China forces and used as a political tool. Additionally, some people with ulterior motives in China have begun to promote these ideas. This is mainly expressed in the following ways:
>
> Promoting civil society and Western-style theories of governance, they claim that building civil society in China is a precondition for the protection of individual rights and forms the basis for the realization of constitutional democracy. Viewing civil society as a magic bullet for advancing social management at the local level, they have launched all kinds of so-called citizen movements. Advocates of civil society want to squeeze the Party out of the leadership of the masses at the local level, even setting the Party against the masses, to the point that their advocacy is becoming a serious form of political opposition. (ChinaFile, 2013)

The passage of China's Charity Law in 2016 has helped the Party-state tighten its control over social organisations. The Charity Law is deemed an unprecedented development of the regulation of social organisations in China (Shieh, 2016; Han, 2018; Spires, 2020), as it covers a wide range of topics closely relating to the operation of social organisations, including registration, fundraising and donations, charitable activities and services, information disclosure, supervision and regulation, and legal responsibilities. The new law has addressed some salient obstacles facing Chinese social organisations for a long time and provides them with more legal support and opportunities to engage in nonprofit activities. For example, the law simplifies the

procedures for registering a social organisation and abolishes the supervisory agency requirement[12]. Besides, it sets up the procedures for formally obtaining a fundraising license, with which social organisations can publicly fundraise and increase their sources of income.

However, the Charity Law also imposes stricter political monitoring and control upon social organisations. As Backer (2017) observes, it represents "an effort both to manage civil society and to harness its energy in the service of the state and of the political order's fundamental objectives to move toward the establishment of a communist society in China". The new law reflects the Party-state's concern that social organisations may have the potential for mobilising citizens and undermining the authority of the Party. Therefore, it emphasises in many articles that social organisations must not engage in activities that could endanger national security, otherwise they would be subject to investigation and punishment. According to the Charity Law:

> Article 4: The implementation of charitable activities shall follow the principles of lawfulness, voluntariness, integrity, and non-compensation; must not violate social morals, and must not endanger national security, public interest or the lawful rights and interests of others.
>
> Article 15: Charitable organisations must not engage in or fund activities that endanger national security or public interest, and must not accept contributions that have conditions attached which violate laws and regulations or are contrary to social morals, and must not attach conditions for beneficiaries that violate laws and regulations or are contrary to social morals.

[12] Before the enactment of the Charity Law, most local authorities required social organisations to find a supervisory agency from within the government when they applied for formal registration. It was very difficult for grassroots social organisations to meet this requirement.

> Article 104: Where charitable organisations engage in or fund activities that endanger national security or public interest, the relevant state organs investigate and reach a disposition in accordance with law, and the civil affairs departments revoke registration certificates and make a public announcement.
>
> Article 109: Where violations of provisions of this law constitute a public security administration violation, the public security organs will give public security administrative sanctions in accordance with law; where a crime is constituted, they will pursue criminal responsibility in accordance with law.

As many observers point out, the Charity Law does not provide a clear definition of "national security", which is a very broad and ambiguous concept in the Chinese context, and this may give the government the power to decide what activity is harmful and suppress the politically disobedient social organisations (Wang, 2016; Spires, 2020). To prevent social organisations from engaging in activities that may undermine "national security", or actually the authority of the Party, the Charity Law has tightened the monitoring and control over the funding of social organisations. According to the new law, social organisations must apply for eligibility to undertake public fundraising, which will go through strict political examination. Also, together with the enactment of the 2016 Overseas NGO Management Law, the Charity Law makes it extremely difficult for Chinese social organisations to receive funding from foreign nonprofit groups. This has further increased their fiscal dependence on government funding (Kan and Ku, 2021), to political requirements are usually attached (eg. the establishment of Party branches within social organisations).

As Sidel (2022: 2) observes, the Charity Law "embodies the long-standing tension between exercising strict control over associational activity and encouraging the sector's growth to serve the party-state". As an attempt to solve this tension, Han (2018: 390) argues, the Party-state intends to apply the Charity Law to "incorporate those

NGOs that it considers useful and innocuous into an increasingly institutionalised system of social governance and rule of law" on the one hand, and to "apply the policy of outright rejection and repression to those it identifies as threatening the party-state's authority" on the other.

To reduce the potential political risk resulting from the rapid development of social organisations, the Chinese state has exerted a variety of strategies to regulate and even control social organisations' activities. These strategies include legal registration restrictions, excluding social organisations which work on politically sensitive issues, incorporating certain social organisations' activities into government plans, turning social organisations into quasi-governmental organs, and cutting off the supply of critical resources for disobedient social organisations, etc. (Ling et al, 2007; Teets, 2013; Kang and Han, 2008; Thornton, 2013; Li et al, 2017). In recent years, the Chinese state has developed a new strategy of political incorporation to strengthen its control over social organisations. More specifically, political incorporation is realised through two mechanisms: co-opting social organisation leaders into the political establishment and involving social organisations in Party-building work.

An important mechanism of political incorporation is to co-opt leaders of social organisations into the People's Congresses (PCs) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCCs) at various levels. It has been reported that many SWO leaders have become local PC deputies and CPPCC members. For example, the Shunde district of Foshan city had its first social work PC deputies and CPPCC members in 2011 (Zeng et al, 2011). In Shenzhen city, 24 experienced social workers joined the municipal and township-level PCs, CPPCCs and the CPC's congresses in 2016 (Luo & Wang, 2016).

According to the Constitution of China, The National People's Congress (NPC) and the local PCs are the organs of state power and the legislatures of China. The PCs have the power to enact and amend legislation, elect and appoint members to the government

and other state organs, and determine major issues worthy of legislative action. Deputies to township-level PCs, which are the lowest-level PCs, are elected by voters, while PCs above the township level are elected by deputies from the lower-level PCs. The CPPCCs at various levels are the political advisory bodies in China, in which CPC members, legally permitted non-communist parties, people's organisations, and people of all ethnic groups and from all sectors of society work together to participate in state affairs. In practice, CPPCC members serve as advisors for the government and legislative and judicial organs and put forward proposals on major political, economic, and social issues. CPPCCs usually consist of experienced political figures, social celebrities, and experts and scholars specialising in various fields, who are invited to join the CPPCCs at various levels.

Studies have shown that one essential function of the PCs and CPPCCs is to co-opt economic, political, and social elites in the political establishment so that the authoritarian regime can maintain its inclusion and resilience, and control non-state forces (Yan, 2011; Sun, 2014; Chen, 2015; Yew, 2016). Sun's (2014) study on the municipal PC elections in China depicts how co-option is realised through the PC electoral process which is under the complete control of the CPC committees, as these committees can decide the deputy quotas and the deputy composition, allocate the deputy quotas, select deputy candidates, examine the credentials of deputy candidates, and influence the election of deputies to the PCs. Yan's (2011) study on the selection of CPPCC members and their roles in local politics reveals that CPPCCs provide the Party-state with "an important platform for co-opting potentially threatening social forces, a forum for policy bargaining, a channel for monitoring various social sectors and a mechanism for offering material benefits to the regime's most loyal and trustworthy collaborators" (p.54). Despite the political control function, CPPCCs provide opportunities for the co-opted social elites to influence the policy-making process and the work of the government by submitting proposals to express opinions, complaints and suggestions, which are expected to improve the performance of local governments (Yan, 2011).

Although incorporating influential social leaders into the establishment enables the Party-state to enhance its control over the non-governmental sector, the coverage of this mechanism of political control remains limited, as it can only reach a small number of social elites. To develop more extensive control over social organisations, the Party-state has launched a large-scale campaign to involve social organisations in Party-building work. In 2015, the Central Committee of the CPC (CCCPC) issued the *Opinions on strengthening the work of party building in social organisations* (CCCPC, 2015), which marked an unprecedented change in the relationships between the Party-state and social organisations.

The CPC's new political incorporation strategy of involving social organisations in Party-building work has put forward a series of important political requirements for social organisations. First, the social organisations with three or more Party members must establish independent branches of the Party within their organisational structures. The small-scale social organisations with less than three Party members should establish joint Party branches together with other social organisations. Newly registered social organisations and those that currently lack the conditions for establishing independent Party branches should be directed to carry out Party-building work and establish Party branches when conditions allow. The CPC attaches great importance to promoting the coverage of Party organisations within social organisations, according to the CCCPC (2015):

> (We should) promote the coverage of Party organisations and Party work within social organisations… Strengthen the ideological education for the persons in charge of social organisations, and guide them to actively support Party-building work. (CCCPC, 2015)

Second, Party organisations and Party members in social organisations should play a key role in strengthening the legitimacy of the CPC and enhancing its connection with

ordinary people. This should be achieved by Party branches and members providing political education for the public, delivering services to the people, publicising and implementing the Party's policies, etc. According to the CCCPC:

> Party organisations in social organisations should understand and pay close attention to the ideological status and actual needs of their employees and the people, innovate ideological and political education, organise and carry out activities welcomed by the people, provide services needed by the people, strengthen humanistic care and psychological support, actively solve the problems facing the people, and combine political education with services, effectively promote the attractiveness and influence of Party organisations... Social organisations should make use of their advantage of having close connections with the people, organise Party members to publicise the Party's line, principles and policies in their professional activities, and build social consensus. (CCCPC, 2015)

Third, social organisations are expected to be led by CPC members, and the Party organisations in social organisations should be led and supervised by their upper CPC committees, which are in charge of Party-building work within social organisations. This requirement reflects the CPC's intention to incorporate the leaders of social organisations into its rank and put these organisations under the CPC's leadership and control. According to the CCCPC:

> The secretaries of Party organisations should generally come from within social organisations, and it is suggested that the person in charge of a social organisation serves as the secretary of the Party organisation. If the person in charge is not a Party member, then the Party organisation secretary can come from the management. If there is no suitable candidate in a social organisation, it can ask the upper-level Party organisation to select and appoint a candidate to hold this position according to relevant regulations of the Party… The

> secretaries of Party organisations in social organisations should conscientiously carry out their duty of Party building, report to and be reviewed by the upper-level Party organisations and the Party members in their organisations every year. (CCCPC, 2015)

Last but not least, Party branches in social organisations should play the role of the Party's "battle fortresses", fulfil the Party's political duty, abide by the Party's political rules, and ensure social organisations' allegiance to the Party. As articulated by the CCCPC:

> Party organisations in social organisations are the Party's battle fortresses within social organisations and play the role of their political cores. Party organisations in social organisations should fulfil the Party's political duty, work closely around the basic tasks assigned by the Party Constitution to grassroots Party organisations, have a strict organisational life, strictly abide by political discipline, political rules, and organisational discipline, and fully perform the political functions of Party organisations. (CCCPC, 2015)

More specifically, Party organisations in social organisations should fulfil six major duties, which comprehensively cover the political, ideological, professional, cultural, and organisational aspects of social organisations. According to the CCCPC:

> (1) Ensure the correct political direction. Publicise and implement the Party's line, principles and policies, publicise and implement the resolutions of the Central Committee of the Party, organise Party members and the people to earnestly learn about the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics… (2) Unite the people. Undertake ideological and political work, educate and guide the people to strengthen their political identity… (3) Promote the development of social organisations. Stimulate the work enthusiasm and sense of ownership of employees, help social organisations improve their

> regulation and management… (4) Build advanced culture and values. Persist in using the socialist core values to guide cultural development, organise cultural activities in diverse forms… (5) Support the development of professionals. Care for professionals, actively help and guide them, continuously improve the ideological and professional competence of employees… (6) Promote the development of Party organisations. Maintain and implement Party discipline, and supervise Party members to fulfil their obligations… (CCCPC, 2015)

It can be seen from this landmark policy that the Party-state intends to develop stricter and more comprehensive and sophisticated control over social organisations by building Party branches within them. In other words, the mechanism of involving social organisations in Party-building work enables the Party-state to incorporate these once relatively independent social forces into its rank. According to the CCCPC's policy design, the Party organisations within social organisations are expected to play an important role in ensuring social organisations' political compliance with the Party, and even to intervene in these organisations' operation and management. For instance, Party organisations in social organisations need to provide political education for the employees and the public, and they also need to help with social organisations' management. Given the Party-state's intensified political incorporation strategy, although social organisations are registered as non-governmental organisations, they are faced with unprecedented challenges in terms of their independence and autonomy.

With the Party-state's massive intervention, Party-building work within social organisations has made great progress in recent years. It was reported that 61.7% of all registered social organisations in China had established Party organisations by 2017 (Xin and Huang, 2021). In 2021, the Organisation Department of the CCCPC (2021) reported that there were about 162,000 Party organisations established within social organisations, covering almost all social organisations that meet the conditions for establishing Party ties. However, although the relationships between the Party-state and

social organisations are undergoing a significant and rapid transformation, only limited rigorous studies have been conducted to analyse the implementation of the Party-building strategy and its implications for social organisations including SWOs. Perhaps the most in-depth analyses to date are provided by Kan and Ku (2020) and Xin and Huang (2021).

Xin and Huang (2021) comprehensively describe how the CPC in Shanghai city adopted a basket of flexible measures to carry out Party-building work within social organisations. These measures included "the establishment of a unified commanding body, the training of specialised Party workers, the diversified organisational forms, and a well-designed reward-and-punishment system" (p.15). For social organisations, engaging in Party-building work is crucial for registration and legitimation, their leaders' political appointments (eg. PC deputies, CPPCC members), organisation accreditation, and eligibility for government contracts and funding (Xin and Huang, 2021).

The study by Kan and Ku (2020) provides an in-depth analysis of how a SWO was involved in Party-building work and eventually co-opted by the CPC. In practice, Party-building work has both an internal aspect and an external aspect: the former requires the staff of the SWO to "attend regular meetings to learn about Party principles and the latest Party documents, have annual self-evaluation and appraisal meetings, and hold 'heart-to-heart' conversation sessions among Party members", while the external aspect focuses on social outreach and service delivery and requires the SWO to "discursively demonstrate their alignment with Party-building rhetoric", "incorporate Party slogans in their activities", and "mobilise participation among migrant population in the activities organised by the Party" (Kan and Ku, 2020, p.87-88).

From the perspective of SWOs, there are both negative and positive incentives for them to get involved in Party-building work. As Kan and Ku's (2020) study reveals, social workers have experienced top-down political pressure that compels compliance and

cooperation. Social workers fear that their rejection of participation in Party-building work would cause trouble and even suppression to their organisation. Besides the political pressure, there are several positive incentives for SWOs to participate in Party-building work. According to Kan and Ku (2020), firstly, participation in Party-building work produces a mutually interdependent relationship between SWOs and local Party organisations and provides SWOs with continued and even increased funding from local Party organisations which rely heavily on SWOs to accomplish the political task of Party building assigned by the upper-level authorities. Secondly, the ambiguity and flexibility of Party-building work give the SWO a certain degree of autonomy in designing the actual contents of service-centred Party-building projects. Thirdly, the collaboration between local authorities and SWOs on Party-building work creates opportunities for SWOs to persuade local decision-makers to roll out new social services in wider contexts under the name of Party-building projects.

Despite the benefits listed above, getting involved in Party-building work has also increased SWOs' workload, shifted their priorities, and weakened their relationships with grassroots communities (Kan and Ku, 2020). More importantly, as social workers are required to incorporate Party terminology in social service provision, their work has been appropriated to "normalise the language and presence of the Party in everyday community life" (p.90), which eventually contributes to the strengthening of the Party's legitimacy (Kan and Ku, 2020).

Studies also show that local governments start to contract out Party-building projects to SWOs, which need to organise political activities for Party members and provide social services for the public in the name of the Party (Chen, 2016; Jing and Hu, 2017; Kan and Ku, 2020). Following the CCCPC's (2015) decision to promote Party-building work within social organisations, in 2015, the community service centres run by SWOs in Shenzhen city were renamed "Party-masses service centres" to highlight the Party's role in reaching and caring for the people. It is argued that the reform of Shenzhen's community service centres has changed the relationship between SWOs and local

authorities from nominal partnership to explicit subordination (Chen, 2016).

To sum up, the CPC's policy documents and existing studies have shown that the Party-state attempts to incorporate social organisations and their leaders into its rank through two mechanisms: co-opting social organisation leaders into the political establishment and involving social organisations in Party-building work. They enable the Party-state to exercise political control over social organisations, ensure their allegiance to the Party, and take advantage of them to meet the Party's political interests. It should be noted that the Party-state's political and contractual control are often interrelated. For example, social organisations' engagement in Party-building work affects their eligibility for government contracts, and they also undertake contracted-out Party-building projects from the government. These two forms of state control have significantly influenced the relationships between the Party-state and SWOs. It is conceivable that they would also shape the spaces in which SWOs participate in policy practice.

4.4 Social organisations' participation in policymaking in the Chinese context

Despite the strict contractual and political control exercised over social organisations, the Party-state still allows controlled participation by social forces in public affairs. Increasing academic attention has been paid to how social organisations participate in policymaking within China's political and social context. Before reviewing the literature on social organisations' role in the policy-making process, a brief overview of policymaking in China is provided.

According to the constitution of the People's Republic of China, China is a socialist country led by the CPC, which has the authoritative, monopolistic and unchallengeable power to determine the social, economic and political goals of China's society. Within a one-party polity, the CPC is China's real political power holder and policy-maker,

which takes a variety of means to control the policy-making process, including "organisational control over key appointments, institutional control over the meeting agendas, pre-approval of draft laws and setting the general tone of legislative debate" (Chan et al, 2008). As Chan et al (2008) point out, the CPC organisations at both central and local levels penetrate every aspect of the policy-making system.

Under the leadership and direction of the CPC, the legislative and administrative bodies undertake the actual work of policy formulation and enactment. At the central level, the National People's Congress (NPC) is China's highest legislative organ possessing the dominant power to enact national laws. However, the NPC has been nicknamed the "rubber stamp" and criticised for having a limited and symbolic role in policymaking, as its main duty is to discuss and formally legitimise the decisions made by the CPC and it rarely defeats proposals put forward by the CPC (Tanner, 1999; Saich, 2000).

In comparison, as China's highest administrative organ, the State Council (SC) has more operational policy-making power to formulate and implement administrative regulations and measures, monitor policy implementation, and draft legislative bills for submission to the NPC (Chan et al, 2008). It is worth noting that social policies in China usually take the form of administrative regulations and measures made by the SC and lower-level governments rather than laws enacted by the NPC. It is because administrative regulations and measures are more flexible in terms of formulation and revision, leaving more room for local governments and other policy actors to manoeuvre, especially in the context of the continuous transformation of China's social welfare system (Chan et al, 2008). As a department of the SC, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) is responsible for formulating national policies relating to social welfare and social work, which include policies on social assistance, child protection, and welfare programmes for disadvantaged groups. Besides, other key government departments (eg. National Health Commission, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development) and semi-governmental mass organisations (eg. All-China Federation of Trade Unions, All-China Women's Federation,

Communist Youth League of China, and All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce) are also important actors involved in social policymaking in China (Chan et al, 2008).

The operational policy-making power is not only shared by different government departments, but also by governments at different administrative levels. In China, social welfare arrangements usually vary from locality to locality, as the central government has delegated its welfare functions to local government authorities and enabled them to develop welfare programmes according to their regional economic and social conditions (Chan et al, 2008). In practice, while higher-level policy-makers set agendas for policy development and develop general plans, they provide space for local officials to experiment with innovative policy programmes and encourage them to feed local experiences back into higher-level policy formulation (Heilmann, 2008). As Heilmann (2008: 4) observes, local policymakers have the power to "try out a variety of methods and processes to find imaginative solutions to predefined tasks or to new challenges that emerge during experimental activity". A key feature of China's policy-making process is the decentralised policy experimentation mechanism, which builds connections between the central and local governments and ensures that local policies can fit local conditions but are also consistent with the central government's policy directions (Heilmann and Melton, 2013). Policy experimentation means "innovating through implementation first, and drafting universal laws and regulations later", which is an intentional and coordinated activity that aims at "producing novel policy options that are injected into official policymaking and then replicated on a larger scale, or even formally incorporated into national law" (Heilmann, 2008: 4-5).

Although the CPC and the government system it leads are undoubtfully the core policymakers in China, the CPC's political agenda of making innovations to social governance has created more opportunities for SWOs and other non-state actors to participate in the policy-making process. Also, we should bear in mind that the characteristics of China's policymaking, including the leadership of the CPC and the

policy experimentation mechanism, inevitably affect how SWOs engage in policy practice. This will be shown and further discussed in the research findings chapters.

Previous studies have revealed some salient features of Chinese social organisations' engagement in policy practice. First, social organisations in China generally devote limited time and resources to policy practice. Based on a survey conducted in three provinces, Zhang and Guo (2012) find that social organisations in China spend only 9% of total organisational resources on policy practice. When making policy engagement decisions, social organisations face two threats: how to generate or maintain resources from the external environment and how to reduce the political risk of being suppressed by the government (Li et al., 2017). These concerns affect their intention to participate in policy practice. There are also some factors related to social organisations' policy practice investment: the degree of professionalisation, the percentage of government funding, and peer collaboration have a positive influence, while the percentage of foundation funding has a negative influence on policy practice investment (Li et al., 2017; Z. Zhang and Guo, 2012). However, although SWOs rely heavily on government funding, they are often criticised for focusing on direct service delivery and meeting the needs of the government and thus showing insufficient participation in policy practice (Zhu and Chen, 2014).

Second, the Party-state's policy agendas and its intention to consult social organisations about policymaking play fundamental roles in deciding social organisations' access to the policy process and what policies they can influence. Social organisations' participation in policy practice largely follows a government-guided model, in which the Party-state selectively provides opportunities to participate in policymaking for those social organisations that have rich resources, show high professional capacity, and are willing to align with the Party-state's policy goals (Teets, 2013; Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2018). Although social organisations are given a certain degree of influence over the policy-making process, their participation in policy practice does not lead to democratisation. Instead, the Party-state intends to utilise social organisations'

resources and expertise while maintaining its political control over the social sector (Zhang, 2018), and achieve better governance under "consultative authoritarianism" (Teets, 2013). Francesch-Huidobro and Mai's (2012) study on the climate policy advocacy groups in China reveals that the formation of an advocacy coalition is led primarily by government agencies in a top-down manner, and government recognition and endorsement are crucial for the coalition's legitimacy for participating in policymaking. An exploratory study on Chinese SWOs' policy practice shows that these organisations are often involved in reactive policy practice in which social workers react to local governments' invitation to policy consultation (Cai et al, 2021). In addition, SWOs tend to comply with the Party-state's policy agendas, assist with policy formulation and improvement, and even view setting alternative agendas as detrimental as it could generate the Party-state's distrust of SWOs and make them excluded from channels of policy collaboration (Cai et al, 2021).

Third, to survive the authoritarian political context and avoid possible suppression from the Party-state, social organisations tend to use cooperative and incremental strategies rather than the confrontational and radical ones to influence policymaking. In a preliminary study on Chinese SWOs' participation in policymaking, I find that SWOs tend to play the role of a professional advisory body for the Party-state and suppress their political potential for representing citizens and mobilising them into social actions (Cai et al, 2021). SWOs use a range of cooperative methods to influence policymaking, including participating in policy consultations, participating directly in drafting policy documents, etc. (Cai et al, 2021). Studies on policy practice by other types of social organisations also show that the political and institutional pressures play a significant role in shaping the policy practice activities of social organisations in China, which tend to apply a soft and cooperative approach to influence policymaking (Schröder, 2015; Li et al, 2016). Social organisations' policy practice activities include seeking government approval and funding for their policy practice activities, generating mutual trust and co-learning between social organisations and the government, and participating in policymaking through institutional channels (eg, PCs, CPPCCs and

government-organised policy consultation meetings), building collaborative networks, incrementally scaling up pilot policy projects, and improving organisational capacity (Schröder, 2015; Yang et al, 2015; Wang and Li, 2016; Li et al, 2016; Jing and Hu, 2017).

4.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter provides a literature review of the relationships between the Party-state and SWOs in China by looking into how the Party-state exercises contractual and political control over SWOs, and how social organisations participate in policy practice within China's political and social contexts. The existing literature has provided several important insights that help understand the spaces for SWOs' participation in policymaking.

First, the existing scholarship has indicated that social organisations in China do not operate and carry out their work with complete autonomy and independence from the Party-state. The Party-state has developed two strategies to control and even incorporate social organisations: contractual control and political control. Through social service contracting, the Party-state not only utilises SWOs' resources and professional capacities to provide services for the people in need, but also turns SWOs into its foot soldiers, limits their autonomy, and directs them towards meeting the Party-state's political interests (Leung, 2012; Zhu and Chen, 2013; Zhao et al, 2016; Chan and Lei, 2017; Mok et al, 2020; Mok et al, 2021). In this sense, a social service contract is also a political contract, by signing which SWOs must pledge their compliance with the Party-state. Besides contractual control, the Party-state has also developed two more direct and explicit forms of political control: co-opting social organisation leaders into the political establishment and involving social organisations in Party-building work. These two mechanisms of political control enable the Party-state to incorporate social organisations and their leaders its rank and to appropriate their work to reestablish the

Party's influence in grassroots communities and ultimately strengthen its legitimacy (Kan and Ku, 2020). Given that contractual control and political control have significant impacts on the power relationships between SWOs and the Party-state, they need to be taken into account when making analyses of the spaces in which SWOs participate in policy practice.

Second, although the Party-state has tightened its control over social organisations through social service contracting, co-opting social organisation leaders into the establishment, and urging social organisations to establish Party branches and carry out Party work, these state control mechanisms have also generated opportunities for social organisations to collaborate with the Party-state and participate in policymaking. It is believed that contracting contributes to the forming of a collaborative and mutually supportive SWO-government relationship, in which these two parties can develop trust, exchange information, and design policy programmes to tackle the issues of common concerns (Jing and Hu, 2017; Fang and Walker, 2020). Social organisation leaders that are co-opted into the PCs and CPPCCs can use their political roles to send policy proposals and suggestions to the government (Wang and Li, 2016). As for the social organisations that are involved in Party-building work, they have a certain degree of discretion to design the actual contents of service-centred Party-building projects, and can even advise local authorities to scale up pilot social services under the name of Party-building projects (Kan and Ku, 2020). Therefore, even state control mechanisms can create spaces for social organisations' participation in policymaking. However, it should be kept in mind that policy practice spaces are filled with opportunities and bond with restrictions at the same time, thus attention must also be paid to how these state control mechanisms define the rules and boundaries of the spaces where SWOs participate in policy practice.

Third, political constraints have significant impacts on social organisations' engagement in policy practice. To avoid state suppression and secure political and financial resources that are key to organisational survival and development, social

organisations need to strategically collaborate with the Party-state. The literature shows that social organisations tend to respond to the government's invitations to policy consultation, comply with state agendas, and adopt a cooperative and incremental approach to influence policymaking (Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2018; Cai et al, 2021). Besides, maintaining a close relationship with the government is deemed important for social organisations when participating in policy practice. Therefore, social organisations emphasize seeking government endorsement and approval, generating mutual trust and co-learning with the government, and assisting the government with policy formulation and improvement through a variety of cooperative activities (Schröder, 2015; Yang et al, 2015; Wang and Li, 2016; Li et al, 2016; Jing and Hu, 2017; Cai et al, 2021).

At the same time, there are several gaps in the literature leaving some important questions unaddressed. First, most of the previous studies on policy practice by social organisations in China do not have a particular focus on SWOs (Schröder, 2015; Yang et al, 2015; Wang and Li, 2016; Li et al, 2016). Although SWOs belong to a specific type of social organisations in China, they have some unique features which may differentiate them from other social organisations. These features include employees with a social work education background and social work professional certificate, the main mission to deliver social services, a close contractual relationship with the government, and their role in the Party-state's scheme of strengthening social governance. Studies have revealed that the characteristics of social organisations may lead to different kinds of participation in policy practice (Li et al., 2017; Zhang, 2018; Zhang and Guo, 2012). It is conceivable that SWOs' participation in policy practice may be different from other types of social organisations. However, only my colleagues and I conducted an exploratory study on SWOs' role in policymaking in China, but we were not able to comprehensively analyse the impacts of the SWO-state relationships on policy practice and did not give a full account of why SWOs can develop their influence over policymaking in an authoritarian context (Cai et al, 2021). Generally speaking, social work policy practice in China remains under-researched. Therefore,

this thesis hopes to provide a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of SWOs' engagement in policy practice in China's political and social context.

Second, although there are plenty of studies showing how the Party-state exercises contractual and political control over SWOs (eg. Chan and Lei, 2017; Mok et al, 2020; Mok et al, 2021; Kan and Ku, 2020), most of them do not discuss the impacts of these control mechanisms on SWOs' roles in the policy-making process. Thus, this study aims to adopt the concept of "space" to analyse how the interaction between the Party-state and SWOs creates opportunities for policy practice on the one hand, and define what is sayable and doable within such spaces on the other.

Last but not least, the existing literature does not explain why and how SWOs can develop their influence over policymaking in an authoritarian regime featuring the exclusive political power of the ruling party. As Cornwall's (2002) work reminds us, participatory spaces are filled with power dynamics, in which different actors attempt to exercise their power to influence public decision making. Do SWOs possess a certain degree of power or influence over policymaking? If so, where does their policy influence come from? This study tries to answer these questions by looking into the power relation between SWOs and the Party-state in the spaces for policy practice.

Chapter 5 Research methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the methodology and research design of the study. As social work policy practice in China has not drawn a lot of attention from both academics and practitioners, this study adopts the qualitative approach to explore how SWOs participate in policy practice in the Chinese context, and in what kind of participatory spaces they interact with the government to influence policymaking. To achieve the aim of this study, grounded theory is selected as the main research methodology, as it enables researchers to systematically gather and analyse data and develop concepts and theories to understand the research topics that have not been widely studied.

This chapter begins with the articulation of the aim and objectives of this study. Then, it provides an introduction to grounded theory, which includes a review of different versions of grounded theory analytic procedures and methods. Third, this chapter discusses the reasons for choosing grounded theory as the research methodology and how I used grounded theory in this study. After that, I demonstrate the overall research design and the research process, including sampling, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, this chapter discusses key ethical issues involved in the research, reports the measures taken to protect research participants' rights, and reflects on the challenges that I faced during the research journey.

5.2 Research aim and research questions

Although policy practice is an important element of social work practice, the role of Chinese SWOs in the policy-making process has not been widely studied. Therefore, this thesis is rather exploratory, aiming to develop a grounded theory or a conceptual

framework to gain an in-depth understanding of social work policy practice in the Chinese context. I entered the research field with only some initial questions in mind, which were rather broad and general: how do SWOs engage in policy practice? What affects the way they try to influence policymaking? What results from their policy practice? Since using grounded theory metholodogy entails "responding to emergent questions, new insights, and further information" (Charmaz, 2008: 403), as the research progressed, a set of more focused research questions was generated, refined and explored during the data collection and analysis processes:

1) What are Chinese social workers' perceptions of policy practice?
2) Do SWOs participate in policy practice? What are their experiences?
3) In what participatory spaces do Chinese SWOs try to influence policymaking? How are these spaces constructed? What are their main features? How do they shape SWOs' roles in the policy arena?
4) How do SWOs participate in policy practice? What methods do they use?
5) What are the results and impacts of SWOs' policy practice?
6) Where does SWOs' influence over policymaking come from?
7) What challenges do SWOs face when participating in policy practice?
8) What are the impacts of participatory spaces on SWOs' policy practice and their professional role?
9) What can China's social work professionals do to improve their participation in policy practice?

5.3 Grounded theory

As an important approach to doing qualitative research, grounded theory is adopted as the main methodology in this study. Grounded theory was first articulated by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. In their impactful monograph *The Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*, Glaser and Strauss (1967: 2) explicated the

strategies for “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained and analysed from social research”. In other words, grounded theory means a theory that is “derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 12). At the time when Glaser and Strauss (1967) put forward the grounded theory methodology, the mainstream sociological research focused on testing existing macro-level theories through empirical research and paid little attention to how new theories could be generated (Flick, 2018). Meanwhile, although ethnographic studies could produce meaningful detailed descriptions of contexts, fields, institutions, and behaviours, they were often criticised for lacking the ability to provide theoretical frameworks that explain why certain events take place and lead to certain consequences (Flick, 2018). In this academic context, Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory as a means to “bridge the gap between the theoretically ‘uninformed’ empirical research and empirically ‘uninformed’ theory” (Goulding, 1998: 51).

The fundamental tenant of grounded theory is to begin with no preconceived theory and then discover or generate one during analysis (Glaser and Holton, 2004). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998: 15), a theory is “a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena”. Creswell (1998: 56) regards a theory as “an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation, in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon”. Grounded theory methodology provides researchers with a set of strategies, procedures, and techniques that help systematically analyse qualitative data, identify concepts and their relations, and finally generate a theory.

However, researchers may use variant procedures and techniques to generate theories that are believed to be grounded in data. Since it came into being, grounded theory has been influenced and modified by varying schools of qualitative research, leading to different versions of grounded theory methodology. Even the two co-originators of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss, showed divergence on how to apply this

influential research approach. In 1990, Strauss and Corbin (1990) published the first edition of *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, which formulated a set of more detailed and well-defined coding procedures in the use of grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This book triggered the fierce rebuke by Glaser (1992) who published the *Basics of grounded theory analysis* to highlight the differences between the original version of grounded theory and the version developed by Strauss and Corbin. Glaser (1992) insisted that only he and Strauss's original collaborative work represents the real grounded theory, and claimed that "*Basics of qualitative research* cannot produce a grounded theory; it produces a forced, preconceived, full conceptual description, which is fine, but not grounded theory" (p.3). In response to this critique, Strauss, together with Corbin, stated that "no inventor has permanent possession of the invention…a child once launched is very much subject to the combination of its origins and the evolving contingencies of life. Can it be otherwise for a methodology" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 283). After that, Strauss and Corbin continued to develop their approach and published the second and third editions of *Basics of qualitative research* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In addition to Glaser's and Strauss's respective development of grounded theory, Charmaz (2008; 2014) remodelled grounded theory from a constructivist perspective. Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory is viewed as an attempt to go beyond the division between Glaser and Strauss and refocus grounded theory researchers' attention on the coding and conceptualisation of data, rather than the debate on whose version is correct (Flick, 2018). The following sections will take a closer look at the different versions of grounded theory. After that, I will explain how I used grounded theory in this study.

5.3.1 The original version of grounded theory

In their earliest elaboration of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed the use of the constant comparative method to analyse qualitative data and generate theories. The constant comparative method enables researchers to generate theories

systematically by using explicit coding and analytic procedures (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 102). More specifically, the constant comparative method is comprised of four stages (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 105-115):

(1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category. In the first stage, "the analyst starts by coding each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible, as categories emerge or as data emerge that fit an existing category" (p.105). The analyst needs to compare incidents with "the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category", so that they can start to "generate theoretical properties of the category" and think "in terms of the full range of types or continua of the category, its dimensions, the conditions under which it is pronounced or minimised, its major consequences, its relation to other categories, and its other properties" (p.106). After coding a category for several times, the analyst needs to stop coding and record a memo on their ideas to "to tap the initial freshness of the analyst's theoretical notions" (p.107).

(2) Integrating categories and their properties. As the coding continues, "the constant comparative units change from comparison of incident with incident to comparison of incident with properties of the category that resulted from initial comparisons of incidents" (p.108). During this process, "the category becomes integrated with other categories of analysis" so that a theory can start to develop, "as different categories and their properties tend to become integrated through constant comparisons that force the analyst to make some related theoretical sense of each comparison" (p.109).

(3) Delimiting the theory. As a theory develops and solidifies, "major modifications become fewer and fewer" and they are "mainly on the order of clarifying the logic, taking out nonrelevant properties, integrating elaborating details of properties into the major outline of interrelated categories and, most important, reduction" (p.110). Reduction means that the analyst can "discover underlying uniformities in the

original set of categories or their properties, and can then formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher-level concepts" (p.110). By cutting down "the original list of categories for collecting and coding data", the analyst's "consideration, coding, and analysing of incidents can become more select and focused" (p.111).

(4) Writing the theory. In the final stage, the analyst draws on the coded data and memos to determine the major themes of the emerging theory. Theory writing starts with collating the memos on each category (p.113). And "when the researcher is convinced that his analytic framework forms a systematic substantive theory, that it is a reasonably accurate statement of the matters studied, and that it is couched in a form that others going into the same field could use, then he can publish his results with confidence" (p.113).

The main purpose of the constant comparative method is to help researchers discover or generate concepts from qualitative data, examine the relations amongst them, and develop a theory that accounts for the phenomenon studied. Besides the constant comparative method, Glaser and Strauss (1967) also put forward some essential principles of developing a grounded theory, including doing theoretical sampling and achieving theoretical saturation.

Theoretical sampling refers to "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, to develop his theory as it emerges" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 45). There are several basic questions in theoretical sampling: "What groups or subgroups does one turn to next in data collection? And for what theoretical purpose? In short, how does the sociologist select multiple comparison groups?" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 47). By selecting comparison groups according to theoretical criteria, researchers can collect sufficient data to saturate the theory that is being developed.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967: 61), “the criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category’s theoretical saturation”. Saturation means that “no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61). As researchers analyse and code similar incidents over and over again, they become “empirically confident that a category is saturated”, and they turn to “look for groups that stretch diversity of data as far as possible, just to make certain that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61).

The joint work by Glaser and Strauss (1967) has built the foundation of grounded theory by explicating the essential principles and procedures of doing grounded theory research. However, data analysis was described very loosely in their original book, which did not provide detailed instructions on how to do coding on data. This led to their respective efforts to further develop and elaborate the data analysis process of grounded theory.

5.3.2 Glaser’s development of grounded theory

To address the limitations of the original version of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), Glaser (1978) proposed a more detailed procedure for data coding and recommended the coding families as a tool for theoretical coding. According to Glaser and Holton (2004: 11), a code is a conceptualisation of “the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators within the data”, and it “gives the researcher a condensed, abstract view with scope of the data that includes otherwise seemingly disparate phenomena”. And coding is the process that “gets the analyst off the empirical level by fracturing the data, then conceptually grouping it into codes that then become the theory that explains what is happening in the data” (Glaser and Holton, 2004: 11).

The coding process proposed by Glaser (1978) involves two stages: substantive coding

and theoretical coding. At the stage of substantive coding, the analyst starts line-by-line analyses of the data by asking a set of questions: “What is this data a study of?” “What category does this incident indicate?” “What is actually happening in the data?” (Glaser, 1978: 57). Then, the analyst can generate substantive codes to capture concepts/categories and their properties and write memos to record their ideas. While “substantive codes conceptualise the empirical substance of the area of research”, “theoretical codes conceptualise how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory” (Glaser and Holton, 2004: 12-13). Theoretical coding refers to “the identification and use of appropriate theoretical codes to achieve an integrated theoretical framework for the overall grounded theory” (Holton, 2007: 283). As a guide for researchers, Glaser (1978: 72–82) developed the coding families which provide a list of theoretical codes that can be a source of inspiration for researchers looking for the relations between categories. Table 5.1 presents some examples of Glaser’s (1978) coding families.

Table 5.1 Examples of the coding families

Coding families	**Concepts**
The six Cs	Causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions.
Process	Stages, staging, phases, phasing, transitions, passages, careers, chains, sequences, etc.
Degree	limit, range, intensity, extent, amount, polarity, extreme, boundary, rank, etc.
Dimension	Dimensions, elements, divisions, properties, facets, sectors, portions, parts, etc.
Type	Types, forms, kinds, styles, classes, genres, etc.
Strategy	Strategies, tactics, mechanisms, management ways, techniques, arrangements, etc.
Interaction	Interaction, mutual effects, reciprocity, mutual trajectory, mutual dependency, interdependence, etc.

Source: Glaser, 1978: 73-82

The main purpose of the coding families is to help researchers identify or develop a core category (Flick, 2018), which can "account for most of the variation around the concern or problem that is the focus of the study" (Glaser and Holton, 2004: 14). Based on the core category, the analyst can integrate other categories and develop a theory. According to Glaser and Holton (2004: 15), the criteria for choosing a core category include:

(1) It is central, relating to as many other categories and their properties as possible and accounting for a large portion of the variation in a pattern of behaviour.
(2) It reoccurs frequently in the data and comes to be seen as a stable pattern that is more and more related to other variables.
(3) It relates meaningfully and easily with other categories.
(4) It has clear and grabbing implications for formal theory.
(5) It is completely variable and has conceptual carry through in the emerging theory, enabling the analyst to get through the analyses of the processes that he/she is working on by its relevance and explanatory power. (Glaser and Holton, 2004: 15)

Glaser's (1978) work has made remarkable improvements to the original version of grounded theory by giving more instructions on data coding and analysis. However, Strauss did not adopt some of Glaser's important methods such as theoretical coding and the coding families. Instead, he worked with Corbin to develop a different approach to doing grounded theory research.

5.3.3 Strauss and Corbin's development of grounded theory

Strauss and Corbin (1990 and 1998) developed a procedure for data coding and analysis in grounded theory research. The procedure consists of three interrelated stages: open

coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 101). Strauss and Corbin (1998) termed the abstract concepts that stand for phenomena "categories", and categories constitute the building blocks of theory. At the stage of open coding, "data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences", so that "events, happenings, objects, and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning" can be grouped under certain categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 102).

Following open coding during which a series of categories are generated, axial coding is conducted to relate categories to their subcategories to form "more precise and complete explanations about phenomena" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 124). This stage is termed "axial" because "coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 123). It is noteworthy that although axial coding "differs in purpose from open coding" and requires that "the analyst have some categories", axial coding and open coding are "not necessarily sequential analytic steps" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 124). In other words, generating categories and developing relations among them can proceed together. Besides, to help researchers discover the way that categories relate to each other, Strauss and Corbin (1998: 130-135) developed the coding paradigm. It consists of six components: phenomenon, casual conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences. The paradigm is believed to help explain the phenomena being studied: why and how people act and respond in certain ways. In Strauss and Corbin's (1990) initial version, they perceive the coding paradigm as an obligatory element of a grounded theory that could ensure density and precision (Vollstedt and Rezat, 2019). However, in the second edition of *Basics of qualitative research* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), they stated that although the paradigm is helpful, it is "just one device that analysts can use to think about such relationships amongst categories" and "never should be used in rigid ways; otherwise, it becomes the end

rather than the means" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 142).

The last stage of the coding procedure is selective coding. It refers to "the process of integrating and refining the theory" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 143). The analyst develops a central explanatory concept, organises major categories around it through explanatory statements of relationships, and trims off excess and fills in poorly developed categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Several techniques can be used to facilitate the integration process, including telling or writing the storyline, using diagrams, and sorting and reviewing memos (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). An important rule for theory building is that each major category becomes saturated. This means: (1) "no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category", (2) "the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation", and (3) "the relationships among categories are well established and validated" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 212). However, as Strauss and Corbin (1998: 136) admitted, theoretical saturation is "a matter of degree" as there is always a potential for new data to emerge, and saturation is about "reaching the point in the research where collecting additional data seems counterproductive; the 'new' that is uncovered does not add that much more to the explanation at this time". They also admitted that the researcher may stop collecting and analysing data simply because they "run out of time, money or both" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 136).

However, Strauss and Corbin's (1990; 1998) approach to doing grounded theory analysis drew harsh critiques from Glaser (1992), who claimed that the use of axial coding and the coding paradigms would make researchers force categories on the data instead of allowing the categories to emerge directly from data, and lead to "a forced, preconceived, full conceptual description" (p.3). In response, Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that the coding procedure and techniques should be applied flexibly rather than in a rigidly doctrinal way.

5.3.4 Comparisons between Glaser's and Strauss's approach

The differences between Glaser's and Strauss's approaches can be found at the methodological level as well as in the data analysis procedure and methods. Ralph et al (2015) regarded the divergence of grounded theory as "the methodological dynamism", and viewed Glaser, as well as Strauss in 1967, as "critical realists operating in a postpositivist paradigm, who emphasize objectivity, inductive logic, and the emergence of data, thus focusing on the constant comparative method in order to produce grounded theory" (p.2). As for Strauss and Corbin, they believe that the world is a symbolic representation that is created and recreated through interaction (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.7). They are "pragmatic interactionists with a constructivist intent, leading them to emphasise axial coding and coding paradigms for the purpose of explicating the nature of relationships within the data" (Ralph et al, 2015: 2).

In a more practical sense, according to Kelle (2007), both Glaser and Strauss attempted to further develop methods and techniques to enhance theoretical sensitivity — the ability to generate concepts from data and discover how they relate to each other (Glaser, 1978) — and reconcile the conflicting implication of grounded theory: whether researchers can use their knowledge to identify concepts and categories but avoid preconceptions at the same time. As Kelle (2007) observes:

> The controversy between Glaser and Strauss boils down to the question of whether the researcher uses a well-defined "coding paradigm" and always looks systematically for "causal conditions", "phenomena", "context", "intervening conditions", "action strategies" and "consequences" in the data, or whether he or she should employ theoretical codes *ad hoc*, thereby drawing on a huge fund of "coding families". (Kelle, 2007: 153)

Howard-Payne (2016) identifies six contentions between Glaser's and Strauss's grounded theory methodology, as summarised in Table 5.2:

Table 5.2 Differences between Glaser's and Strauss's grounded theory methodology

	Glaser's approach	**Strauss's approach**
Ontological and epistemological positions	Critical realism: reality can be seised to develop a grounded theory that truly resides in the data.	Pragmatic relativism: "fact" is restricted to the established consensus of a particular period, a consensus that is founded on multiple outlooks regarding a certain phenomenon.
Role of the researcher	Researchers should embody the role of an objectively detached observer.	Researchers should be personally engaged with the research in an attempt to better describe and understand the world as the participants perceive it to be.
The use of literature	The literature review should only be conducted post data analysis to avoid the pre-conceptualisation of the research.	Researchers' histories, experiences, and existing theoretical knowledge colour the way in which they understand and interpret the data.
The formulation of research questions	Researchers should enter the research field without any pre-set research questions.	Researchers can initiate the research enquiry with some predetermined research questions in mind, which arise from a partial perusal of the existing literature.
Data coding and analysis	Researchers should use the constant comparative method to reveal substantive and theoretical categories.	Researchers should follow the data analysis procedure comprising of open coding, axial coding and theoretical coding.
Theory verification	Verification of the emerging grounded theory should be performed via subsequent quantitative analyses that encapsulate the "truth".	It is only through constant comparison and the capturing of multiple perspectives (located within a specific historical period and culture) that the theory can be verified.

Source: summarised from Howard-Payne, 2016.

Despite the differences and debate between Glaser and Strauss regarding how grounded theory is used to systematically analyse qualitative data, they have established some essential elements of grounded theory, such as open coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, theoretical integration, etc. Based on Glaser's and Strauss's fundamental work, researchers continue to develop grounded theory methodology and try to redraw people's focus on how grounded theory can be applied to modern research rather than the academic battlefield (Flick, 2018: 70). Among them, Charmaz (2008; 2014) has made a great contribution by remodelling grounded theory with constructivism.

5.3.5 Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory

Charmaz's (2008) development of constructivist grounded theory starts from the critical reflection on objectivist grounded theory (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998), which holds the belief that there is a truth that can be discovered by researchers systematically analysing data without any preconception. Objectivist grounded theorists "seek explanation and prediction at a general level, separated and abstracted from the specific research site and process" and emphasise "generality, not relativity, and objectivity, not reflexivity" (Charmaz, 2008: 399). From Charmaz's (2008) constructivist view, "objectivity is a questionable goal, and what researchers define as objective still reflects partial knowledge and particular perspectives, priorities, and positions", and "subjectivities are embedded in data analysis, as well as in data collection" (p.402). In response, the constructivist approach takes into account the value positions of researchers and research participants and emphasises reflexivity (Flick, 2018).

The constructivist grounded theory recognises the existence of value positions, prior knowledge, and even theoretical preconceptions, but advocates that these should be subject to rigorous scrutiny (Charmaz, 2008). Also, rather than assuming that theory can neutrally emerge from data, the constructivist grounded theory assumes that

researchers and research participants construct categories of the data, and the aim is to develop "an interpretive understanding of the studied phenomenon that accounts for context" (Charmaz, 2008: 402). Based on these beliefs, Charmaz (2008) proposes a set of principles for doing grounded theory analysis under constructivism:

(1) Treat the research process itself as a social construction.
(2) Scrutinise research decisions and directions.
(3) Improvise methodological and analytic strategies throughout the research process.
(4) Collect sufficient data to discern and document how research participants construct their lives and worlds. (p. 403)

Following the principles, Charmaz develops a coding procedure consisting of three phases: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding is also known as open coding, during which researchers read and analyse the data "word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, or incident by incident", and "compare data with data; stay close to and remain open to exploring what they interpret is happening in the data; construct and keep their codes short, simple, precise and active; and move quickly but carefully through the data" (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014: 156). Meanwhile, researchers use the constant comparative method to generate, sort and cluster initial codes. This may result in "revising codes as well as constructions of new, more elaborated codes by merging or combining identical or similar initial codes" (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014: 158).

During the phase of focused coding, the researcher identifies the codes that "appear more frequently" or "have more significance than other codes", and uses these codes to "sift, sort, synthesise, and analyse large amounts of data" (Charmaz, 2014: 250-251). These codes are termed "focused codes" as they "make the most analytic sense to categorise the data incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2014: 251), and can be raised

to “tentative conceptual categories” that best capture what the researcher sees in the data (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014: 159). The focused codes are more directed, selective and conceptual than the initial codes (Charmaz, 2014). To generate and refine focused codes, the researcher needs to make constant comparisons: “(1) comparing and grouping codes, and comparing codes with emerging categories; (2) comparing different incidents (e.g. social situations, actions, social processes, or interaction patterns); (3) comparing data from the same or similar phenomenon, action or process in different situations and contexts; (4) comparing different people (their beliefs, situations, actions, accounts or experiences); (5) comparing data from the same individuals at different points in time; (6) comparing specific data with the criteria for the category; and (7) comparing categories in the analysis with other categories” (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014: 159).

The final phase of Charmaz’s coding procedure is theoretical coding. Similar to Glaser (1978), Thornberg and Charmaz (2014: 159) see theoretical coding as the process of analysing “how categories and codes constructed from data might relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory”. Researchers need to “inspect, choose, and use theoretical codes as analytical tools to organise and conceptualise their own codes and categories with each other to develop a coherent grounded theory” (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014: 159). However, different from Glaser (1978) who advocates that researchers should maintain a distance from existing concepts and theories, Thornberg and Charmaz (2014: 159) state that “theoretical codes consist of ideas and perspectives that researchers import to the research process as analytic tools and lenses from outside, from a range of theories”.

Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory holds the notion that researchers are inevitably influenced by their value positions and prior knowledge, but they can develop a more appropriate theory or account for the phenomenon studied through constantly comparing theoretical codes with data, moving between induction and abduction, and modifying the emerging theory (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Also,

Charmaz's development of grounded theory encourages pragmatism, flexibility and innovation (Charmaz, 2008; Flick, 2018). As Charmaz (2008: 398) critiques, grounded theory guidelines provide "sufficient direction such that some researchers have treated the method as a recipe for stamping out qualitative studies", and these researchers often emphasise "a narrow and rigid application", which "limits the potential of grounded theory and fosters the production of superficial studies". In fact, grounded theory researchers always advocate a flexible use of grounded theory procedures, methods and techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser and Holton, 2004; Charmaz, 2014). The following section reports why and how I use grounded theory in this study.

5.3.6 The reasons for using grounded theory in the study

This study employs grounded theory as the research methodology for several reasons. First, grounded theory enables researchers to explore the substantive areas that have not been widely studied or theorised about, obtain the intricate details about phenomena (eg. thought processes, actions, and meanings that people assign to their experiences, etc.), and develop new insights and perspectives that help explain the phenomena being studied (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Flick, 2018). This advantage of grounded theory fits my study well as it aims to explore how SWOs in China perceive and engage in policy practice, which is not well known to the academia and not well explained by existing theories or theoretical concepts.

Besides, grounded theory offers very useful guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data. As summarised by Charmaz (2004), grounded theory has considerable significance because it (1) "provides explicit, sequential guidelines for conducting qualitative research", (2) "offers specific strategies for handling the analytic phases of inquiry", (3) "streamlines and integrates data collection and analysis", (4) "advances conceptual analysis of qualitative data", and (5) "legitimises qualitative research as scientific inquiry" (p.440).

Although grounded theory provides detailed instructions on data analysis, it encourages flexibility, openness, and creative thinking. Grounded theory perceives qualitative analysis as the interplay between researchers and data, as it ensures a certain degree of rigour by grounding analysis in data, and at the same time allows researchers to creatively work with data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998: 13), by applying grounded theory, researchers can "aptly name categories, ask stimulating questions, make comparisons, and extract an innovative, integrated, realistic scheme from masses of unorganised raw data". Given the merits mentioned above, grounded theory is chosen as the methodology of this study.

5.3.7 My epistemological stance and the use of grounded theory in the study

Regarding how grounded theory is used in the research and which version of grounded theory is applied, the study views social work policy practice as a social construction and embraces the principles of pragmatism and flexibility to explore SWOs' participation in policy practice. When using grounded theory, I take the social constructivist epistemological stance advocated by Charmaz (2008), who makes the following assumptions about the research process:

> (1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. (Charmaz, 2008: 402)

Social work policy practice is constructed in the localised social and political contexts by various actors involved through their interactions (eg. social workers, policy-makers, service users, other stakeholders, etc.). The spaces for policy practice are shaped by the

power relations amongst these actors, leading to various types of participation of social workers in different countries and regions. The research process through which I investigate policy practice in China also emerges from the interaction between the researcher and researched, who co-construct the data. Research participants bring in their personalities, value positions, life experience, and even agendas during data collection. Also, what research participants are willing to tell and what data can be collected are affected by the relationships and interactions between the researchers and researched in a certain social and political environment. Therefore, the researcher should constantly scrutinise and reflect on the fieldwork experiences, and try to engage research participants in meaningful and productive conversations to generate sufficient data to discern and present how SWOs perceive and construct policy practice in the Chinese context.

Besides, although grounded theory research mainly involves the application of inductive reasoning and does not begin with pre-set theoretical assumptions, it is unrealistic to hold the belief that the researcher can completely avoid the influence of their value positions, work experience, and prior knowledge on data analysis. As a Chinese social work researcher, although the research topic is new to me, my experience of working with SWOs and local governments in previous field practice and research projects inevitably colours the way I understand and interpret the research data. What is important is that with the help of grounded theory methods, I can analyse data, generate concepts, and identify their inter-relations more systematically and efficiently, and so that the research findings can be solidly based on the research data.

Based on the above understanding of social work policy practice and the research process, I selectively and flexibly use the various methods provided by different versions of grounded theory. I do not choose only one specific school of grounded theory and rigidly follow its analysis procedure. As Charmaz (2008: 403) advocates, researchers should “improvise methodological and analytic strategies throughout the research process”. By doing so, grounded theory methods can meet researchers’ actual

needs rather than confine them to a preset recipe. I have used several essential elements of grounded theory methodology in the research process. They include intensive interviewing, open coding, focused coding, selective coding, constant comparisons, memo writing, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, theoretical integration, diagram drawing, etc. The details of how I use grounded theory throughout the research process are reported in the following sections, which cover sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

5.4 Sampling and recruitment of participants

This study selected two cities in China as the research sites and recruited social workers from the SWOs in these cities as the main research participants. Besides, some social work researchers were also invited to participate in the interviews. To ensure anonymity and protect research participants from being identified (which may make trouble for them by drawing the attention of Chinese national security officers), after discussion with my supervisors and some Chinese social work researchers, I decided not to disclose the exact locations and other detailed information of the two cities where this study was conducted. Some of the research participants were members of the local CPPCCs, and some of them talked about their well-known service projects in their city. Explicitly pointing out which cities research participants were from may risk making them identifiable. Nevertheless, I can still provide some background information about the two cities to help readers understand why they are selected as the research sites.

The two research sites (City A and City B) are among the largest and most developed cities in China, each with a population of over ten million and a Gross Domestic Product of over a thousand billion by 2021. The development of social work services and SWOs in these two cities are energised by their rapid economic growth and stimulated by the increasing social problems that result from urbanisation and industrialisation. They are viewed as two of the most advanced cities in developing social work in China, with a

significant amount of public expenditure on contracting out social work services. Each of the two cities has hundreds of locally registered SWOs and more than ten thousand certificated social workers. City A and City B epitomise close government-SWO collaboration as SWOs play a vital role in developing and delivering welfare services. This enables SWOs to develop a deep and ample understanding of social policies and explore participation in policy practice. Therefore, locating the research in these two cities can provide me with rich data on how SWOs interact with local governments to influence policymaking.

Sampling in this study includes two phases: initial sampling and theoretical sampling. At the stage of initial sampling, I purposefully selected participants that could answer the initial research questions. Several SWO leaders from the two research sites were recruited through my networks. They all had experience in social work policy practice and were interested in sharing their stories and opinions on this topic. Because of their higher executive positions in their organisations, SWO leaders had more resources and opportunities to interact with policy-makers and influence policymaking. Also, being SWO leaders and supervisors of front-line social workers, they could report how their colleagues in the same organisation participated in policy practice. Therefore, I started data collection by making initial contact with SWO leaders who had experience in policy practice. I first approached eight SWO leaders whom I had already built connections with in the past. A participant information sheet was sent to them which articulated my personal background, the research topic, interview questions, and participants' rights. Six of them agreed to participate while two turned down my invitation for the reasons that they did not have much experience in policy practice and they also did not have time to participate.

During initial sampling, the snowball sampling technique was used to identify and reach more research participants that could provide useful information. After interviewing each of the SWO leaders, I kindly asked them to recommend other SWO leaders who had experience in policy practice and might contribute to my research. I also asked

them to put me in contact with potential research participants. As SWO leaders were important members of the local social work profession, they had the knowledge about which SWOs had ever made an effort to influence policymaking. Through snowball sampling, I approached 13 SWO leaders and all of them agreed to participate.

Besides initial sampling, I also use theoretical sampling to guide data collection and try to saturate the emerging concepts by gathering data from divergent participant categories. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.143), theoretical sampling is:

> "A method of data collection based on concepts/themes derived from data. The purpose of theoretical sampling is to collect data from places, people, and events that will maximise opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts." (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.143)

Unlike statistical sampling, theoretical sampling cannot be planned before embarking on a study, and the researcher has to let the data analysis guide the data collection (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.146-157). While analysing the data collected from research participants recruited in the initial sampling, the researcher needs to ask questions about concepts and their properties that emerged from the data, and then do more data collection to find the answers to those questions. Theoretical sampling and data collection will continue until the research reaches the point of saturation, that is, the point in the research when all the concepts are well defined and explained (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.145).

During data analysis, I developed an important category of "incorporated spaces", which later became the core category of this study. In incorporated spaces, some SWOs are incorporated into the Party-led social governance system and become an arm of the authority. I found that the research participants that I recruited through initial sampling and snowball sampling could be categorised into the policy actors in incorporated

spaces. This led me to think about the SWOs that do not enter incorporated spaces and remain more independent from the government. Why do these organisations prefer to maintain a distance from the Party-state? How do they participate in policy practice? In what kind of spaces do they participate in policy practice? What are the differences between these spaces and incorporated spaces?

To answer these questions and maximise the opportunities to develop analytic concepts, I decided to conduct theoretical sampling and recruit participants from independent SWOs that did not receive contracts or other forms of funding from the government. I invited one independent SWO leader and a service-oriented NGO leader that I had known for several years to participate. Both of them agreed to participate and they also put me in contact with two more independent SWO leaders through snowball sampling. However, one of the later approached independent SWO leaders politely turned down my invitation, saying that she was occupied by a heavy workload. In addition, I also invited four social work researchers based in Hong Kong for interviews. They were both outsiders and insiders of the development of social work in mainland China, as they all had experience working with SWOs in the mainland to conduct research or establish social services but enjoyed more freedom to talk about the state-SWO relationships. Their role as Hong Kong researchers could provide a different but meaningful perspective that helps understand social work policy practice in mainland China. Theoretical sampling led me to think about variations and enabled me to recruit new research participants from different groups that could enrich the data. By comparing the different stories collected through initial sampling and theoretical sampling, I further developed the core research concept of “incorporated spaces” and discussed their unique characteristics.

It is noteworthy that a snowball sampling technique was used in both initial sampling and theoretical sampling. With the help of previously recruited participants, I was able to purposefully contact new participants, who usually shared similar characteristics or belonged to the same category. During initial sampling, the leaders of incorporated

SWOs put me in contact with more incorporated SWO leaders. At the stage of theoretical sampling, leaders of independent social organisations introduced me to more participants of their kind.

A total of 26 research participants were recruited for this study. The sample includes three types of participants: 19 participants were from incorporated SWOs that had a close collaborative relationship with the government, three were from independent SWOs/NGOs that provided social services without governmental funding, and four were social work researchers who were based in Hong Kong but had rich experience working with SWOs in mainland China.

Six participants were male and 20 were female. The average age of research participants was 37 years, and the average length of work experience was 14 years. Seven participants had a bachelor's degree in social work, 12 had a master's degree in social work, and four had a PhD in social policy or public administration. Only three participants did not have a social work education background. All except one of them obtained the national qualification of social worker, and the one without social work qualification was the director of an independent social service-oriented NGO. All of the 22 participants from SWOs/NGOs held leadership roles (eg. general director, executive director, etc.) or management roles (eg. section chiefs, service managers, etc.) in their organisations.

The demographics of research participants were presented in Table 5.3. To ensure anonymity, a common Chinese surname was randomly given to each research participant as their pseudonym.

Table 5.3 Demographics of research participants

Num.	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Position	Certificate	Education	Length of work experience	Location
Participants category 1: Incorporated SWO leaders (19)								
1	Wang	Female	30-34	Deputy director	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
2	Li	Female	30-34	Deputy director	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
3	Zhang	Male	30-34	Executive director	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
4	Liu	Male	35-39	General director	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
5	Chen	Female	30-34	Senior supervisor	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
6	Yang	Female	30-34	Deputy director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
7	Huang	Female	30-34	General director	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
8	Zhao	Female	35-39	General director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
9	Wu	Female	30-34	Deputy director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
10	Zhou	Female	30-34	Section chief	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
11	Gong	Female	35-39	Section chief	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City A
12	Sun	Female	35-39	Section chief	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City B

13	Ma	Female	35-39	Executive director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City B
14	Zhu	Female	35-39	General director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City B
15	Hu	Male	35-39	General director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City B
16	Guo	Female	25-29	Service manager	Social Worker	Non-social work education	5-9 years	City B
17	He	Female	30-34	Executive director	Social Worker	MA. Social work	10-14 years	City B
18	Luo	Female	30-34	Section chief	Social Worker	BA. Social work	10-14 years	City B
19	Gao	Male	30-34	Section chief	Social Worker	MA. Social work	5-9 years	City B
Participants category 2: Independent SWO/NGO leaders (3)								
20	Liang	Male	35-39	General director	/	Non-social work education	10-14 years	City B
21	Song	Female	25-29	General director	Junior Social Worker	MA. Social work	1-5 years	City B
22	Xu	Female	35-39	General director	Social Worker	Non-social work education	5-9 years	City A

Participants category 3: Social work researchers based in Hong Kong (4)								
23	Lin	Female	>50	Researcher	/	PhD. Social welfare	>40 years	Hong Kong
24	Zheng	Female	30-34	Researcher	/	PhD. Public Administration	5-9 years	Hong Kong
25	Xie	Female	35-39	Researcher	/	PhD. Social policy	5-9 years	Hong Kong
26	Tang	Male	>50	Researcher	/	PhD. Social policy	>40 years	Hong Kong

5.5 Data collection

Intensive interviews were conducted to collect data regarding research participants' understanding and experience of social work policy practice in China. Charmaz (2014) proposed intensive interviewing as a way of generating rich data for grounded theory research. According to Charmaz (2014: 56), intensive interviewing refers to "a gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perspective on their personal experience with the research topic". It has the following key characteristics:

> (1) Selection of research participants who have first-hand experience that fits the research topic. (2) In-depth exploration of participants' experiences and situations. (3) Reliance on open-ended questions. (4) Objective of obtaining detailed responses. (5) Emphasis on understanding the research participant's perspective, meanings, and experience. (6) Practice of following up on unanticipated areas of inquiry, hints, and implicit views and accounts of actions. (Charmaz, 2014: 56)

Charmaz (2014: 81) developed a set of detailed instructions on how to conduct intensive interviews in grounded theory research (see table 5.4). Throughout the interviews, I followed the instructions to facilitate productive conversations. They enabled me to gather rich data for analysis.

Table 5.4 Instructions on how to do intensive interviews

DO
(1) Listen, listen, and listen some more.
(2) Try to understand the described events, beliefs, and feelings from your research participant's point of view, not your own.
(3) Aim to be empathetic and supportive.
(4) Build trust.

(5) Encourage your research participant to state things in his or her own terms.
(6) Let the participant explore a question before you ask more specific probes.
(7) Ask the participant to elaborate, clarify, or give examples of his or her views.
(8) Be sensitive to the participant's non-verbal response to you and your questions.
(9) Revise a question that does not work.
(10) Be willing to take time for unanticipated issues that might come up.
(11) Leave the participant feeling positive about the interview experience and about self.
(12) Express your appreciation for the opportunity to talk with (and, perhaps, get to know) him or her.
DON'T
(1) Interrupt.
(2) Correct the research participant about his or her views, experiences, or feelings.
(3) Interrogate or confront.
(4) Rely on "do you" and "did you" probes. (These questions elicit "yes" or "no" responses, rather than information and reflections.)
(5) Ask "why" questions. ("Why" questions are generally taken as hostile challenges in numerous cultures. Instead, phrase questions in these ways: "Tell me about …," "Could you tell me more about…," "How did …," "What was …?")
(6) Ask loaded questions. (Try to frame questions, even follow-up questions, in neutral terms.)
(7) Expect your research participants to answer questions that you would be unwilling to answer.
(8) Take an authoritarian stance in the interview. (It is a privilege to share someone's private views and personal experience – establish equality, not authority.)
(9) Ignore or gloss over what the participant wishes to talk about. Be willing to take more time with him or her, if need be.
(10) Forget to follow up and thus overlook clarifying points and/or asking for further thoughts and information.
(11) Truncate the interview to get it over "on time".
(12) Leave when the participant seems distressed.

Source: Charmaz, 2014: 81

The interviews enquired about participants' understanding and experience of policy practice. Although several questions were designed prior to the interviews, I was open to exploring questions and topics that are not on the question list, and I also improvised follow-up questions to gather further thoughts and information. To avoid imposing presumptions on interviews, I asked relatively broad and neutral questions with an open agenda. The interview questions included but were not confined to:

(1) Could you tell me about your career in social work? When did you start working in the social work service field? What other jobs have you done?
(2) Could you tell me about this organisation? What does it do? How is it funded?
(3) Could you tell me about your role in this organisation? What do you do on a daily basis?
(4) Do you have any experience in policy practice? Please give some examples. What did you do? What strategies did you employ to influence policies? How well did that work? What could influence the results of policy practice?
(5) How do you understand policy practice?
(6) What is the relationship between SWOs and the government in the field of policy practice?
(7) What is SWOs' role in the policy-making process?
(8) What are your concerns when participating in policy practice?
(9) What are the challenges of participating in policy practice in China?
(10) What do you think are the characteristics of social work policy practice in China?

I began the interviews with a brief introduction to my study and myself. Then, I invited participants to talk about their stories and opinions relating to policy practice. As Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.27-28) suggested, I used open-ended questions such as "Could you please tell me about your career in social work?", "Do you have any experience in policy practice? Please give some examples. What did you do? How well did it work?". Also, I encouraged them to share their experiences and express their opinions freely by

using a statement such as “After you have completed your storytelling, then if I have further questions or something is not clear I will ask you. But for now, just talk freely”. These questions could provide me with a means of generating a new and emic perspective, one that is rooted in the participant’s perspective (Elliott and Higgins, 2012). I took notes of participants’ key points during the interviews so that I could raise further questions or ask participants to talk more about certain instances or topics. Some research participants were interviewed for the second time to collect additional information regarding their participation in policy practice. In addition, with participants’ consent, I asked them to provide documents relating to their policy practice, including policy proposals, policy documents, policy practice reports, and news reports. However, due to confidentiality reasons, only several of them agreed to provide relevant documents, but they helped me better understand their participation in policy practice.

5.6 Data analysis and theory development

With participants’ consent, all the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interview transcriptions were imported into Nvivo 12, a useful piece of software for qualitative analysis, which I used to do data coding and analysis. I started the data analysis process with open coding, during which I read the transcripts line by line, compared data with data, explored and interpreted what was happening in the data, and captured concepts and their properties by generating constructed codes and in vivo codes (codes using the terminology and language used by research participants).

Table 5.5 presents an example of open coding from which I started to notice the relations between spaces for policy practice and SWOs’ political affiliation and their involvement in contracting out social services. I generated codes such as “Political qualification for social service contracts”, “Political qualification for policy practice” and “Death-exemption card” to capture the useful information in the data.

Table 5.5 Example of open coding

Codes	**Excerpt from the interview with *Liang*, male, director of an independent social service-oriented NGO.**
CPC building as a criterion for social organisation grade assessment Political qualification for social service contracts Political qualification for policy practice Contracting out social service contributes to spaces for policy practice Political qualification for social work business Death-exemption card	To obtain a "3A" grade, SWOs have to establish CPC branches within their organisations. Only with a "3A" grade can SWOs be qualified to get social service contracts from the government. It is a step-by-step process. If SWOs want to contribute to policymaking, they have to undertake contracted-out social services, and they have to get a "3A" grade, which requires them to establish CPC branches. So, this is very helpful. If SWOs do not have contracted-out social services, they are not able to talk much to the government, and there would be no space for them to give advice. (Researcher: What do you think about the implications of the Party-building work for SWOs' engagement in contracting out social services?) It is all about business. If you are not qualified, you cannot do that business. Now the rule of the game is that SWOs have to establish CPC branches. However, does the establishment of a CPC branch mean that everyone in the SWO is for the Party? Not sure about that. (Researcher: Do you mean it is more about a symbol for security?) Yes, it is a death-exemption card.

After developing some important initial codes through open coding, I began focused coding. At this stage, I identified and selected the focused codes that appeared more frequently, had more significance than other codes, and related meaningfully to other categories (Glaser and Holton, 2004: 15; Charmaz, 2014: 250-251). These focused codes helped explain how spaces for policy practice were created and why SWOs participate in policy practice in a specific way. Also, because they related meaningfully

to many other codes that were generated through open coding, they could be used to sift, sort, organise and analyse data (Charmaz, 2014). After focused codes (key categories) were identified and selected, I related them to other codes (subcategories) to form "more precise and complete explanations about phenomena" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 124). Here, I did not use the coding paradigm suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) which is criticised for always rigidly looking for causal conditions, phenomena, context, intervening conditions, action strategies and consequences (Kelle, 2007). Instead, I did it in a more flexible way by focusing on what useful information was available in the data and how categories could relate to each other to generate a better understanding of SWOs' policy practice.

Taking the excerpt presented in Table 5.5 as an example, I noticed that the code "political qualification for policy practice" had a lot of significance, as it revealed the political constraints that shaped the spaces for policy practice. Then I discovered that this code related to other codes such as "CPC building within SWOs", "co-option of SWO leaders into the establishment", "death-exemption card", and "let those complying with me thrive and those resisting me die" (an in vivo code from one participant). By examining these codes and their relations, I learned that political qualification meant that SWOs were incorporated into the Party-led political system through Party building and co-option. And the SWOs/NGOs that are deemed politically disqualified would have no space to advise policymakers. Therefore, I developed the focused code of "political incorporation", which indicates a crucial process for creating spaces for SWOs to participate in policy practice.

In a similar manner, at this stage of data analysis, I developed a series of important focused codes that related closely to the main theme of the thesis. They included "contractual incorporation", "role expansion in the policy cycle", "a combination of participation and control", "cooperative and non-confrontational policy practice methods", "performance and expertise", "compliance and subordination", "political recognition and trust", "top-down delegation of power", "consolidation of the Party-

state's legitimacy", etc. These codes and concepts generated through focused coding explained a lot of findings from the fieldwork, and they became the bricks that I used to build the grounded theory to help better understand social work policy practice in China.

After focused coding, I entered the final stage of the coding process: selective coding. At this stage, I developed a central explanatory concept of "incorporated spaces" and organised major categories around it. Through systematic data analysis, I found that the spaces where SWOs engage in policy practice featured strong intervention of the Party-state, which deliberately incorporated SWOs into the social governance system. It dominated and encouraged SWOs to participate in social policymaking while exercising strict control over these organisations at the same time. I selected "incorporated spaces" as the central explanatory concept because it relates to almost all categories and best captures the main characteristics of Chinese SWOs' policy practice. The data analysis around the concept of "incorporated spaces" led me to focus on answering three key research questions: How are incorporated spaces created? How do SWOs participate in policy practice in incorporated spaces? And how do SWOs develop influence over policymaking in incorporated spaces?

To answer these questions, I reexamined the interview transcripts and the codes generated through the previous coding process, related the central concept to other important concepts, and organised the main research findings together. For example, I discovered that incorporated spaces were produced through two mechanisms: political incorporation and contractual incorporation. Political incorporation consists of direct incorporation through co-option and Party building, and political exclusion that leads to diverse forms of suppression of independent social organisations. Besides, in the incorporated spaces, SWO leaders become the main policy actors as they are the targets for the Party-state's co-option strategy. They tend to play the role of the assistants of policymakers and use cooperative and non-confrontational methods to influence policymaking. As such, incorporated spaces feature the superior-subordinate

relationship between the Party-state and SWOs. SWOs' policy influence mainly comes from the top-down delegation of the policy-making power of the Party-state. In exchange, SWOs need to offer their professional expertise and help with the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and their influence in grassroots communities. By selecting a central explanatory category and relating other categories around it, I managed to write a storyline and develop a grounded theory to explain how SWOs participate in policy practice and why they do it in a certain way.

The concept of "incorporated spaces" was well developed and somewhat saturated when no new information was added to the analysis. For example, all the data regarding the creation of incorporated spaces pointed to the two mechanisms of contractual incorporation and political incorporation. However, theoretical saturation is rather "a matter of degree" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 136). Future research may discover more properties of incorporated spaces or propose a new concept to understand policy practice in China.

Besides, during the data analysis process, I used memos and diagrams to facilitate analysis. According to Glaser (1978: 83), memos are "the theorising write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding". Writing memos throughout the research process enables researchers "to investigate their codes and categories as well as possible relationships between them, to gain an analytic distance from data and generated codes, to increase the level of abstraction of their ideas, and to build up and maintain 'a storehouse of analytical ideas that can be sorted, ordered and reordered'" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 120). Diagrams, which refer to the "visual devices that depict the relationships among concepts" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 120), not only enabled me to analyse and figure out how concepts relate to each other, but also helped present the research findings. For example, I developed a diagram to depict the power dynamics of policy practice in incorporated spaces (see figure 8.1).

After the data analysis process, I reviewed the literature on contracting out social

services in China, Party-building work by SWOs, government-SWO relationships, policy practice, and spaces for participation, etc. The literature review is not only a compulsory part of the thesis, it also provides important background information for the readers and helps them understand the context of policy practice in China. Besides, the literature enables me to rethink the theoretical concepts generated in this study and refine the grounded theory that I intend to develop.

5.7 Ethical considerations

The main ethical considerations involved in this study relate to politics. This study was conducted within the authoritarian context in China, which inevitably placed political constraints on the research journey, as policy practice is usually highly politicised. The interviews covered some topics that may be regarded as politically sensitive in China, such as SWOs' relationships and interaction with the Party-state, SWO leaders' opinions and comments on the Party-state, and the Party-state's suppression of independent SWOs/NGOs, etc. In a country where the freedom of speech is subject to state control, people may feel worried about expressing their ideas about politically sensitive topics to researchers, especially those that are based in foreign research institutes. A distressing scenario may be that research participants are identified by national security officers and admonished for their inadequate opinions. In fact, the researcher also faces a similar risk. It is not uncommon for Chinese sociology researchers to be put on some surveillance list and harassed by security officers because of their research on sensitive topics such as social activism, social protest, feminism, etc. Therefore, I need to make responsible and ethical research decisions throughout the research journey. To prevent potential political risks involved in this study and protect the rights of research participants, I have taken the following measures:

(1) Gain informed consent. The consent form covers the aim, objectives, and research methods of this study, how research participants' rights are protected, and how

research findings will be disseminated. Also, the consent form reports my personal background and why I intend to do this study. Research participants had the right to get comprehensive information about this study and the researcher, and only by doing so would they feel secure and be willing to share their ideas and experiences. Besides, participants were informed about their rights to refuse the interview or not to answer specific questions. I started the interviews only after getting the research participants' consent. The examples of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form can be found in Appendix 1.

(2) Discuss any political concerns with research participants. Before the interview, I asked the participant whether they were concerned about any sensitive topics that might be covered in the interview. Participants were encouraged to give their suggestions about how to avoid potential political risks. All the participants that gave consent for this study were willing to share their opinions and experiences frankly, but in a way that they thought was proper and safe.

(3) Explain participants' rights. Participants were informed about their rights in the research, for example, they could withdraw from the interview anytime they wished without giving any reason and without reprisal, and they had the right not to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with. The interviews were based on the ethical principles of equality, mutual respect, and voluntary and democratic participation.

(4) Ensure anonymity. The names of participants and their organisations were replaced by pseudonyms in the thesis to ensure anonymity. Any other identifying features were also removed during the data analysis process. Besides, I decided not to disclose detailed information about the two research sites, which made research participants more unidentifiable.

(5) Ensure the confidentiality of data. All research data and documents (digital form) were saved on my personal computer and a mobile hard disk which were protected with a password. I did not pass the research data to others without the research participants' permission.

(6) Constantly reflect on the research process and the ethical issues involved, and seek

advice from my supervisors and colleagues in China. Throughout the research process, I made meaningful discussions with my supervisors and several Chinese social work researchers and practitioners regarding the ethical issues I faced, such as how to better protect the rights of research participants and myself and how to reduce the political risk involved. I have adopted many of their suggestions and adjusted my fieldwork and revised the thesis accordingly.

This study has gone through the formal ethics and risk assessment process and obtained ethics approval from the Department of Sociology at Durham University.

5.8 Research challenges

There were several challenges and difficulties during the research journey. First of all, it is important to note that this study was conducted within the political constraints in China, which inevitably have an impact on how data can be collected, what can be expressed by research participants, and even how findings can be presented. Participants might choose to talk about their experiences in a way they thought was safe and not share some of their stories that are deemed politically sensitive. Although the missing data could greatly contribute to the study, the security and rights of participants should be prioritised. Also, as a Chinese social work researcher, I am not just an outsider in this study. When I was involved in the conversations with the leaders of both incorporated and independent SWOs and asked questions about their interaction with the government, I could feel the intangible political constraints that might shape the interviews and affect the data for analysis. Here, I would like to share three stories about events during my fieldwork in China.

When I visited the director of an incorporated SWO the office of which is in the same building as a state-own enterprise and its CPC branch, the director suggested that we went out and had the interview in a café in a nearby shopping mall. He told me later

that he did so because he did not want any Party cadre to see him talking to a social work researcher from a British university. A similar concern was expressed by another research participant, who is the leader of an independent service-oriented social organisation. When I met him in a convenience store outside his office building, a mid-age man sat next to us and looked at us from time to time. Then the research participant told me not to worry, he knew the national security officers that were in charge of surveillance and the man next to us was not one of them. The third story relates to a situation when I was asked by a research participant, who worked for a SWO that has a close relationship with the government, about my views on radical policy practice. At that moment, I had mixed feelings. I began doing self-censorship and tried to give an appropriate answer, and at the same time, I was also wondering why she raised this question with me. Was she testing my political stance? Was she thinking about what can be said to me and what cannot? Would my answer affect what she would be willing to talk about? The research journey was filled with concerns and tensions like these coming from both research participants and the researcher.

Second, the political sensitivity and concerns involved in this study have led to a limitation of data sources and a relatively small number of research participants. This study lacks data collected from government officials. I tried to invite two government officials to participate in this study, who had a lot of experience working with SWOs. However, both of them refused to take part for the reason that they were very busy. One of them, after learning that I was doing my PhD in the UK, even asked me about the role of the UK government in the anti-extradition law movement in Hong Kong, which is harshly criticised by the Chinese government. I think that their concern about the effect of participating in a study that was not organised by the government on their career was the unspoken reason for not taking part. I also learned from my experience of working with government officials that their consent to participate in a study would require a formal invitation from the research institute and approval from their departments. Therefore, I stopped trying to recruit other government officials.

In addition, several SWO leaders turned down my invitation for the reason that they had no experience in policy practice or they were occupied by other work. It is highly possible that the political sensitivity of the research topic and my role as a UK-based researcher might have affected the recruitment of research participants. This also raises questions about whether theoretical sampling is always feasible. In this study, I feel that I have the privilege of working with some brave SWO/NGO leaders, especially those from the independent SWOs/NGOs. I am very grateful to all participants as it is not an easy decision for them to take part in this study given the strict political environment they face. After the research fieldwork was finished, one independent SWO leader left her organisation and picked up a new job in the private sector. Another independent SWO leader also had to leave her organisation, which was even closed down later due to force majeure. Without a trusting relationship with these leaders, or if they were not willing to talk with me, it was impossible for me to do theoretical sampling and collect valuable data.

I use grounded theory as the main research methodology, and with the research journey going on, I realised that the thesis is not only grounded in data but also grounded in the political, social and cultural context of China. Research participants' understanding of the political reality, their perception of my role, and our relationships might all affect what story I could hear and what data I could collect. There may be many unspoken issues missing in the data. Research participants might self-censor their narratives, and I might also self-censor my conversations with research participants and even my writing unconsciously and consciously. Frankly speaking, sometimes I felt worried about the potential impact of this study on myself. For example, I am not sure whether my future employer in China would inspect my thesis and perceive anything as incorrect or inappropriate. However, I try my best to stick to the academic training I received and enjoy the academic freedom provided by Durham University to present what I have found in this study.

Also, although I followed the grounded theory research procedures, my cultural

background, personal experiences (including my educational experiences and research experiences in China), knowledge, and values might have influenced the analysis and interpretation of data. However, these personal traits can also be valuable as they promote my research sensitivity and help me contextualise and understand the experiences and opinions of research participants. In addition, I constantly reflected on my personal identity and values and their possible influence on how I interpret the stories of research participants. The formulation of my main arguments also involved a lot of meaningful discussions with my supervisors who gave valuable comments on my thesis. I tried to make sure that the research findings and discussions were supported by data.

Another challenge I faced during the research journey related to language. To maintain authenticity and promote my understanding of the nuances of data, I did coding and analysis on the Chinese transcripts of interviews. When I wrote the thesis, I needed to translate the Chinese quotations into English. Sometimes I found it difficult to translate certain Chinese words, phrases, and metaphors into English adequately and authentically. This might risk losing some important information and meanings and might make it hard for English readers to follow the text. For example, the Chinese phrase "*民主协商 Min Zhu Xie Shang*" is used by the Chinese government to describe an important feature of the social governance system. The phrase can be translated into "democratic consultation" or "democratic negotiation", and it is obvious that these two English phrases have nuanced differences. After checking the Chinese government's translation of "*协商 Xie Shang*", I decided to translate the phrase into "democratic consultation" (eg. the Chinese phrase "*政治协商会议 Zheng Zhi Xie Shang Hui Yi*" is officially translated into "political consultative conference"). Also, what "democratic" means in the Chinese context can be very different from Western readers' perception of democracy. To avoid translation mistakes, I drew on official documents and academic papers to check what translation is more appropriate. I also discussed translation issues with my supervisors one of whom is a Cantonese-Chinese speaker. Besides, when

quoting Chinese words and phrases that English speakers are not familiar with, I tried to provide the context and explanation which might help understand the meanings of those words.

Last but not least, the covid-19 pandemic starting in 2020 interrupted my plan for doing the second round of fieldwork in China. I had to adjust my plan and approach some participants through social media and do some of the interviews online. This affected research participant recruitment and relationship building. Also, being physically isolated in my small studio in Durham for a long period placed challenges on my physical and psychological health as well as my work efficiency. Nevertheless, with the help of my supervisors and friends in Durham and China, I managed to survive the research journey.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter reports the methodology and research design of this study. With the aim of exploring how Chinese SWOs participate in social work policy practice and in what kind of space they play a role in the policy-making process, this study selects grounded theory as the main research methodology, as it has the following advantages: (1) it enables researchers to explore the topics that have not been widely investigated; (2) it provides useful instructions and techniques for data analysis; (3) it helps researchers develop theories or conceptual frameworks that explain the phenomenon researched; (4) it encourages creativity, flexibility, and openness. After reviewing the different versions of grounded theory and the debates among them, I find that they have divergent views on a series of issues including ontological and epistemological positions, coding procedures and techniques, styles of reasoning, the use of literature and prior knowledge of the researcher, etc. Nevertheless, they all intend to make qualitative analysis more systematic, effective, and valid and show similarities in terms of a few elements of grounded theory. For example, they all start with open/initial coding, then

they all try to discover the relations between the categories that emerged, and they all emphasise theoretical sampling to collect ample data and saturate the research findings. As an attempt to redraw researchers' attention to the actual application of grounded theory rather than the debate over which version is correct and which is defective, Charmaz advocates the pragmatic and flexible use of grounded theory and develops the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008; Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2018).

The similarities and divisions among different schools of grounded theory require me to make a careful decision on how to use grounded theory in this study. After comprehensive consideration, I decide not to follow one single version of grounded theory. Instead, I decide to pragmatically and flexibly apply grounded theory in the study, make constant reflexion, and adjust the use of diverse techniques and methods according to the actual needs and difficulties that I face throughout the research process. As a result, I have used several essential elements of grounded theory methodology in the research process. They include intensive interviewing, open coding, focused coding, selective coding, constant comparisons, memo writing, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, theoretical integration, diagram drawing etc. They enable me to systematically analyse the research data and develop the core concept of "incorporated spaces" to understand the spaces for SWOs' policy practice in China.

Two Chinese cities that epitomise close government-SWO collaboration were selected as the research sites where SWOs' engagement in policy practice was investigated. During the research process, I encountered several challenges that affected data collection and analysis. They made me rethink the application and limitation of grounded theory in a place filled with political constraints and tensions. Grounded theory provides very useful guidelines and techniques for data analysis, but there is an important premise for productive analysis: the data should carry sufficient information that can saturate the emerging theory or conceptual framework. This is why grounded theory researchers pay a lot of attention to intensive interviewing and theoretical

sampling. However, in practice, data collection may not be an easy job. During the fieldwork, I could feel that the political and social contexts in China were shaping what was sayable in the interviews and what would be presented in the thesis. There might be many stories and comments not given by research participants due to their concerns about the political risk involved. Also, sampling and recruiting independent SWO/NGO leaders is very challenging in China nowadays. It was my privilege that some of them were willing to talk to me in a way that was appropriate and comfortable for them. Some of the participants might want all their stories to be heard, while some might have some reservations about what to share. This depended on how they perceived this study, what motivated them to participate, and how they assessed the boundary of interviews.

Therefore, grounded theory research is not conducted in a neutral environment, where the researcher as an outsider can just observe and discover what is going on in the real world from a distance trying to avoid the influence of pre-conceptualisation. Instead, both the researcher and the researched bring in their value positions, agendas, life experience, and prior knowledge into the research process, which is also affected by the social, cultural and political contexts. The research findings of the thesis are not only grounded in the data, but also grounded in the interaction between research participants and me, and in the broader Chinese context. This requires the researcher to make responsible and ethical research decisions, constantly reflect on the data collection and analysis process, carefully scrutinise the research findings, and actively engage in discussions with colleagues. In the following chapters, I present the findings from the study and report the conceptualisation of "incorporated spaces" that help understand SWOs' participation in policy practice in China.

Chapter 6 The creation of incorporated spaces

6.1 Introduction

The discussion around participatory spaces reminds us to look into the power relations permeating any given spaces and examine their impacts on public participation. Spaces can be categorised into different types according to the configuration of power relations within them. Then, in what spaces do Chinese SWOs participate in policy practice? How are these spaces brought into being? What actors play what roles in the creation of these spaces? This chapter aims to answer these questions by examining the key mechanisms that create and shape the spaces for social work policy practice in China, based on the findings from the interviews conducted as described in Chapter 4.

The research findings reported in this chapter reveal that SWOs participate in policy practice in the incorporated spaces, which refer to those incorporated in the Party-state's social governance system in which SWOs become the arms of the authority and assist with policymaking. Incorporated spaces are created and framed by the Party-state, which intentionally develops the strategies of contractual incorporation and political incorporation to enhance and regulate SWOs' participation in policymaking. This chapter first examines the effects of contracting out social services and explains how SWOs experience role expansion in the policy process through contracting and develop their influence over policymaking. Then, it looks into the Party-state's political incorporation strategy, which incorporates SWOs into the dominant political system and disempowers those independent and disobedient SWOs. Finally, this chapter concludes with a conceptual map illustrating the creation process of the incorporated spaces for policy practice, which shows that the Party-state's intention to increase SWOs' presence in the policy arena implies both participation and control: the Party-state increasingly involves SWOs in the making of social policy while suppresses their potential for mobilising the public and challenging the authority at the same time.

6.2 Contractual incorporation: From service contracting to policy practice

To make innovations in social governance, the Party-state supports the development of SWOs and promotes collaboration with these non-governmental actors. The contracting out of social services has been adopted as the main policy tool by the Party-state to involve SWOs in social governance. The contracting out approach has not only stimulated the emergence of a great number of SWOs by providing increasing government funding and resources but also led to an unprecedented reform in China's social welfare system (Lei & Chan, 2018). In addition, social service contracting, as I argue in this section, has incorporated SWOs into the policy process and contributed to the creation of incorporated spaces for social work policy practice. Through contractual incorporation, SWOs expand their role in the policy process from policy implementation to other stages including agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, and policy evaluation. SWOs' role expansion in the policy process is realised through three main processes. First, during policy implementation and social service delivery, SWOs are involved in policy learning and increase their knowledge about policymaking. Second, contracting has opened up new channels and opportunities for SWO-government communication and collaboration. Third, the contracting out approach defined and reinforced the superior-subordinate relationship between the government and SWOs.

6.2.1 SWOs' role expansion in the policy process

By delivering contracted-out social services, SWOs took a role in the policy process as the agents who implemented a variety of social policies. The policy process comprises a series of stages including agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Sabatier, 2019: 6). Contracting is usually practised at the stage of policy implementation, as it is adopted by the government as a tool to collaborate with private and non-profit entities to turn formulated policies into

welfare services. The contracting out approach has made a connection between SWOs' daily practice and the government's social policies. By signing social service contracts with the government, SWOs are incorporated into the official policy process and play an increasingly important role in the policy implementation stage. In this context, the senior social workers interviewed in this study believed that policy implementation is one of SWOs' essential missions. According to the leaders of two SWOs that work closely with the government through contracting:

> In essence, social work is about the implementation of social policy. For example, the government put forward some policies about social-psychological health, and as a result, we deliver services in this domain. So, we are in fact implementing those policies. (Yang[13], female, deputy director of a SWO)

> I personally think that the social work profession plays the role of implementing social policy. A lot of social policies, for example, those providing welfare to the disadvantaged, entail the involvement of the social work profession. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Besides turning social policies into welfare services, at the policy implementation stage, SWOs also took up the job of helping publicise social policies. For example, two SWO leaders shared some examples about social workers educating service users on what policies would affect their lives and what policies they could use to apply for welfare benefits. They believed that social workers should contribute to the promotion of the government's social policies, according to them:

> In addition, we also publicise the state's policies. For instance, we provide policy information to the disadvantaged and help them apply for social

[13] To ensure anonymity, a pseudonym is given to each research participant. The pseudonyms were randomly chosen from the list of the most common family names in China.

assistance according to specific policies. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

For example, when the government wants to publicise its drug abuse prevention policies or garbage sorting policies, we social workers need to assist with this kind of work and follow the government's policy directions. (Zhang, male, executive director of a SWO)

In Chinese, the word "publicise"[14] has a similar meaning to "propaganda" (but in a more neutral and sometimes commendatory sense), which is about making something more popular and well-accepted. Social workers' job of publicising social policies indicates their important role in policy implementation and also seems to imply their allegiance, rather than resistance, to state policies. In this sense, contracting may have shaped SWOs' stance on policy as well as their relationship with the government.

While SWOs have attained access to the policy process by playing an important role at the policy implementation stage, they gradually developed their influence over other stages of the policy process. According to the policy cycle model, the stages in the policy process are interrelated. The actual activities in one phase pave the way for another and may result in new policies or the improvement of the existing ones, although this may or may not take place in a linear way. For example, evaluation of the effects of policies often leads to the reconceptualisation of policy problems and solutions in the light of experiences encountered with the policy in question and the start of a new iteration of the cycle (Howlett & Giest, 2015: 228). In this study, a process of role expansion of SWOs in the policy process has been identified. In other words, SWOs' involvement in the policy implementation stage enables them to expand their role in the policy process and develop increasing influence over agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, and policy evaluation. *Wu*, the deputy director of a SWO,

[14] "宣传" in Chinese, *Xuan Chuan*.

described the process of role expansion as giving her more energy, which enabled her to move from direct service to policy practice and support her service users in the macro-environment. According to *Wu*:

> My biggest feeling is that it was not such a kind of participation before. In the past, I was just a service provider, I turned policies into services to deliver social welfare. I did not ever think that I could do it reversely and offer policy advice… This feeling is very good. I feel I have more energy. I can help my service users in the macro-environment and the policy system. The significance and value of this are different from direct services. (Wu, female, deputy director of a SWO)

For SWOs, the delivery of contracted-out social services was a cut-in point from which they are incorporated into the policy process and then flow and navigate through the interrelated stages in the policy cycle. The leaders of SWOs reported how role expansion took place in this process. Firstly, while delivering social services, social workers could monitor and reflect on specific policies and gain more understanding of their effects and defects. Also, every year SWOs were required to write self-evaluation reports on the contracted-out social service projects, and these projects would be reviewed by a committee comprised of government officials, academics, and senior social workers from other SWOs. These tasks and occasions provided SWOs with opportunities to get involved in policy evaluation and provide feedback on the outcome of existing policies.

Secondly, SWOs usually provided services to the target groups of social policies. The working relationship enabled SWOs to identify the challenges facing the disadvantaged groups and bring the government's attention to the unmet social needs. By doing so, SWOs were engaged in agenda setting. As two SWO leaders observed:

> In many cases, social workers are the ones who deal with the "last mile" of

> policy in communities. Social services are delivered in specific policy frameworks. However, I do not think that social workers can only implement policies. On the contrary, we can discover social problems, provide solutions, and influence decision-making. These (actions) are very necessary. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

> Policy practice is about… In the process of delivering social services, we discover the problems of people's livelihood, we discover what improvement is needed to existing policies, and then we offer constructive and feasible advice to the government. (Wang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Thirdly, drawing on their experience of service delivery and their knowledge of the issues to be tackled, SWO leaders can become policy advisors upon whom the authority depended to formulate policy options. In addition, many contracted-out services are pilot projects, the outcome of which may lead to broader policy changes. For example, a pilot project that gains recognition from the government can be copied and implemented in more regions. In this sense, some SWOs are experimenting with possible policy options when they undertake contracted-out projects.

Fourth, with the data and evidence emerging from contracted-out social services, SWOs could influence decision-making by persuading the authority to adopt certain policies. SWO leaders believe that the positive outcome of contracted-out projects is a kind of convincing evidence that certain policy options can make a difference. Also, proposing new policy solutions with solid evidence from existing practices is less confrontational and more welcome by the government. According to two SWO leaders:

> If you have been providing services in a community for ten years, then you can collect some data and do some analyses, and you can write a report or hold a media briefing to do advocacy. For example, you identify some social needs through services, which call for our action. I think this is welcomed by

> the government. The government expects social workers to collect information in communities and provide feedback, like what capillaries do… According to my experiences of working with government officials from a variety of departments, they expect social workers, after years of service experience accumulation, to provide feasible solutions to social problems and meet social needs. The government often expresses such expectations. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

> We do policy practice through services… Generally speaking, influential projects are more likely to be recognised by the government. Therefore, you must concentrate on doing your service well and showing successful outcomes. Then you can make the government interested (in your projects) and willing (to listen to you). (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

SWOs' role expansion in the policy process enables them to shift from simply service providers to more influential policy actors. As the quotations above show, the delivery of contracted-out services had a strong connection with SWOs' role expansion in the policy cycle. Then, why can SWOs navigate throughout the policy cycle from the starting point of policy implementation? The research data further reveals that three driving forces are contributing to SWOs' role expansion: policy learning, collaboration building, and relationship reinforcement. The following sections focus on these three aspects respectively.

6.2.2 Involving SWOs in policy learning

Policy learning refers to the process through which a variety of policy actors, including politicians, multiple levels of government, policy experts, advocacy groups, NGOs, the public etc., increase their knowledge about policy goals, policy instruments, and the organisational features of state institutions so that they can deliberately achieve policy changes in terms of policy paradigms, policy programmes, and organisational features

(Bennett and Howlett, 1992). Policy learning plays an essential role in the policy cycle as it enables policy actors to amend their actions in subsequent policy-making rounds while pursuing their original goals or modified ones (Howlett et al., 2020: 9).

For SWOs, undertaking contracted-out social services is also a process of policy learning, through which they can increase their knowledge of policy issues and enhance their capacity for policy practice. More specifically, SWOs accumulate their knowledge about the social problems to be tackled, the needs of the target social groups, the effects and defects of existing policies, the policy agendas of the government, the operation of the policy system, and the feasible policy options emerging from contracted-out projects. The senior social workers interviewed believed that the accumulation of policy-related knowledge from service delivery promoted their role in the policy arena. For example, *Chen*, the deputy director of a SWO, believed that social workers acquired important information that the policymakers needed but lacked — knowledge of service users' living conditions and needs. According to *Chen*:

> Because social workers are on the front line of social service, they can gain a more accurate understanding of service users. Therefore, I think what social workers can provide, such as their knowledge about service users, are important references for policymaking… Currently, many policymakers may not have a full understanding of the conditions of the people. So, I think these are important references. (Chen, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Zhang, the executive director of a SWO, pointed out another important object of policy learning — the defects or blind spots of existing policies. Policy learning involves an incremental trial-and-error process of experimenting with policies (Howlett et al., 2020: 9). During service delivery, social workers can identify the social issues that existing policies neglect to tackle and report to policymakers the policy improvements or changes that need to be made. According to *Zhang*:

> Policy practice, as far as I know, is about social workers identifying the needs of service users while delivering social services. What is the missing part of the social welfare system? As social workers, we should analyse and report (those missing parts), so that we can make social policies more just, and better benefit the disadvantaged. (Zhang, male, executive director of a SWO)

Feasible policy options are also important objects of policy learning. As policy learning is a trial-and-error process, there can be feasible solutions or meaningful insights emerging from the contracted-out projects, which can inform the future development of social policy. Many senior social workers reported that it was common for policymakers to refer to SWOs' experience of tackling social issues when they wanted to design new policies. As three SWO leaders said:

> I can influence the government through service delivery. When the government makes decisions, it can refer to the projects I undertook. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

> As social work organisations, do we have feasible solutions to offer to the government for reference? In fact, I found that in many cases, it was not that the government leaders did not take our advice seriously…I think when we offer advice, we need to provide the government with feasible solutions generated from existing services. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

> It is not that first, we make a policy, and second, we deliver the service. This is not a common case. Usually, we need to try service first, and then we get the data through research or whatever, and we provide feedback to the government. Then we can talk about what improvement to policy is needed. This is a common process. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Finally, SWOs can obtain more knowledge about the macro-political and policy

system through policy learning. The delivery of contracted-out social services entails SWOs' close collaboration with the authority, from which SWOs can increase their knowledge about how the government thought and worked. This improves their skills in interacting with policymakers. SWO leaders believed that successful policy practice called for social workers' in-depth understanding of the government's policy agendas and policy-making process. Social workers can seize policy windows and even make use of the needs and concerns of the government to lobby for policy changes. According to two SWO leaders:

> We need to understand within what system we do our job… We need to know how we can interact with the macro environment and find an appropriate way to influence it. (Li, female, deputy director of a SWO)

> I think the first thing is that we need to know what the government is concerned about. For example, home care for elderly people has become an urgent issue since the central government put forward the "9073 approach"[15] for elderly care. Also, City B is one of the pilot cities for the reform of elderly care. From the perspective of the government of City B, it must show excellent performance and bring out some successful projects or models. So, we came up with this idea (of elderly-oriented design and refurbishment) at perfect timing. As an innovative service, it was a good manifestation of the City B government's efforts. Yes, social workers should understand how the government thinks and works. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of a SWO)

For policymakers, the process of policy learning enables them to achieve policy development through five main routes: copying, emulation, hybridization, synthesis, and inspiration (Rose, 1991). However, it should be noted that as SWOs were not the

[15] 90% of the older population should be cared for at home, 7% should be cared for in communities, and 3% in institutions.

makers of most social policies in China, the policy learning process they went through did not directly lead to policy change. For SWOs, the main effect of policy learning is the Party-state's increased recognition of their policy expertise and the outcome of their practices, which makes it possible for SWOs to influence the other stages of the policy process. Many SWO leaders reported that their access to policymaking was closely linked to the authority's recognition of their expertise and its intention to consult them. For example, three participants shared their experiences:

> The most contributing factor (in successful policy practice) may be… I do think that if social workers can achieve some kind of service outcome that is recognised by the government, if social workers' role is recognised by the government, then it is willing to help you promote whatever (service) approach you work out. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

> At that time (when I was invited to a policy consultation), the social work committee of the local Party committee held a main belief that social workers played a very important role in social services. (Ma, executive director of a SWO)

> It is important that your organisation has a certain degree of influence in the profession. Even if the government officials do not know you, when they look for social work organisations for consultation, they would invite those that have influence in specific service domains… If we want to influence policy, we need to have certain social status and gain recognition. If we were just a small SWO that no one knew us, then we would have no power when we spoke. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

Research data shows that SWOs gained increasing recognition from the authority as they undertook a great number of contracted-out social services. From the perspective of authorities at different administrative levels, contracting also created opportunities

for policy learning for them. They not only tested policy options by outsourcing pilot services from SWOs but also learned about how they could engage SWOs as policy advisors that helped improve their capacity for social governance. Xu's experience in advising the formulation of the national anti-domestic law was a good example. Her experience in front-line service enabled her to identify the gaps between policy design and implementation. When a government-endorsed expert from the central government sought advice from the local government, *Xu*, who was recognised as an experienced practitioner in the field of domestic violence intervention, was recommended by the local authority for this task. As *Xu* recalled:

> Policymakers could only rely on some incomplete perceptions (to formulate policies). I could see that there were gaps between the design of some policies and the reality. It would be better if they involve social workers in policymaking. For example, the anti-domestic violence law went through years of formulation which was said to be based on front-line practice. But when I saw the draft of the law… At that time, an expert from a national research centre came to consult me. I could see that a lot of details and realities were not considered in that draft. Yes, they did make a law, but it was hard to be implemented. Why? Because it lacked a solid foundation for implementation. It was not operational. (Xu, manager of the training department of a SWO)

To summarise, contracting incorporates SWOs into the policy process and involves them in policy learning, through which they not only increase their knowledge about social policy but also gain growing recognition for their policy expertise. As a result, SWOs become experts in the field of social policy and develop more influence over policymaking.

6.2.3 Opening up channels and opportunities for government-SWO collaboration

The contracting out approach, directly and indirectly, opened up a lot of new channels for SWOs to communicate and collaborate with the government on policy issues. The channels and opportunities directly brought into being by contracting include formal meetings with government officials on the design, funding, implementation and evaluation of social service projects, field visits to service projects, symposiums organised by the government on improving existing policies or developing new ones, informal meetings with government officials. For example, *Wu*, the deputy director of a SWO, shared her experience of advising policymakers in a series of symposiums focused on the development of drug prohibition policies. As contracted-out services went further, more and more channels for policy discussion between the government and SWOs would be created. As *Wu* recalled:

> Our organisation has been working on several contracted-out drug prohibition projects. So, last year, some cadres from the local government invited us to a series of symposiums. They wanted to collect data from us and review the services in this domain, and see what improvements could be made to relevant policies… I think the government has opened up a lot of channels, through which we can contribute to social policy. (Wu, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Contracting also gives social workers reasons to regularly visit government cadres that oversee outsourcing social services. Usually, these bureaucrats are also the makers of relevant policies. During these visits, social workers can not only update policymakers on the implementation of welfare services but also talk about what policy innovations they can work on together. This kind of communication builds a foundation for SWO-government collaboration on policy development as it enables both SWOs and policymakers to get to know what each other is working on and thinking about, and what policy solutions they can try out together.

Without contracting, SWOs may find it much harder to open the doors of the government. *Gong*, a senior social worker, attached great importance to those visits that were made possible by contracting. For her, whether the government accepted her ideas for policy development was not her prior concern. What really mattered was that she could make the policymakers get used to her presence in the physical spaces where policies were formulated and decisions were made — the government officials' offices and meeting rooms. In this sense, besides the actual discussion on policymaking, these visits also have symbolic meaning — social workers are always available for policy discussion and collaboration, and the government can always turn to social workers for support. According to *Gong*:

> When I was a front-line service manager, I used to visit the government leaders who were in charge of the contracted-out services and told them what we had been working on recently. "Are you interested in our projects? Are you willing to support us?" It didn't matter if they were not interested. I just wanted to increase my presence in front of them. I wanted to let them develop this habit: it was normal for me to visit them. I was not coming to ask them for help. I was there to help them solve problems, and even to help them accomplish some of their work. I wanted to let them believe that we could help each other. I was not a troublemaker. Instead, I could bring them some new ideas. (Gong, female, manager of the training department of a SWO)

Contracting entails regular communication between the government and SWOs, which brings both parties into the same room to discuss how the contracted-out projects are going and what new actions are needed. SWO leaders value these opportunities and want to seize them to input new ideas into the mind of policymakers. According to two SWO leaders:

> We have many channels (for communication with the government). For

> example, we need to report our work to the service purchasers on a regular basis. Also, we need to provide working reports. And we can also meet the leaders of various government departments and report our services. We have a lot of opportunities. (Li, female, deputy director of a SWO)

> Our regional executive directors have regular meetings with the government departments that outsource services from us. In these meetings, we talk about our recent work and some new ideas. And we can reach a consensus and collaborate on some projects. I think there are too many examples of this. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

The contracting out approach also indirectly created some channels for SWO-government communication. The directors of the SWOs that undertake many contracted-out service projects or have a high reputation in specific service fields would be invited to hold important positions in the government-endorsed professional organisations, such as the associations of social workers and research institutes for social work services. By joining these organisations, SWO leaders are provided with more opportunities to communicate with the government. As a SWO leader recalled:

> I have joined a lot of social associations, such as the local association of social workers, the association of volunteers, and the association of social organisations. I hold some positions in these associations, which enable me to get more information (about services and policies) and speak on various occasions. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

The contracting out approach has built connections between SWOs and the government by bringing these two parties together on a range of occasions. These occasions constitute new institutions in which SWOs can directly communicate and collaborate with policymakers on policy issues. However, on many of these occasions, SWOs and the government are not in an equal relationship. In contracted-out social service projects,

SWOs are often the ones who report to the government, the recipients of government funding, and the objects of evaluation. In this sense, the channels and opportunities created by the contracting out approach may imply unequal power relationships.

6.2.4 Defining and reinforcing the superior-subordinate relationship

While the Party-state's policy documents on social governance have defined the relationship between SWOs and the government in a normative sense, in practice, it is contracting that turns SWOs into the subordinates of the government. Studies show that in contracted-out social services, Chinese social workers are often treated as foot soldiers and extra workforce by local governments and are asked to undertake extra administrative work beyond their contracts (Chan and Lei, 2017; Chen and Zhao, 2019). The unequal contractual relationship also permeated the incorporated spaces in which SWOs perceived themselves as servants, assistants, and rowers, while they perceived the Party or the government as the boss, leader, and navigator. These metaphors have important connotations regarding the relationship between SWOs and the Party-state. *Ma*, the executive director of a SWO, compared the CPC and the government to navigators and believed that social workers should be good rowers. This seems to imply that these two parties were on the same ship and pursued the same goals. However, she also admitted that SWOs were usually in a lower position, be they rowers, sellers, or employees who got paid to do whatever their boss told them to do. As *Ma* commented:

> The Party and the government definitely play the role of navigators who decide the main direction, but whether the boat can sail well depends on a lot of practical details. I think that social workers can function here, in the position of rowers… We always say that the government is the purchaser while we are the sellers, and they are the bosses or whatever. By saying so, we imperceptibly place ourselves in a lower position. In reality, they (the government officials) may also place us in a lower position. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

Similarly, Zhu, the director of a SWO, pointed out the importance of ensuring the Party-state's authority and leading role in social policy and social service. To do so, SWOs needed to limit their role to assistants who just collaborated. In Chinese, the word "collaboration"[16] has the connotation of participating in something as a helper instead of the main actor that takes charge. According to Zhu:

> The government likes to use the word "collaboration" and defines social workers' roles as the ones who collaborate. All services are led by the government, and social workers just collaborate. Collaboration means assistance. In other words, we should assist the government and ensure its authority in the field of social service. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

The superior-subordinate relationship between the Party-state and SWOs was reinforced through contractual control. *Hu*, the director of a SWO, pointed out the link between contracting and the unequal relationship. He held the belief that SWOs should give up their fantasy about becoming real partners of the government. Resource dependence leaves SWOs no choice but to accept and internalise the boss-servant relationship, as long as they want to continue undertaking contracted-out social service projects. According to *Hu*:

> I have been saying this to many people. We should not think too much. We are in a boss-servant relationship with the government all the time. We are wrong when we talk about partnership… As long as our money comes from the government, we cannot get rid of the so-called boss-servant relationship, because we do not have other income. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Sun, a service manager, provided a detailed example of how she made a difficult

[16] "协同" in Chinese, *Xie Tong.*

decision to satisfy the government's urgent request for an extra workforce. To maintain a trusting, but usually unequal, relationship with the subdistrict government which funded the service projects, *Sun* sacrificed the interests of her team and even service users, who might suffer from the suspension of service. For Sun, the bottom line in this case might be about the amount of extra work requested by the government. However, there were no fixed criteria for SWOs' bottom line. Social workers often face dilemmas like this in the contractual relationship, and in most cases, rejecting the requests from the government is not their prioritised option. When concessions and sacrifices recurred several times, as *Sun* stated, social workers would not use "equal" to describe the contractual relationship:

> In some cases, I don't think we are equal. Sometimes government cadres require us to undertake work that is not relevant to our service but very important for them. I usually satisfied the government as long as its requirement did not exceed our bottom line. For instance, last year, my colleagues in a service centre were required by the subdistrict government to work for it for a whole week and assist with data entry which was supposed to be done by the subdistrict government. This work was very urgent. If the subdistrict government failed to complete the work in time, it would be criticised by the upper district government. At first, my colleagues did not understand why they had to do the work. I told them that the local government cadres would not trust our team anymore if we refused to lend a hand. Then my colleagues understood and decided to do it. It seems unequal that we have to do whatever the government tells us to do. So, I won't use the word "equal" to describe this relationship. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of a SWO)

In *Sun*'s case, social workers' and even service users' interests were sacrificed to meet the needs of the service funder. This leads to a question about whose needs are prioritised in SWOs' efforts to influence policy, as sometimes there are conflicts

between the interests of the government, the public, and SWOs. Social workers' attitude toward this question was rather ambiguous. Contracting may make many social workers believe that the government is their client as it purchases services from them. Therefore, many SWO leaders emphasise the importance of meeting the needs of service purchasers through policy practice. For example, *Sun* compared her organisation to a commercial consultancy firm, which took part in policy practice according to the common interests it shared with the government. According to Sun:

> I think we are similar to a commercial organisation. We need to find the common interests that we share with the government. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of a SWO)

Hu, the director of a SWO, even compared policy practice to doing a business, arguing that social workers should think about the needs of the leaders[17], and solve the difficulties facing them. At the same time, he tried to justify his statement by integrating the political pursuits of the Party-state with the well-being of the public and the values and missions of the social work profession. In this way, Hu also defended himself against the criticism of his role as a "dog" loyal to the government. In Chinese society, calling someone a dog is very insulting, as dogs are regarded as doing whatever their owners command them to do and having no freedom or autonomy. For *Hu*, the boss-servant relationship between the government and SWOs could be justified, because serving the government was also serving the people. According to *Hu*:

> It (policy practice) is similar to doing a business. We think about what the leaders need and solve what they are worried about[18], right? Some people may think that I am ingratiating myself with the government like a dog. But I don't think so. The government pays us to solve problems, right? We need

[17] In the Chinese context, leaders usually refer to the cadres who hold important positions in the Party and government departments. They make important decisions to lead the development of society.

[18] "想领导所需，解领导所难 *Xiang Ling Dao Suo Xu, Jie Ling Dao Suo Nan*" in Chinese.

> to think about what it needs. What does our government want to achieve? The people's well-being, harmony, and development. There is no difference between these and the values of the social work profession and the missions of SWOs. The only difference is that the government does it within the establishment while we do it outside it. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

The findings of this study echo Leung's (2012) observations about the Chinese social work profession which tends to harness itself to the alleged shared goal of building a harmonious society to gain legitimacy and mandates in China. This study further shows that this was realised through contracting, which has limited SWOs' role to the assistants of policymakers. In this way, SWOs were incorporated into the Party-state's social governance system through signing social service contracts with the government.

To sum up, contracting incorporated SWOs into the policy process through which SWOs experience role expansion and develop their influence over policymaking. SWOs' role expansion is realised through three main processes: policy learning, collaboration building, and the reinforcement of a superior-subordinate relationship. As such, contracting, on the one hand, enabled SWOs to develop their influence over policymaking; on the other hand, it created restrictions, drawing the boundary of incorporated spaces.

6.3 Political incorporation: incorporating SWOs into the CPC-led political system

Besides contracting, the Party-state also develops the strategy of political incorporation to work with SWOs, which plays an essential role in the creation of incorporated spaces. The political incorporation process comprises three aspects: co-opting SWO leaders into the establishment, involving SWOs in Party-building work, and marginalising the independent and disobedient SWOs. More specifically, SWOs leaders are invited to

join the People's Congresses (PCs), the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCCs), and governmental think tanks. SWOs are required to establish CPC branches within their organisational structure and carry out Party-building activities such as political education and Party-led social services. In addition, the politically sensitive SWOs are excluded and marginalised from the mainstream social service domain. The observation of the suppression of the disobedient SWOs becomes a learning process for other SWOs, through which they learn to comply with the Party-state's political requirements. As a result, the majority of SWOs that are willing to be incorporated into the mainstream political establishment are given opportunities to work with the government on policymaking but they are also restricted to the role of the arms of the Party-state rather than independent policy advocates.

6.3.1 Co-opting SWO leaders into the establishment

In recent years, a considerable number of experienced social workers from SWOs have been elected as local PC deputies or nominated as local CPPCC members. For example, three participants in this study were members of local CPPCCs. *Ma*, the executive director of a SWO, was a member of the standing committee of a district-level CPPCC. *Luo*, the manager of youth service of a SWO, was a district-level CPPCC member. *Sun*, the manager of the elderly service of a SWO, was a member of one of the eight legally recognised political parties in China that mainly consists of intellectuals in the fields of science and social science. *Sun* participated in a district-level CPPCC as part of a collective delegation of her party. Besides them, many participants reported that their colleagues were PC deputies and CPPCC members. *Zhao*, the general director of a social work professional association, estimated that there were about forty social workers in City A that entered local PCs and CPPCCs.

> In City A, there are about thirty to forty social work representatives in district-level PCs and CPPCCs. They make up the voice of social workers. (Zhao, female, general director of a social work professional association)

It is worth noting that these social workers did not deliberately run for the positions in the PCs or CPPCCs. Instead, these two political institutions intentionally provided seats for leaders from SWOs and selected appropriate candidates. As *He* observed, the local PCs and CPPCCs identified the people who worked for SWOs and other nonprofits as "new grassroots" and tried to involve them to offer policy advice. *Ma* and *Luo* recalled that there was a political requirement from the Party-state that created opportunities for them to be invited into the local CPPCCs. *Luo* even believed that without this requirement, there would be much fewer social workers in the CPPCCs than at present. In other words, the nomination process followed a top-down approach, which showed the Party-state's intention to include SWOs in the political establishment. According to these three SWO leaders:

> PCs and CPPCCs have created new sections to involve members from SWOs and charities. They are called 'new grassroots', who are dedicated to social service and charitable work. And they can offer policy advice and put forward policy proposals through this channel. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

> Around 2011, there was a new requirement that the CPPCC should include members from SWOs and other social organisations. The members were nominated by the government. The CPPCC asked the Department of Civil Affairs (DCA) for proper candidates, and then the DCA recommended and nominated some social workers from SWOs. (Ma, executive director of a SWO)

> Why would the CPPCC select me? Firstly, there was some requirement that it needed to consult social workers. Without this requirement, it could be anticipated that the number of social workers in the CPPCC would be much smaller than the present. In 2012 or 2013, my organisation told me that the

> district-level CPPCC was selecting new members who were social workers and non-CPC members to become the representatives of the social work profession and provide policy advice. My organisation recommended me to the CPPCC because I met its selection requirement. (Luo, female, manager of youth service of a SWO)

Although the deputies to the district-level PCs are elected by voters, the potential candidates are selected by the CPC. Sun's (2014) study on the PC elections in China reveals that the electoral process is also a process of political co-option, which is under the complete control of the CPC committees. The CPC can decide deputy quotas, deputy composition, candidates' nominations, credential examination, and election. Therefore, including SWO leaders in both the PCs and the CPPCCs is the Party-state's purposeful action. It reflects the Party-state's strategy to incorporate the newly developed profession into its social governance system. As *Ma* recalled, it was a historic moment when SWO leaders were invited into the establishment.

> In the past, there was no section for members from social organisations. Therefore, I remember that at that time, social workers being selected as CPPCC members was reported by local newspapers in the headlines. It was a historic moment. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

Besides being co-opted into the PCs and CPPCCs, many SWO leaders have taken up semi-political roles by joining advisory committees and think tanks of the government. These positions have not only turned them into parts of the establishment but also created opportunities for policy practice. For example, although *Hu* was neither a PC deputy nor a CPPCC member, he held a lot of part-time positions relating to social service in the government system. According to *Hu*:

> I'm now quite different from the past in terms of roles. Besides being an advisor to the association of social workers, I am also an advisor to the Bureau

> of Civil Affairs (BCA) and a member of the think tank for child protection and the think tank for social organisations. These different roles provide me with channels to participate in policy practice… The more roles I have, the more information I get, and the more opportunities for me to speak on a range of occasions. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Why does the Party-state intend to co-opt SWO leaders? The co-option strategy is in accordance with the political agenda of making innovations in social governance. SWOs are not only the important tools for but also the targets of social governance. Therefore, by incorporating SWO leaders into the establishment, the Party-state can not only make use of their professional expertise to promote policy development, but also manage potential civil society challenges to the state power.

On the one hand, SWOs' ability to deliver social services and tackle social problems makes them worthy of co-option. Therefore, professional expertise and influence are important criteria for selecting social workers into the PCs and CPPCCs. When asked about why they would be nominated as CPPCC members, *Ma* believed that it was because the Party-state valued the influential elites from the social service sector, while *Luo* emphasised the importance of showing "competence" and "ability". Their answers indicated that, as advisory bodies, CPPCCs intend to include elite members from diverse domains to advise the government. In other words, CPPCC members are expected to contribute to policymaking and social governance. According to *Ma* and *Luo*:

> The members of the CPPCC are usually elites from various professions. You can see a lot of successful entrepreneurs and other elites in the CPPCC… I was very surprised when I was invited to become a member of the standing committee of the district-level CPPCC. When a reporter told me about this decision, I asked him whether he read the wrong person. People need to be very influential and outstanding to enter the standing committee. I did not

> think that I reached that level. Maybe it was because the government and the CPPCC really valued social service. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

> I don't want to boast, but the CPPCC would definitely look at the competence and ability of the potential candidates when it selects new members. It expects its members to have a great understanding of policy… When it wants to invite you or consult you, it expects you to provide useful advice which can contribute to policy development. (Luo, female, manager of youth service of a SWO)

On the other hand, co-option is a means of political control. As Sun (2014) points out, in theory, civil society may contribute to democratisation by checking state power, enhancing public participation, and providing reservoirs for potential resistance against the establishment. Considering the potential threat from social organisations to an authoritarian system, social organisations become a target of co-option (ibid). This study also reveals that political control is an essential function of co-opting SWOs leaders into the PCs and CPPCCs. For example, candidates need to go through a political review to check whether they have ever been engaged in any political action or discussion against the Party-state before they are formally selected. Besides, according to China's constitution, both the PC and the CPPCC are led by the CPC. This assigns the selected candidates with the normative requirement of accepting the leadership of the CPC. As *Ma* recalled:

> During the nomination process, I went through a political review, and other kinds of reviews, and we needed to fill out a lot of forms. I remember that the review became stricter when I was nominated for the second tenure. The government contacted my colleagues and did investigations about my work, such as how I performed, and what kind of person I am. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

After being co-opted into the PCs and the CPPCCs, SWO leaders will be given a certain degree of power to offer comments and suggestions on major political and social issues to the government. As *noticed by Wang*, the deputy director of a SWO, the PC deputies and the CPPCC members had the power to demand replies and feedback from the government, which differentiated them from common social workers.

> They have the power to ask the government to reply to their proposals or take action to tackle the social issues they are aware of. The government is concerned and even worried about the issues raised by PC deputies, so it will think about how to solve those problems. Otherwise, the political performance of the government would be affected by their comments… Normally, social workers do not have such power, and we don't know whether the government is paying any real attention to our policy advice. (Wang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

However, this does not mean that the PC deputies and the CPPCC members can exercise their power over policymaking without any constraints. As *Zhang* pointed out, the policy discussion in the PCs and CPPCCs was led by the CPC and had a boundary that their members should not exceed. Although *Zhang* did not explicitly explain what the boundary and taboos were, the example he gave implied that social workers co-opted into the establishment needed to discipline themselves by not taking radical action to push the government to change. Also, social workers' efforts to influence policies in the PCs and the CPPCCs do not necessarily lead to policy changes, as the government can decide how to reply and what action to take. These are the limitations of the power of social work delegates in the establishment. As *Zhang* said:

> At present, for some topics, can we talk about them? To what extent can we talk about them? In fact, the discussion is led by the government. We express our opinions and thoughts within the boundary drawn by the government. If

> we push ahead with some policy issues and push too far, we may exceed the boundary. The director-general of our organisation is a member of the CPPCC, and he has been advocating for anti-school bullying services for years, which gradually drew the attention of the education department. In the current political system in China, the government needs to reply to any opinions from the CPPCC, but how it replies is interesting. It has to reply, but the actual effect is another matter. There may still be some effect, but it may take a long time. (Zhang, male, executive director of a SWO)

In general, co-opting SWO leaders into the establishment is an important means of political incorporation. The Party-state purposefully looks for and selects appropriate candidates who are competent and politically loyal to the CPC to become members of the PCs, the CPPCCs, and other governmental advisory committees. By doing so, the Party-state cannot only turn SWOs into its arms that help with policymaking and social governance but also eliminate their potential for being antagonistic political agents.

6.3.2 Involving SWOs in Party-building work

As the discussion above shows, although co-option is an essential means of political incorporation, it can only manage a small segment of social workers: the social work elites that lead their organisations. To enhance its comprehensive political control over the social work profession, the Party-state has developed another strategy for political incorporation: to require SWOs to establish the CPC branches within their organisational structure.

In 2015, the CCCPC put forward a plan to strengthen Party building in social organisations (CCCPC, 2015), which marked an unprecedented change in the relationship between the Party-state and social organisations. In response to this top policy enacted by the CCCPC, local authorities have implemented and further

developed the actual plans for promoting social organisations' involvement in Party-building work. For example, the General Office of the Municipal Committee of the CPC in City A enacted the *Regulations on party building in social organisations in City A*, which demanded that "the comprehensive leadership of the Party should be insisted and strengthened" and "the work of the Party should be integrated into the operation and development of social organisations". This document defined the role of the CPC branches in social organisations as "the battle fortresses of the Party":

> The Party branches in social organisations are the battle fortresses of the Party in social organisations. They should undertake the foundational tasks assigned by the Party constitution, ensure the correct political stance, educate and manage Party members, lead and serve the people, and promote the development of society. (General Office of the Municipal Committee of the CPC in City A, 2018)

To promote Party building in social organisations, City A and City B have developed three main measures. Firstly, the task of Party building has become connected to key activities of social organisations, including registration, annual review, grade assessment, and contracting out social services. According to the Municipal Committee of the CPC in City A:

> The supervisory government departments of social organisations, such as the justice, finance, taxation, education, health, and market regulation departments, should include the requirement of Party building in the comprehensive regulations on social organisations, including the annual inspection, grade assessment, leadership re-election, service contracting, and application for awards. (General Office of the Municipal Committee of the CPC in City A, 2018)

In City B, when a social organisation applies for registration, it is required to fill out a

CPC membership survey form and submit a letter of commitment to Party building. In City A, the CPC committee of the BCA set up a "coordination mechanism for the simultaneous implementation of Party building and the registration, inspection, and assessment of social organisations" (General Office of the Municipal Committee of the CPC in City A, 2018). For newly established social organisations, the CPC committee of the BCA would collect their Party membership information, promote the establishment of CPC branches, and guide them to include Party building in their charters (ibid).

What was even more practically important for SWOs is that their performance in Party building is directly linked to their assessment grade and their eligibility for government funding. In City A, only the social organisations with a "3A" or a higher grade are eligible for applying for contracted-out social services, government funding, and awards (City A Municipal Bureau of Social Organisation Administration, 2011). Similarly, in City B, social organisations with a "3A" or a higher grade are given priority when applying for contracted-out social services, government funding, and awards. (City B Municipal Bureau of Social Organisation Administration, 2020). In the grade assessment system, Party building was an essential prerequisite for a "3A" grade. To get a "3A" grade, SWOs need to get at least 800 points, and their performance in Party building accounts for 100 out of the total 1000 points. In other words, SWOs without the CPC branches would lose 100 points and are very unlikely to get 800 points in the assessment. As reported by research participants, SWOs without the CPC branches had a very slim chance to be awarded a "3A" grade or get government funding in both City A and City B. In addition, the assessment of SWOs' performance in Party building covers a range of indicators, which require SWOs to put a lot of effort into this political task. Table 6.1 presents the assessment indicators and criteria relating to Party building in City B:

Table 6.1 Assessment indicators and criteria relating to Party building for SWOs

Indicators		Assessment criteria
Party Building (100)	Coverage of Party branches (15).	E.g., the organisation has three or more Party members and has established an independent Party branch.
	Construction of Party branches (10).	E.g., the Party branch is well-structured, and the members have clear responsibilities.
	Management of Party members (10).	E.g., the Party branch actively recruits new members.
	Party branches' regular activities (12).	E.g., the Party member meeting is held every three months.
	Political leadership (17).	E.g., the Party branch actively publicises and popularises the policies of the Party; the Party branch well performs the tasks assigned by the upper Party committees.
	Working mechanism (10).	E.g., the Party branch reports to the upper Party branches annually.
	Working conditions (7).	E.g., the Party branch has a fixed site for Party-building activities.
	Overall merits (19).	E.g., the Party branch has opened its social media account; the Party members have received awards.

Source: City B Municipal Bureau of Social Organisation Administration, 2019. This policy document was provided by one of the participants.

The second measure adopted by the Party-state to promote Party building in SWOs is to require SWOs to develop and provide social services that highlight the leading role

of the CPC in social work service centres. These services are termed "social work services led by Party building"[19]. For example, the municipal government in City B requires that SWOs should design and carry out social work services led by Party building, which should be regarded as the core services in all social work service centres.

However, what does "social work services led by Party building" actually mean? How do SWOs combine social work services with Party building? As *Guo* noted, the guidelines for Party building services were still very vague, and SWOs have been doing a lot of exploration. For example, to emphasise the leading role of social workers with the CPC membership, they are required to wear the CPC emblems or carry the CPC flags and banners when undertaking family visits and outreach work. Also, SWOs need to collaborate with CPC branches in other organisations or recruit volunteers with CPC membership to provide social services. For instance, *Ma* was asked to involve CPC members from the government as volunteers in the rehabilitation service for drug users. In a word, social work services led by Party building can take a lot of forms, but they all aim to highlight the leadership of the CPC in the social welfare domain and its irreplaceable role in promoting people's wellbeing.

The third measure for promoting Party building in social organisations targets SWOs' managerial structure. By cultivating the CPC branches in social organisations, the Party-state intend to turn them into lower affiliated agencies in the CPC's hierarchical system. For example, according to the *Regulations on Party Building in Social Organisations in City A* (The General Office of City A Municipal Committee of the CPC, 2018), the CPC branches in social organisations should be led by the upper CPC committees:

> The Party committees in social organisations are in charge of the Party building work in their organisations, and they should be under the leadership

[19] "党建引领社会工作服务" *Dang Jian Yin Ling She Hui Gong Zuo Fu Wu*.

> of the Organisation Department of the Party committee and the Party committee of the Civil Affairs Department. (The General Office of City A Municipal Committee of the CPC, 2018)

Besides, according to the same document, the CPC committees in social organisations are responsible for reviewing the credentials of candidates for the leadership of social organisations. By doing so, the CPC indirectly controls the leadership of social organisations and ensures that they will follow the instructions from the CPC.

The Party-state's plan to strengthen its political control over SWOs has gained great success. By 2020, in City B, there were more than 700 CPC members in the social work profession, more than 80 independent CPC branches and around 30 joint CPC branches in SWOs, and more than 200 social work service projects related to Party building (City B Association of Social Workers, 2020). Many participants reported that they needed to prioritise Party building in their work plans. According to two SWO leaders:

> We need to follow the policy trend. For example, we need to provide training for social workers on Party building and strengthening the leadership of the Party. (Zhao, female, general director of a social work professional association)

> This year, we need to do a new task. Party building is a priority this year… The CPC is a unique political party. It is connected to politics and everything. To be honest, all social work service centres in City B are talking about and working on Party building and strengthening the leadership of the Party. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

However, SWOs' efforts to meet the political requirements of Party building drew criticism from the more independent NGOs. *Liang*, the director of an independent social organisation providing services for industrial workers, believed that for SWOs,

establishing the CPC branches was a "death-exemption card" and "the qualification for doing social work business". And the cost was that SWOs spent less time and energy on improving social services, and lost their autonomy. According to *Liang*:

> SWOs have given up what they are good at and replaced them with Party building. Also, they become increasingly dependent on governmental funding, which prevents them from saying anything (that would irritate the government) … I think these are all business. If SWOs do not set up the CPC branches, they do not qualify for doing the social work business. Now, the rule of the game is that they have to work on Party building… It was a death-exemption card. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

Compared to co-option, establishing the CPC branches in SWOs is a more massive project of political absorption, which has incorporated hundreds of SWOs in City A and City B into the CPC's hierarchical system. As SWOs' performance in Party building is closely connected with their political security and their access to governmental resources, complying with the leadership of the CPC has become a prerequisite for working with the government and even survival. As for those SWOs that wish to remain more independent, they are likely to be excluded from channels for working with the government and other SWOs.

6.3.3 Marginalising the independent and disobedient SWOs

Besides direct incorporation, the Party-state's strategy of political incorporation also includes the marginalisation and exclusion of the independent and disobedient SWOs. They constitute the Party-state's "carrot and stick" strategy to control SWOs. As this section will detail, the marginalised SWOs are faced with huge obstacles to accessing resources, fulfilling their missions, and even survival. As a result, the suppression of the independent SWOs becomes a negative incentive which would pressure other

SWOs into affiliating themselves with the CPC. Meanwhile, even though the independent SWOs can survive surveillance and suppression, their ability to influence policymaking would be greatly weakened.

To implement political exclusion, the Party-state develops a set of criteria to identify and target politically sensitive SWOs and then adopts a range of tactics to impose restrictions upon them. Many research participants used the word "sensitive" to describe the SWOs that drew special attention and suspicion from the government. In the Chinese context, sensitive things are those that people have to avoid or treat with great care because they may bring danger and risk. When asked about what made social organisations sensitive in China, *Zheng*, a researcher in Hong Kong who spent years studying the interaction between social organisations and the government in China, believed that the government had three main criteria for identifying and blacklisting sensitive social organisations. The first criterion relates to the backgrounds and fields of practice of social organisations. *Zheng* believed that the following categories of social organisations were classified as sensitive by the government: unregistered social organisations, international NGOs and foundations, social organisations working with industrial workers, social organisations dedicated to civil rights protections, and social organisations working with sexual minorities.

The second criterion is about the sources of funding. The Chinese government is very suspicious of the social organisations that receive funding from foreign countries. *Zheng* was told by a government official that getting money from abroad was a red line that should not be exceeded by social organisations, and any organisations that receive overseas funding would look "bad" and "politically sensitive" in the current political environment.

The third criterion is about the actual activities that social organisations are involved in. As *Zheng* observed, "many social organisations would send their plans and other materials to the government for review when they wanted to carry out some activities

so that they could know whether these activities would involve anything sensitive". Similarly, *Zhang* believed that by being involved in inappropriate projects, some SWOs might "accidentally exceed the boundary or break the political norms", which "put them in a very dangerous situation". According to *Liang* and *Xu*, two independent social organisation leaders, collective actions such as petitions and civil rights advocacy were taboos for social organisations:

> In China, it's almost impossible for a social organisation to organise petitions. They are regarded as very sensitive. The government explicitly told me that petitions are not allowed. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

> Overall, I think it's very difficult for us to plan any action. For example, some migrant workers are advocating for free public education for their children through a point-based enrolment system. They are organising a petition themselves, but we are not playing any role in this action. If we mobilise them to petition, then we will die surely… Because we were involved in civil rights advocacy in the past, we are surely on the government's list (of sensitive social organisations), and we have been marginalised. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

However, it should be noted that these criteria are never formally or explicitly stipulated by the government. They are summarised by SWOs through speculation and interaction with the government. It may be the government's strategy to intentionally keep the red line blurry so that SWOs have to keep doing self-censorship and imposing increasingly stricter constraints upon themselves to ensure safety in the environment. *Liang* complained that the government never gave clear guidance, and the criteria for sensitive social organisations were changing all the time. Similarly, when asked how he knew which SWO was on the blacklist, *Zhang*, a SWO leader that worked closely with the government, shared his experience of choosing inappropriate social service partners:

> We feel quite confused because of the lack of clear guidance or boundary… We don't really know (what the red line actually is). We will only know when some problem happens. For example, a few years ago, we worked with Oxfam on a service project for internal migrant children. It was the provincial Women's Federation that introduced Oxfam to us, so we thought that there was definitely no problem. However, during those years, the director of our organisation was frequently summoned for talks. We didn't know what went wrong, but there were cases like this. (Zhang, male, executive director of a SWO)

The social organisations that are identified as politically sensitive then become the targets for political exclusion. They experience various forms of suppression from the Party-state, which can be categorised according to the degree of coercion. These include regular contact, surveillance, limitations on information dissemination, limitations on fund-raising, slandering, coercive orders, shutdown, and arrestment.

Although most independent SWOs do not collaborate with the government on any project, they were still contacted regularly by national security officers and other government officials. In these meetings, the staff of social organisations would be asked to report what they have been working on. Sometimes they would also be given mild warnings and instructions regarding their behaviours. In China, being summoned by national security officers for talks was usually termed "being invited to tea". This metaphor involves a sense of humour and implies that being contacted by the government is a common thing that social organisations can deal with calmly. As *Zheng* observed, some independent SWOs were used to being invited to tea and even treated it as a way of communication with the government.

> I think "being invited to tea" is a way of communication between NGOs and the national security agency… Many NGOs I know are contacted regularly

> by national security officers, who would ask them how they are doing and ask them to keep quiet when the National PC and the National CPPCC are about to be held. (Zheng, female, researcher)

Surveillance was a stricter form of suppression than regular contact. In most cases, the blacklisted SWOs and even some incorporated SWOs working on sensitive fields were under the national security agency's surveillance. For example, *Liang* was monitored and trailed for a period when he was suspected of collaborating with "foreign hostile forces". When I met *Hu*, a CPC member and the director of a SWO, in his organisation, he suggested that we had the interview in a café, because he wanted to avoid being seen talking to a PhD researcher in a British university by someone from the upper CPC committee. *Xu* also shared her experiences of being monitored by national security officers:

> If I communicate with someone who may be regarded as somewhat politically sensitive, then the next day I am very likely to be contacted by national security officers, who will ask me who I met and what we talked about. They always know what I do. And I'm under constant surveillance. This makes it very difficult for us to do something. The strict control over society is comprehensive. For example, we are not allowed to undertake outreach work or send out leaflets in the industrial areas in City A. Some stores are even prohibited from sending out coupons. These activities are all prohibited in the area where we work… The government has a powerful network for surveillance. Also, there is strict surveillance over the internet. We don't have the space to do anything. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

Besides surveillance, the Party-state's propaganda department impedes the blacklisted social organisations' efforts to disseminate information and knowledge to the public, such as publishing research reports. For example, NGOCN is an independent nonprofit newspaper that reports news about civil society and social issues in China. It played an

active and progressive role in the development of China's nonprofit sector, but it can be no longer accessed in mainland China. *Liang* attributed the shutdown of NGOCN to its "incorrect political stance". *Xu* reported that when her organisation wanted to publish a book about their experience of working with migrant workers, the application for publishment was denied by all the publishers she contacted.

> We summarised our experience of working with internal migrant workers, and we wanted to publish a book based on that. But when we looked for a publisher, we were told that the book was not allowed to be published. We then revised the book and made it very moderate that it only included the stories of our service users. However, it was still not allowed to be published. We couldn't disseminate what we worked out. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

The independent SWOs also face limitations on their income and fund-raising activities. *Xu*'s project of working with internal migrant workers used to be funded by Oxfam. However, since 2020, Oxfam was not permitted to fund this project anymore, which led to a financial crisis for *Xu*'s organisation. When *Xu* decided to launch an online fund-raising campaign, she learned a lesson from another independent SWO which was urged by the government to return the donation to the donors. *Xu* realised that she needed to carefully avoid reaching the blurry red line when organising fund-raising events. According to *Xu*:

> Organisation X is our important partner, its founder and I were in the same organisation in the past, and we worked on civil rights advocacy for migrant workers together. Recently, it launched a very successful online fund-raising campaign, from which it raised about 500 thousand Yuan. However, this campaign drew the attention of the government, which urged them to return the money to the donors. Now the money is stuck in the intermediate foundation, and they don't know what to do with this situation. At first, I

> wanted to join in that campaign, but now I think that if we continue to push ahead with that, we will die together…We can draw attention from the public but not too much. Therefore, we wrote a very moderate and implicit fund-raising letter. The headline was not stimulating or explosive at all… We can't say we are doing civil rights protection for injured workers. We can only say we are providing re-employment training when we raise money online. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

Some independent SWOs even face slanders that could lead to stricter control on their activities and damage to their reputation. The most common slanders were "collaborating with foreign hostile forces to attack China" and "attempting to overthrow the government" (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation). Slanders could provide the government with reasons to impose stricter suppression upon social organisations. For example, *Liang*'s organisation was suspected of being funded by foreign sensitive foundations which planned to undermine the reputation of the Chinese government. Because of the slander, his organisation was even urged to move away from where they worked by the owner of the office. *Liang* was also put under stricter surveillance, as he recalled:

> We were slandered with rumours that we received money from foreign sensitive foundations to attack China. But we did not do so. We had to keep explaining and communicating with the government leaders to convince them that we were not this kind of people… Some people spread these rumours, saying organisations like us were very dangerous. The slander came from the government system, but there were still some officials that trusted us and told us about the slander. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

Giving coercive orders is a more direct form of suppression. When independent SWOs are accidentally or deliberately involved in the activities that the government is

concerned about, they would receive coercive orders requiring them to stop their action. For example, *Xu* shared her story about being demanded to stop organising service users to submit comments on a draft policy:

> We have gone through a lot, such as crackdowns. For example, like what I just told you, the government published a public consultation draft of a policy about education for migrant children and asked for reviews and comments. Some of our service users copied a note written by our staff and pasted it into a government survey. Maybe because they submitted too many comments, the police officer then came to tell me to stop organising the migrant workers. He demanded that I dissolve the online chat group joined by migrant parents and stop doing anything on this issue. The government imposes very strict control over our activities. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

What was more powerful than coercive orders is the shutdown of SWOs and the arrestment of their staff. *Xu* shared the news that another SWO that provided services including law education and legal aid for internal migrant workers was just shut down recently. Unfortunately, a year after the interview with *Xu*, I learned from *Xu* that her organisation had to close down in 2022. In addition, as *Xu* and *Liang* noted with regret, people working for the SWOs that were involved in politically sensitive activities faced a high risk of arrestment.

> Over the years, many of my friends who are dedicated to civil rights protections have been put into prison. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

> Many people who work for independent social organisations like us have been arrested. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

In response to the various forms of suppression from the Party-state, and to survive, the

independent SWOs had to impose stricter self-censorship upon themselves and try to refrain from discourses and activities that might put them in danger.

> We exercise self-censorship. We no longer do the things that are forbidden… We wrote our service plans in a very moderate way. For example, we said we would only do some research on point-based education enrolment system for migrant children, and provide information for the PC deputies, and things like these. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

> Our services are about corporate social responsibility. We will get into trouble if we say we are dedicated to legal aid for industrial workers, so we don't say so. And the workers do not care about whether we provide legal aid. It's ok as long as we can help them. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

However, self-censorship and self-constraint do not change the fact that the independent SWOs are excluded from the mainstream social service domain as well as the incorporated spaces for policy practice. As *Xu* and *Liang* reported, because of their politically sensitive status, their organisations became marginalised and were excluded from policy consultations and other forms of collaboration with the government. In addition, as *Liang* and *Zhang* noted, other SWOs that wished to remain in a close relationship with the government would avoid contact with the blacklisted SWOs. According to them:

> We have never been invited to any policy consultations. We are a marginalised SWO that gains particular attention from the government. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

> We don't have any communication with the government anymore… We have been looking for collaboration with the government all the time. However,

since 2015, our relationship with the government has been turning worse and worse. The number of SWOs that are willing to work with me has also decreased because people think I am dangerous and it's risky to work with me. Everyone wants to stay safe, so they avoid working with me. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

For example, we provide services about sex education. You know, some feminist organisations also work on sex education and do it more radically. We encountered some problems when we selected our partners because we were not sure about their political stances and styles. There was a time we worked with an organisation that was on the blacklist, and it affected our relationship with the WF and the government, which later had a bad opinion of us. (Zhang, male, executive director of a SWO)

While the access to the incorporated spaces for policy practice is closed for the independent SWOs, they also avoid using the bottom-up approach to create their own spaces to influence policymaking, as it could lead to harsh suppression from the Party-state. The independent SWOs are put into a very difficult situation, in which they struggle to survive but are hindered from enhancing their ability to influence social issues and policymaking. As *Xu* summarised, the bottom-up approach for policy practice that worked in the past was no longer permitted. She was confused about what action her organisation could take to influence policymaking in the current political environment.

In the past, we did a great job of policy practice, which was systematic work. We organised petitions, visited a range of government departments, performed performance art, worked with media to cover social issues, worked with academics to conduct research, and attended academic conferences. We did comprehensive work in the past. However, these are all impossible now…To be honest, we are in a confused state of mind. The bottom-up

approach doesn't seem to work anymore. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

By implementing political marginalisation and exclusion, the Party-state disempowers the independent SWOs that reject political incorporation and weakens their influence in the social service and social policy domains. Although political exclusion does not directly contribute to the incorporation of the majority of SWOs into the social governance system, it promotes SWOs' negative incentives to affiliate themselves with the establishment to secure essential resources. As a result, the SWOs that are incorporated into the CPC-led social governance system are given increasing opportunities to participate in policy practice as the arms of the Party-state, while the independent SWOs are excluded from the policy process and are even under the threat of diverse types of suppression. *Liang* used an old Chinese saying to describe the effects of political incorporation and exclusion. By saying "die", he meant that the marginalised social organisations may face diverse types of suppression including the crackdown from the Party-state. According to *Liang*:

Let those complying with me thrive and those resisting me die. (Liang, male, director of an independent service-oriented social organisation)

6.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has reported the two key mechanisms that lead to the creation of the incorporated spaces for SWOs' policy practice: contractual incorporation and political incorporation. Figure 6.1 presents a conceptual map for understanding the key research findings in this chapter.

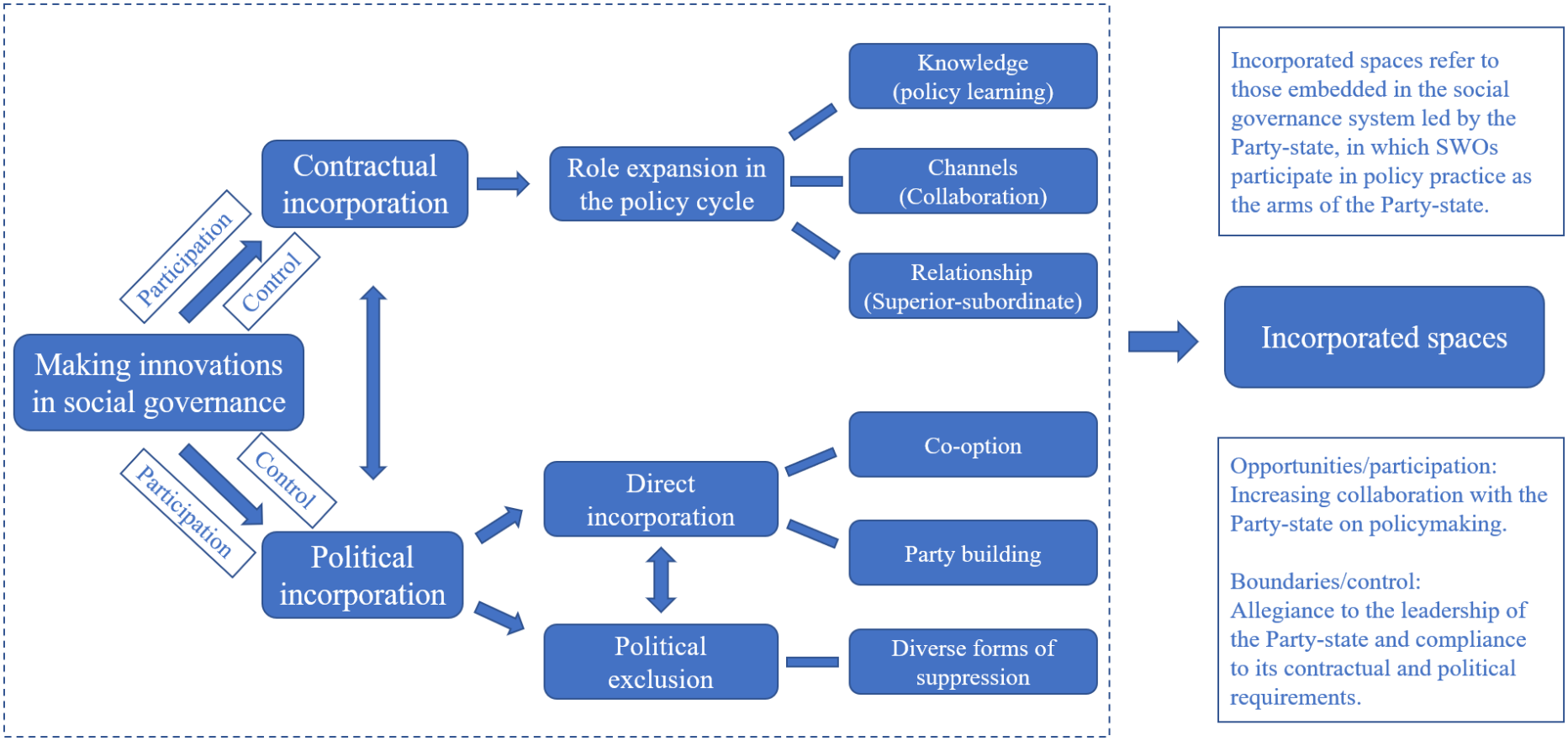

Figure 6.1 Conceptual map of Chapter 6

The Party-state's agenda of making innovations to social governance implies both participation and control, as the Party-state intends to increase social organisations' involvement in solving social problems, and at the same time suppress their potential for mobilising citizens and challenging the authority of the ruling party. In this context, the Party-state has adopted contracting out social services as a policy tool to involve SWOs in social governance. Contracting has created opportunities for SWOs to influence policymaking as it incorporates SWOs into the policy process and enables them to experience role expansion: expanding their influence over the interrelated stages of the policy cycle. More specifically, role expansion was realised through three processes. Firstly, SWOs acquire the knowledge and skills of policy practice through policy learning. Secondly, contracting has opened up new channels for SWO-government communication and collaboration. Thirdly, contracting has defined and reinforced the superior-subordinate relationship between the government and SWOs. It is worth noting that contracting not only creates opportunities for SWOs' participation in policy-making but also strengthened the Party-state's control over SWOs.

Besides contracting, the Party-state has used political incorporation and exclusion as its "carrot and stick" strategy to enhance its control over SWOs. Direct political incorporation includes two main tactics: co-opting SWOs leaders into the establishment and involving SWOs in Party-building work. By doing so, the Party-state has put the majority of SWOs under its political leadership. As for those SWOs that wish to remain more politically independent, the Party-state tend to exclude them from the mainstream social service domain by enforcing various types of suppression. The sufferings of the independent social organisations have become the negative incentives for other SWOs to pledge allegiance to the CPC. In return, the majority of SWOs have been given increasing resources as well as opportunities to participate in policy practice as the arms of the Party-state.

The two mechanisms of contractual incorporation and political incorporation together have contributed to the creation of incorporated spaces: the participatory spaces for

social work policy practice that are incorporated into the social governance system led by the Party-state. Incorporated spaces have provided a lot of opportunities for SWOs' participation in policymaking but also set strict boundaries and control. Although SWOs are increasingly involved in the collaboration with policymakers, they have to abide by the rule of authoritarian politics and build political affiliation with the Party-state. As a result, in these spaces, SWOs have become the arms of the Party-state assisting with policymaking rather than completely autonomous policy advocates. Then, what changes can SWOs make to policies? How do they attempt to influence policymaking within the political constraints? The next chapter will report how SWOs participate in policy practice in the incorporated spaces.

Chapter 7 Policy practice in incorporated spaces

7.1 Introduction

As shown in the previous chapters, the Chines Party-state has adopted the strategies of contractual and political incorporation to involve SWOs in social governance. These two mechanisms play crucial roles in creating the incorporated spaces for policy practice. They not only create a lot of opportunities for SWOs to take part in policymaking but also set the rules and boundaries of incorporated spaces by reinforcing the power relation between SWOs and the Party-state. In this way, they shape SWOs' participation in policy practice in the Chinese context.

This chapter reports how SWOs participate in policy practice in incorporated spaces. It first examines how incorporated spaces affect SWOs' perception of policy practice in China by looking into what policies SWOs tend to influence, what role they think they should play in the policy process, and how SWOs tend to work with policymakers. Then, this chapter discusses the hierarchical division in the social work profession regarding participation in policy practice, which makes social work elites the main policy actors in incorporated spaces. Third, this chapter reports the six institutionalised and five non-institutionalised policy practice methods used by SWOs and provides examples from the research participants' experiences. Finally, this chapter concludes with key research findings and observation of SWOs' role in incorporated spaces.

7.2 Incorporated spaces shaping SWOs' understanding of policy practice

By defining the opportunities for taking part in policymaking and the boundaries and restrictions of participation, contractual and political incorporation have also shaped SWO leaders' understanding of policy practice in China, which is characterised by the

emphasis on service delivery, experimentation-based policy process, and collaboration with the Party-state.

7.2.1 Contracting and service-related policy practice

The Chinese Party-state's agenda of enhancing social governance gave SWOs a clear mandate to be involved in the delivery and development of welfare services. To some extent, SWOs have built their legitimacy upon their professional roles in contracted-out social services which are aimed at managing social problems and maintaining social stability. Therefore, delivering social services was perceived as not only the main task of SWOs but also the foundation for their engagement in the policy-making process. For example, a SWO leader, *Li*, noticed the importance of both using existing social policies to support service users and thinking about policy improvement in the process of service delivery. According to *Li*, this required social workers to be observant service providers that were able to reflect on policies:

> I personally think that policy practice is about… We need to understand within what system we work. Also, we need to be clear about what policies we can use to help and support our service users, and what policies can create conditions for them to improve their abilities. In addition, when we deliver social services, we need to discover what policies are missing but needed by service users, and what policies conflict with service users' needs. We need to be observant and report how policies can be improved. (Li, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Research participants' understanding of policy practice indicates a strong connection between direct social service and policy practice. For SWOs, policy practice is not an independent type of practice that can be detached from direct service. Instead, social service delivery builds a foundation for policy practice. Why did research participants believe that there was an important link between service delivery and policy practice?

As discussed in the previous chapter, delivering contracted-out social services enables SWOs to enter the government's policy-making process where SWOs initially take up the role of implementing policies and later realise role expansion and develop their influence over other stages of the policy process. As a result, most policies that SWOs attempted to influence were at the programme and service level and related to the social services that SWOs specialise in. The policies influenced by the interviewed SWO leaders are summarised in table 7.1, from which it can be seen that the contracting mechanism not only involves SWOs in the policy process where policies on welfare services are formulated, implemented, and changed, but also makes SWOs' enthusiasm for policy practice more focused on those service-related policies. According to a SWO leader:

> It is difficult for us to influence big policies such as social assistance, education, and health care at the national level. However, as for regional policies, especially those on social services, we have some influence over them. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

As shown in Table 7.1, the interviewed SWO leaders reported 48 cases of policy practice. The policies that the research participants and their colleagues attempted to influence can be classified into ten fields according to their contents: children and youths (11), development of the social work profession and social work services (10), seniors (8), regional social services planning (4), women (4), drug abuse (3), community development (3), people with disabilities (2), health care (2), migrant workers (1).

Table 7.1 Policies that research participants attempted to influence

Policies	**Policy level**
Children and youths (11 cases)	
1. Developing school social work service in a province	Provincial
2. Developing youth services in a district of City B	County

3. Developing youth services in a district of City B	County
4. Developing standards of youth services in a district of City B	County
5. Providing financial aid for university students in poverty in a province	Provincial
6. Establishing the appropriate adult system in a province	Provincial
7. Developing anti-bullying services in schools in City B	Prefectural
8. Building child-friendly communities in City A	Prefectural
9. Providing safety education for migrant children in City A	Prefectural
10. Examining pre-primary education in a district of City A	County
11. Designing youth services in a sub-district of City A	Township
Development of the social work profession and social work services (10 cases)	
12. Building a professional social work workforce in City A	Prefectural
13. Building a professional social work workforce in a district of City B	County
14. Building a professional social work workforce in a district of City B	County
15. Providing comprehensive professional training for social workers in City A	Prefectural
16. Providing training on practice and research for social workers in a district of City A	County
17. Formulating regulations on social work services in City B	Prefectural
18. Developing operational standards of family service centres in City B	Prefectural
19. Formulating administrative measures for social work service centres in City B	Prefectural
20. Developing government contracting out social services mechanism in City A	Prefectural
21. Organising social work service centres open days for media in City A	Prefectural

Seniors (8 cases)	
22. Providing home modifications for seniors ageing in place in City B	Prefectural
23. Providing home modifications for seniors ageing in place in a sub-district of City B	Township
24. Providing free early screening for seniors with cognitive impairment in City B	Prefectural
25. Building an age-friendly city in City B	Prefectural
26. Developing hospice care in hospitals and nursing homes in City B	Prefectural
27. Formulating a national guide to social work services for seniors	National
28. Developing elderly care services in a province	Provincial
29. Providing personal emergency link service for seniors in City A	Prefectural
Regional social services planning (4 cases)	
30. Overall planning of social services in a city next to City B	Prefectural
31. Overall planning of social services in a district of a city next to City B	County
32. Overall planning of social services in a district of City B	County
33. Improving and integrating social services in a sub-district of City A	Township
Women (4 cases)	
34. Formulating the national anti-domestic violence law	National
35. Developing family mediation services in City B	Prefectural
36. Developing comprehensive services for women and children in City A	Prefectural
37. Contributing to the amendments to the national Marriage Law	National
Drug abuse (3 cases)	
38. Developing drug abuse prevention and rehabilitation services in City A	Prefectural

39. Combining Party building and drug rehabilitation services in a district of a city next to City B	County
40. Establishment of the association of anti-drug abuse social workers and volunteers in City A	Prefectural
Community development (3 cases)	
41. Making a series of documentaries on the local culture and history of City A	Prefectural
42. Developing the "Beautiful Countryside" community development project in a sub-district of City B	Township
43. Adjusting the implementation of the garbage classification measures in a sub-district of City B	Township
People with disabilities (2 cases)	
44. Providing transport concessions for people with disabilities in City B	Prefectural
45. Formulating standards of social work services for people with disabilities in City A	Prefectural
Health care (2 cases)	
46. Providing medical aid for children with thalassemia in City B	Prefectural
47. Developing medical social work services in City B	Prefectural
Migrant workers (1 case)	
48. Building community centres for migrant workers in City B	Prefectural

Besides the policies on the general development of the social work profession and social services in China, most of the policies listed above are highly related to the specific social services contracted out to SWOs. In addition, these policies also cover the key social services for development prioritised by the provincial government, including services for families (with a particular focus on women and children), youths, seniors, and the disadvantaged (including people with disabilities or serious diseases, and migrant workers). In other words, SWOs' efforts to influence policymaking can be

regarded as an extension of service delivery, which is largely aimed at working with the government to increase and improve contracted-out welfare services.

This service-related policy practice follows an incremental style, as SWOs seldom propose radical policy changes to tackle structural inequalities or opposed the decisions made by the government. For example, the household registration system is often attributed to the inequality of China's welfare system (Chan, 2010), as the lack of an urban household registration is likely to exclude domestic migrant workers from basic public services such as education and health care in cities where they work (Wu, 2011; Yuan et al., 2019). While the independent SWO founded by one of the research participants (*Xu*) attempts to support domestic migrant workers and advocate their children's right to access free public education, SWOs in the incorporated spaces tend to avoid explicitly criticising or tackling this structural root of welfare inequality. Instead, they choose to work with the government to develop more inclusive social services for domestic migrant workers and their children. For example, *Luo*'s organisation set up a service centre in a "village in the city"[20] and carried out a child development programme for domestic migrant children with support from the local Women's Federation. Similarly, the colleagues of *Zhu* were involved in establishing a community centre for domestic migrant workers, which provided comprehensive services such as vocational training, recreational activities, and early childhood development services. This centre was visited and given high credits by cadres from municipal, provincial, and even central governments, and was copied to more communities with endorsement from authorities at various levels. However, the welfare exclusion has not been solved, as the household registration system remains and limits domestic migrant workers' access to a range of basic public services.

[20] "Villages in the city" (城中村 *Cheng Zhong Cun*) refer to the urban residential areas which were once rural villages but later became settlements for the domestic migrant workers during the rapid urbanisation process. They first emerged in the Pearl River Delta region of China and were often associated with poor infrastructure and public services (Lin *et al*., 2011).

SWOs' policy practice in the incorporated spaces has a particular focus on influencing service-related policies to solve individual rather than structural problems. This may explain why SWO leaders attached great importance to thinking and working on policies while delivering social services because they might have opportunities to influence what services would be contracted out and how they would be designed and provided. As explained by the deputy director of a SWO:

> I think that social workers should understand what policies they need in their fields of practice. For example, social workers work on diverse types of social services, such as community development, drug rehabilitation, mental health service, and school social work. We should understand what kind of policy practice we want to participate in, which is based on the consideration of social services and the needs of service users. What do we want from policies? What services are needed? What statutory power do social workers need? And how policies can be adjusted accordingly? These are what social workers should think about. (Li, female, deputy director of a SWO)

SWOs' focus on service-related policies indicates that the contracting mechanism has consolidated SWOs' role as the experts in the social service domain as well as in the incorporated spaces for policy practice. While SWOs have been given increasing opportunities to participate in policymaking, they do not cast off their mission assigned by the Party-state: contributing to social governance and solving individual problems through the delivery of welfare services and the development of relevant policies.

7.2.2 Policy experimentation

Another reason for the linkage between service delivery and policy practice in SWOs' understanding of policy practice is that SWOs are often involved in policy experiments by initiating or undertaking pilot social service programmes. Policy experimentation is a key mechanism in China's distinctive policy-making process, which is characterised

by the features of "learning by doing" (Heilmann & Melton, 2013: 17) and "innovating through implementation first, and drafting universal laws and regulations later" (Heilmann, 2008: 4). The mechanism of policy experimentation is widely used in the development of social services in China. When the central or local governments intend to develop a new social service, they purposefully choose a site in a lower-level jurisdiction to run a pilot scheme in which SWOs or other kinds of social service providers are usually involved and proposed social service is carried out and tested. Once the pilot scheme is evaluated as successful by the government, it will be promoted as a formal policy and implemented on a larger scale and/or in more regions.

The development of the community service centres in City B is an example of how policy experimentation leads to formal policy-making. Inspired by the Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) in Hong Kong and similar services in other cities in mainland China, the BCA in City B decided to introduce this social service model to its jurisdiction. In 2010, the BCA of City B started a policy experiment by contracting out dozens of pilot community service centres to SWOs. One year later, the pilot programmes achieved the desired effect expected by the BCA, which then proposed to set up one community service centre in every sub-district in the city. By the end of 2014, more than 150 community service centres had been established in City B. *Lin*, a senior social work researcher from Hong Kong who participated in the design of community service centres in City B as a key advisor to the BCA, recalled that:

> The government of City B was very satisfied with the inclusive services provided by the several pilot community service centres, so it decided to roll out the services all over the city just after one year (of policy experiment). (Lin, female, a senior social work researcher from Hong Kong and the founder of a SWO)

The policy experiment on community service centres was planned and started by the government and joined by SWOs. In some cases, pilot programmes are initiated by

SWOs and later draw attention from the government, which is motivated to develop a policy based on SWOs' innovative work. For example, the SWO that *Luo* worked for carried out two youth service programmes in two middle schools with funding from a foundation in 2005. These two programmes were later noticed and promoted by the district-level and municipal-level government, which partnered with the SWO to develop a pilot scheme on a larger scale in 2008 and began to outsource youth services to SWOs in 2012. By the time this study was conducted, *Luo* was working with the provincial Communist Youth League to discuss the possibility of rolling out school social work services to all cities in the province. Figure 7.1 illustrates how youth services were developed in district X through the process of policy experimentation, in which service delivery generated crucial data for decision-making.

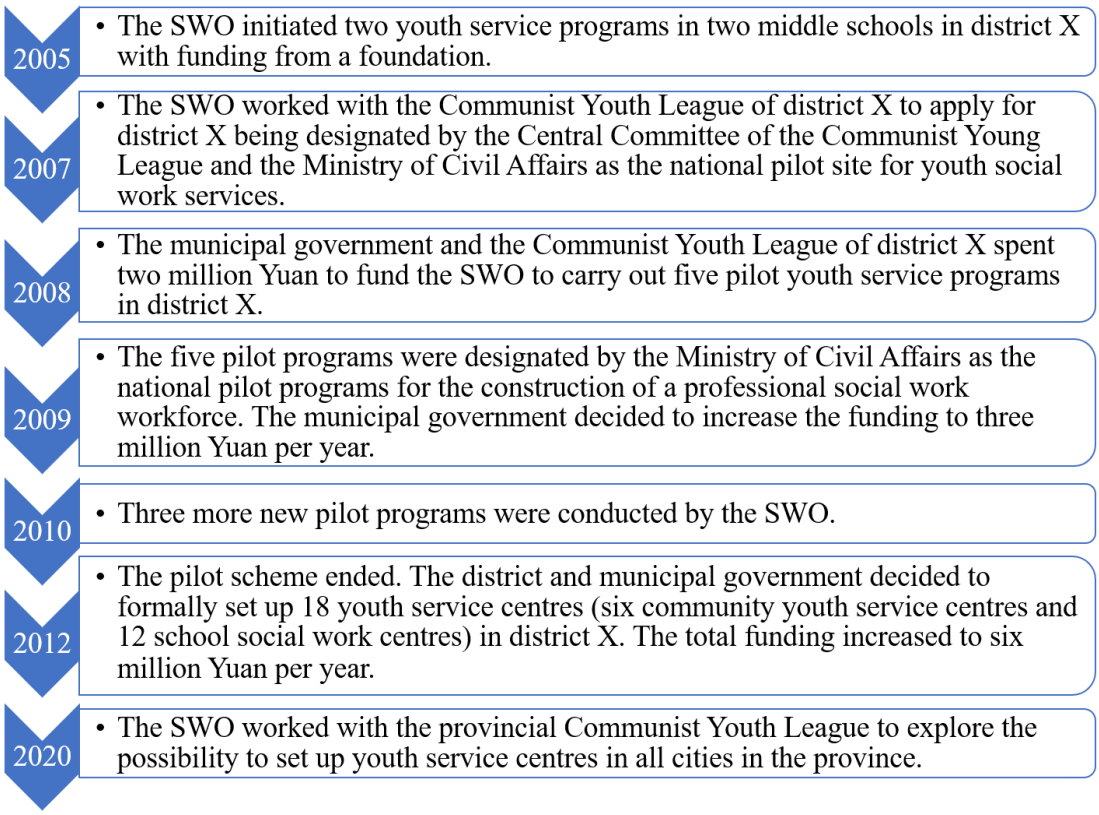

Figure 7.1 The development of youth services in district X

As *Luo* recalled:

> When we discussed youth services with the government, we provided a lot of service-related data, including how youth services were developed in other regions and countries, what support policy could provide, and what we did in the pilot programmes in district X. We have been providing youth services since 2005. We have built a solid base (of service experience), so we can let the government know how to further develop community youth services and school social work services. (Luo, female, manager of the department of youth services in a SWO)

In the mechanism of policy experimentation, service delivery, which implies the trial or preliminary implementation of a proposed social policy, may precede the formal drafting and enactment of a policy. As such, service delivery becomes a crucial stage of the experimentation-based policy process. As *Zhu*, the director of a SWO, observed:

> It is not that we have a policy first, and then we deliver the service. This is not a common case. Usually, we need to try service first, and then we get the data through research or whatever, and we provide feedback to the government. Then we can talk about what improvement to policy is needed. This is a common process. (Zhu, female, director of an SWO)

In addition, although most of the policies that research participants attempted to influence were located at the local level, some SWO leaders managed to influence policies at the provincial and even national level through the mechanism of policy experimentation under hierarchy. As shown in Table 7.2, the administrative divisions of China follow a hierarchical system and consist of four administrative levels: provincial level, prefectural level, county level, and township level. The CPC committees, PCs, CPPCCs, and governments of each administrative level are the main policymakers that are responsible for formulating policies implemented in their jurisdictions (Chan *et al*., 2008: 45-56). In the mechanism of policy experimentation under hierarchy, hands-on experimentation is delegated to local officials who are

responsible for initiating and running pilot policy programmes, while the central government plays a key role in coordinating the reform process and scaling up and generalising local innovations (Heilmann, 2008). When the local programmes achieve success, higher-level authorities formulate policies to roll out and scale up the policy programmes in their jurisdictions.

Table 7.2 Structural hierarchy of the administrative divisions of China

Administrative level	**Types of administrative regions**	**Examples[21]**
Provincial level (1st)	provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities under the direct jurisdiction of the central government, special administrative regions	Guangdong province
Prefectural level (2nd)	prefecture-level cities, prefectures, autonomous prefectures, leagues	Guangzhou city
County level (3rd)	counties, districts, county-level cities, autonomous counties, etc.	Tianhe district of Guangzhou
Township level (4th)	towns, subdistricts, townships, ethnic townships, etc.	Tianyuan subdistrict of Tianhe district, Guangzhou

SWOs are usually registered at the prefectural and county levels, and only very few of them are registered at the provincial level, not to mention nationally registered SWOs. Accordingly, SWOs are usually funded by local governments and carry out social service programmes at lower administrative levels. SWOs' position in the administrative hierarchy makes it very difficult for them to influence provincial and national policies. However, by working with local governments to successfully run

[21] My hometown, Guangzhou city, is used as an example here.

policy experiments, SWOs can navigate through the hierarchical system and participate in policy-making at higher levels.

For example, *Huang*, the director of a SWO and a seasoned social worker specialising in elderly services, was invited to participate in the formulation of the national guide to social work services for seniors with the recommendation from the BCA of City A. Prior to this task at the national level, *Huang* was involved in developing a series of policies relating to services for seniors in City A. In the context of rapid ageing in China, these innovative local policies drew the attention of the central government (Ministry of Civil Affairs), and it delegated the policy drafting task to the BCA of City A, which set up a policy formulation team joined by *Huang* and other social work practitioners and academics. Social workers and the local authority's collaboration in policy innovations led to the formulation of a new national service policy, as noted by *Huang*:

> I have participated in the drafting of almost all important policies relating to social work services for seniors in City A. And I have more experience in this field than many of my colleagues, that's why I was invited to draft (the national guide to social work services for seniors) …Shanghai and some other cities also do a great job in services for older people, but the Ministry of Civil Affairs wanted City A to take up this task. I think it was because they recognised the relevant policies that we made in City A. (Huang, female, director of a SWO)

In the context of making innovations in social governance, governments at all levels in China have been looking for new social service programmes to meet the emerging social needs and settle social unrest. By running pilot social service programmes, SWOs provide and test possible solutions to a range of social problems. These grassroots innovations, after receiving recognition from policymakers, can become formal policies adopted by higher-level authorities and implemented on a larger scale. This approach to influencing policy has shaped SWO leaders' understanding of policy practice: in the

incorporated spaces, policy practice can be integrated into the government's experimentation-based policy process. To achieve this, SWOs need to establish a collaborative relationship with the government.

7.2.3 Collaboration with the government

The third key element of SWO leaders' perception of policy practice in the incorporated spaces is the collaboration with the government. According to the CPC's elaboration of social governance, the CPC should play a leading role, while social forces should collaborate. Collaboration defines SWOs' roles as helpers and assistants of the government and requires SWOs' subordination to the leadership of the CPC and the government it has formed. That is to say, collaboration does not build upon a basis where the government and social organisations, including SWOs, share equal status. On the contrary, government-SWO collaboration in the Chinese political context can mean participation under hierarchy, which is aimed at maintaining and strengthening the government's unchallengeable hegemony but at the same time encouraging social organisations' participation in solving social problems. In terms of policy practice, the interview data seems to reveal that SWO leaders accepted the notion of collaboration under hierarchy. As noted by three SWO leaders:

> SWOs do not play a leading role in policy-making, but we can collaborate. The government always sees social workers as those who assist it. (Zhu, female, director of an SWO)

> SWOs have very limited power over policy-making. The government plays a leading role, and we respond to its demands. We can provide policy suggestions to the government but we are less powerful. (Wang, female, deputy director of an SWO)

> Policy practice takes place in a cooperative relationship. As the government

> is the purchaser of social services, we need to meet its needs… Social workers need to follow the policy trends and meet the needs of the government, meet the needs of the public and improve policies together with the government. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

Policy practice without a collaborative relationship with the government is even perceived as dangerous by SWOs. *Zhao*, the general director of a social work professional association, made a comparison between policy practice in Hong Kong and mainland China and talked a lot about how political restrictions shaped policy practice with Chinese characteristics. When we talked about the diverse forms of strategies used by NGOs in Western democracies to influence policymaking, *Zhao* shared her conversation with a government official, in which the official expressed his anger at Hong Kong social workers who participated in the recent anti-extradition law movement. As *Zhao* recalled:

> We can only collaborate. We just listen (to the government). In the recent situations in Hong Kong, it is said that many social workers took to the streets. Then one of our government leaders said it was social workers that led the riots. He said: "Are we going to raise a group of social workers that riot?" The national conditions are different. We do not even have statutory civil rights. How can we use methods such as demonstrations and strikes (to influence policy)? It is impossible. (Zhao, female, director of a social work professional association)

Drawing on the differences between the political environments in Hong Kong and mainland China, *Zhao* asserted that Chinese social workers can only comply with the leadership of the CPC and engage in policy practice as assistants of the government. Otherwise, "social workers would be eliminated". Although *Zhao* did not literally mean that social workers would be killed if they stood against the government, this word indicates SWOs' fear of the serious consequences that radical policy practice may lead

to, such as diverse forms of suppression from the state over the social work profession. Therefore, according to *Zhao*, "pleasing" and cooperating with the government is the smarter and even only option. This has become common sense for SWOs in the incorporated spaces. As *Zhao* commented:

> And now we need to carry out social work practice under the leadership of the Party. I think this is a way to develop social work with Chinese characteristics… What are the missions of social work? Aren't we going to make people's lives better and help the disadvantaged? I don't think standing against the government could help us fulfil our missions. No, it won't help… Maybe someone would say social workers in Hong Kong succeeded in influencing policies by using confrontational strategies. For example, my former external supervisors from Hong Kong used to tell me how they held rallies to advocate policy changes. However, we have very different political conditions. Hong Kong social workers could use demonstrations and strikes to pressure the government into paying attention to certain social issues. But here, given our national conditions, social workers would be eliminated if they go to rallies and shout slogans. With the skin gone, to what can the hair attach itself? What can we advocate if the profession is gone? Instead, why don't we please the government and seek better cooperation? In other words, we can fulfil our missions through a circuitous route. Don't you think this is a smarter choice? (Zhao, female, director of a social work professional association)

Zhao's explanation of policy practice in China shows that the collaboration between SWOs and the government takes place as an incorporating process through which SWOs become a useful, reliable, and loyal arm of the Party-state. In return, they are provided with increased resources and legitimacy. Nevertheless, incorporated spaces may weaken and limit SWOs' political autonomy in holding an independent stance on

policy issues, and confine their role in the policy process to assisting rather than criticising or challenging the Party-state.

The nature of collaboration — the incorporation of SWOs into the Party-state's social governance system — is highlighted in SWOs' reactive policy practice. The interviewed SWO leaders perceived being invited by the government to provide policy advice as reactive, as in those cases the government usually had a clear policy agenda and even already decided on the main contents of a policy, and intentionally involved SWOs in policy formulation. Many research participants believed that reactive policy practice was more common and effective in China. For example, *Huang* recalled that she was more often invited by the government to participate in policymaking than proactively proposing policy solutions. *Ma* compared reactive policy practice with the bottom-up policy practice and believed that reactive policy practice was more effective given China's political environment where the government has dominant power over policymaking. According to these two SWO leaders:

> In most cases, I was invited by the government to participate in policy practice. For example, when the government reviewed its elderly care policy, it invited me to offer advice. As far as I can recall, I was usually reactive. I mean, I reacted to the government's invitation to contribute to policy-making. (Huang, female, director of a SWO)

> I think that reactive policy practice is more effective (than proactive policy practice). In China, a strong government holds a dominant position in policy-making. When it proposes to do something, that must be the thing that it really wants to achieve. And the government just wants some professional advice in this process. Therefore, in terms of effectiveness and feasibility, I think reactive policy practice works better than the bottom-up approach. (Ma, executive director of a SWO)

To summarise, incorporated spaces have framed SWOs' mindset regarding what policy practice is and how it can be conducted in the context of China. The Party-state uses the "carrot and stick" approach to create incorporated spaces and it has impacted greatly on SWOs' participation in the policy arena. As a stick hanging over SWOs' heads, the political risk of suppression constitutes a negative incentive for SWOs to limit their political autonomy while trying to influence policymaking. At the same time, having opportunities to enter the government's policy process becomes the carrot that motivates SWOs to cooperate with the government, although collaboration under hierarchy may reinforce the unequal relationship. From the perspective of SWOs, policy practice includes three key elements: achieving good performance in delivering social services, entering the government's experimentation-based policy process, and maintaining collaboration with the government. These three elements prevailed in the research participants' discourse on policy practice and the cases of policy practice they shared. In its broadest sense, policy practice includes any attempt by social workers to influence policymaking. However, characterised by these elements, policy practice by SWOs in the incorporated spaces in China seems more restricted: it is integrated into the government's experimentation-based policy process in which SWOs play the role of the assistants of the Party-state and contribute to formulating or improving the policies that relate to social services or concern service users.

7.3 Main actors in policy practice: the targets for incorporation

Although the majority of SWOs have entered the incorporated spaces, not all social work professionals in these organisations have opportunities to participate in policy practice. The government not only selectively drives SWOs to enter the incorporated spaces and excludes those wishing to remain more independent, but also further selects social work elites and deliberately provides them with access to policymaking. This study finds that SWO leaders are the main actors in policy practice in the incorporated spaces, while front-line social workers are seldom involved in relevant activities. For

example, *Gao* was a former front-line social worker who had an interest in research and policy. Because of his career development plan, he gave up his job as the manager of a community service centre and got a new job in a social work professional association, where he hoped to get more opportunities to engage in research and policy practice. According to *Gao*:

> When I was a front-line social worker, I seldom and even never participated in policy practice. That's true. I spent 98% of my time doing direct services, thinking about how to solve individual problems and how to improve services. Maybe SWO directors and people at their level have more participation (in policy practice). As SWO leaders, they have some kind of status[22], right? And they can be invited into local PCs and CPPCCs. With such status, they definitely have more opportunities to participate. (Gao, male, former front-line social worker, manager of the research department of a social work professional association)

Similarly, when asked about whether front-line practitioners could influence policymaking, *Zhao*, the general director of another social work professional association, observed that they were seldom involved in policy practice:

> Honestly speaking, front-line social workers seldom participate in policy practice. SWO bosses and those who become PC deputies and Party representatives have more opportunities to give a voice representing the profession and influence policymaking. (Zhao, female, director of a social work professional association)

The above quotations show that hierarchical division occurs within SWOs where social work professionals at different levels have very different influence over policymaking.

[22] "身份" in Chinese, *Shen Fen*. This word usually implies higher social status and some kind of privilege.

While SWO leaders are the target group for incorporation into the political establishment, front-line social workers are more likely to be used as cheap labour in social service delivery. They are not only inundated with a great amount of workload resulting from the service contracts and the performance evaluation system but also have to accomplish extra administrative work beyond their contracts assigned by the contracting government departments and grassroots government cadres. As a result, front-line social workers not only have very limited time and energy thinking about influencing policymaking, but they are also positioned at the bottom of the hierarchical system in the incorporated spaces. From the perspective of the government, the main duty of front-line social workers is to deliver social services. Being treated as foot soldiers rather than the target for incorporation, front-line social workers are therefore given very limited opportunities to participate in policy-making. As noted by two SWO leaders:

> At present, front-line social workers are in a difficult situation. They can hardly secure their professional roles and autonomy because many grassroots government officials have a different understanding of the role of social workers and believe that social workers should do whatever they are assigned to do. This may lead to the bureaucratisation of social work. In such situations, social workers can hardly play a professional role, not to mention participate in policy practice. (Zhang, male, executive director of a SWO)

> Front-line social workers have very few opportunities (to participate in policy practice). Government officials and front-line workers do not share equal status. Social workers have a lower status in communities, and every grassroots government department can give them orders. You can imagine how difficult it is for a lower class to influence the upper class. There isn't a mechanism for equal dialogues, and front-line social workers seldom have opportunities to participate in policy discussions. (Wang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

In addition, as front-line social workers are not expected or invited to participate in policymaking, they are seldom provided with professional training and support regarding how to influence policy. At present, universities, social work professional associations, and SWOs are the main providers of education and occupational training for front-line practitioners. However, according to two research participants with rich front-line experience, they lacked confidence in participating in policy practice as they seldom received relevant training and supervision:

> I think there are several reasons (for front-line social workers' limited participation in policy practice). Firstly, we never received any education or training on policy practice. You know, to influence policies or give policy advice, we need to have experience, and we need to understand the rule of the game…… Policymaking involves diverse stakeholders and entails careful consideration. For example, diverse policy fields, different processes, and different government departments. Policy practice has a high entry barrier for social workers. (Gao, male, former front-line social worker, manager of the research department of a social work professional association)

> As front-line social workers, we are seldom taught or supervised to influence policymaking. Policy practice is usually a task for the executives and managers of our organisation, who have a broader policy horizon (Guo, female, manager of a community service centre).

One crucial strategy used by the Chinese Party-state to maintain and strengthen its legitimacy is to incorporate the elites from all professions into the political establishment. Being viewed as social service experts and the elite class of the social work profession, SWO leaders have become the target for incorporation. The word "status" was mentioned many times by research participants when they explained why SWO leaders had more access to the policy-making process than front-line social

workers. Although gaining status in the political establishment (eg. PCs, CPPCCs, and government advisory committees) may not give SWO leaders solid decision-making power, it gives them a kind of symbolic political resource which enables them to be incorporated into the government's policy process and exercise a certain degree of influence. *Gao* used an example to explain the importance of status in the establishment to influencing policymaking:

> Take *Feng*[23] as an example, he is the part-time deputy secretary of the national Communist Youth League. Although he doesn't have real power, he has got a status that is very important in the political establishment and the political discourse. Why does the government want to invite him to consultation and listen to him? It is because of the value coming from his status. The same opinion coming from *Feng* would have much more influence than coming from me, right? I believe that he has more opportunities to participate in policy practice because of his resources and his connection with the government… The closer you are to the government, the more information and resources you will get, right? Front-line social workers like me don't have this kind of status. We can only keep working and working (on service delivery) like horses. We can only accept the arrangements. That's it. (Gao, male, former front-line social worker, manager of the research department of a social work professional association)

The incorporated spaces do not seem to be democratic spaces where the powerless such as front-line social workers and even service users can voice their opinions and participate in policy-making. In contrast, these spaces aim to selectively let social work elites, who are relatively more powerful with more authority and resources, get into the Party-state's social governance system and contribute their expertise to policymaking. Although SWO leaders can work with front-line social workers and channel their

[23] Pseudonym for the founder and director of a well-known SWO.

opinions into policymaking, the interview data suggests that this is not a common scene. Policy practice is seldom perceived as the main duty of front-line social workers, who are expected to devote most of their energy to service delivery. And although delivering social service is vital for SWOs to get into the government's policy process, those undertaking this task have very limited opportunities to participate in policy practice. Instead, being the executives and representatives of SWOs, social work elites have become the main actors in the incorporated spaces for policy practice.

7.4 Methods of policy practice in the incorporated spaces

This section illustrates the 11 most frequently used methods of policy practice with examples of how SWOs endeavoured to influence policymaking in the incorporated spaces. According to the level of institutionalisation, these methods could be categorised into two sub-types: institutionalised methods that enable SWOs to work directly and formally with policy-makers on the formulation or improvement of policy, and non-institutionalised methods that are not directly associated with formal policy-making activities. In addition, as the examples will show, regardless of the degree to which these methods are institutionalised, they are all applied in a nonconfrontational and collaborative way. By using these methods, SWOs try to achieve policy changes through collaboration with the government and at the same time refrain from politically controversial activities. Table 7.3 summarises the two groups of policy practice methods.

A lot of direct quotations and monologues are used in this section to let the policy actors do story-telling themselves so that readers can have a direct and accurate understanding of how SWOs participated in policy practice in the incorporated spaces, including their consideration of the use of different methods, their roles behind these methods, and the dynamics of SWO-government interactions. Besides, this section is rather descriptive as it aims to present how SWOs used different methods to influence policy.

Table 7.3 Summary of the methods of policy practice

Institutionalised methods	1. Participating in policy consultations
	2. Participating in research conducted by the government
	3. Piloting and rolling out innovative social services
	4. Participating directly in drafting policy documents
	5. Submitting motions and proposals to the PCs and CPPCCs
	6. Working with the government through social work professional associations
Non-institutionalised methods	1. Conducting research
	2. Using media
	3. Networking with stakeholders
	4. Giving lectures to government cadres
	5. Having informal policy discussions with government cadres

7.4.1 Participating in policy consultations

Being viewed as experts in social service, SWO leaders have many chances to participate in policy consultations convened by the government. Policy consultations may take place as regularised institutions where SWO leaders are invited to become members of the government's advisory groups, or one-off meetings engaging SWO leaders who are asked to provide information and advice that is expected to contribute to the formulation of specific policies. For example, *Hu* is the director of a SWO as well as a member of several governmental think tanks specialising in the fields of social service and social organisation management. These advisory groups hold regular meetings where *Hu* can participate in the formulation or improvement of a range of policies. According to *Hu*:

> These think tanks regularly organised meetings to discuss a range of policies,

> for example, the regulations on community social work service centres, the local Women's Federation's policies on services for women, and marriage and family mediation. I also participated in the discussion on the implementation of the national anti-domestic violence law. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

From 2016 to 2018, *Hu*, together with the leaders from the other ten SWOs, was invited by the BCA of City B to participate in a series of regularised policy consultations that aimed at formulating new policies on social work services in City B to replace the old ones. These consultations resulted in two new formal policies enacted by the PC and the BCA of City B in 2018. As recalled by *Hu*:

> I was very delighted to participate in the policy formulation process and see that the government had increasing intention to take advice from SWOs. In the past, only academics had opportunities to participate in the formulation of policies on social work and social service. However, after years of practice, we found that those policies made by academics might be too ideal and not that applicable. Now the government expects more participation from senior social work professionals. In such context, about ten SWO leaders, including me, were involved in the formulation of the new policies. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

During the consultations, *Hu* gave a lot of comments and suggestions on the administration of social work service centres, including the competitive bidding for service contracts, the amount of annual budget, services to be contracted out, programme evaluation, etc. Although many of his suggestions were adopted (eg. SWOs should be permitted and encouraged to explore innovative services besides the basic services stipulated in the contracts using the same funding), *Hu* and other social work representatives often needed to make compromises to meet the government's interest. For example, *Hu* proposed that the bidding process and the programme evaluation

should be simplified to promote efficiency. However, the leaders of the BCA rejected these suggestions because they were contradictory to the government's appropriation procedures. As *Hu* recalled, contradictions and disagreements were common during these meetings, which required social workers' skills in making compromises. He shared another example of compromising on the articulation of the core values of social work:

> Well, you can see that in most cases, we need to make compromises. As for what we achieved in the end, I personally think that it was a success for the social work profession because the policy was eventually enacted after a long process. However, some social workers were not satisfied with the policy draft, because some terms like "equality" and "social justice" were not included. However, it was understandable to me. Although we didn't explicitly write down these words, we included some sentences such as "social workers should act following the core values of social work". What is included in social work's core values? You know that, right? If I insisted on explicitly writing them out, I might face other conflicts, so I chose to compromise but make them implicit. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Besides regularised meetings of the government's advisory groups, SWO leaders are also often invited to attend occasional policy consultations. According to three SWO leaders, being consulted by the government on specific policy is common to them:

> We are often invited to policy consultations. For example, recently, one district in City A wanted to evaluate the effects of its ageing policy, and the government invited me to provide policy advice (Huang, female, director of a SWO)

> It is a characteristic of the Bureau of Civil Affairs of our district that it would consult SWOs when it wants to make policies related to social work service.

> We are often asked to provide feedback and suggestions on consultation drafts. Many policy ideas did not just jump into policymakers' minds, they were the results of many SWOs' participation and contribution. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

> City A is now making efforts to build children-friendly communities. Because our organisation has done a lot of work on services for children, we were invited to policy consultations when the local Women's Federation wanted to implement the action plan of building children-friendly communities. In those meetings, we could share our opinions and suggestions, some of which were adopted. For example, I talked about how to improve the design of the public environment to ensure children's safety, and how to consider public issues from the perspective of the children. I think those suggestions more or less made some difference. (Zhang, male, deputy director of a SWO)

However, although SWO leaders are provided with chances to give their comments and advice in policy consultations, it is beyond their control whether their opinions would be taken seriously. Nevertheless, they believed that it is important that they try to give their voice. As commented by two SWO leaders:

> When the government puts forward a consultation draft or wants to make some improvements on a policy, it would convene a consultation meeting and invite us to give professional advice… However, sometimes we gave some suggestions, but it was more like tokenism. It was just a procedure that the government needed to go through – to ask if anyone has any comments. The decision-making power is still in their hands. They do not necessarily listen to us. Sometimes I wasn't sure if the government was really taking advice, or just going through a procedure. (Wang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

> The government may or may not adopt your suggestions, but at least you can give your voice. (Liu, male, director of a SWO)

As a top-down approach and a reactive policy practice method, participating in policy consultations is one of the most common ways of influencing policymaking for SWOs. It reflects the government's increasing intention to include SWOs in its policy formulation process and directly turns social work leaders into the government's policy advisors.

7.4.2 Participating in research conducted by the government

Besides policy consultations, SWOs are sometimes invited to take part in government-organised research. In China, government-organised research[24] is not restricted to rigid studies which follow an academic style but can refer to any events that aim at promoting government cadres' understanding of social problems or issues, including field visits and field learning. Many research participants reported participation in both of these two forms of research: rigid studies and less formal research occasions.

For example, *He*, the director of the research centre of a SWO, was invited to take part in a government-organised research project. In 2017, a policy-making commission of the provincial CPPCC initiated a research project on nursing services for the elderly and set up a research partnership joined by cadres of the provincial Department of Civil Affairs (DCA), academics, and some senior social workers. *He* and other members of the research partnership did fieldwork in four cities located in both the developed and underdeveloped areas in the province. They visited both public and private nursing homes and held focus group meetings involving carers and government cadres. With data provided by the government and collected from the fieldwork, they wrote a research report and submitted it to the provincial CPPCC and DCA. The report included

[24] "政府调研" in Chinese, *Zheng Fu Diao Yan*.

many important suggestions for the improvement of the province's nursing policies, including setting up an interdepartmental mechanism for coordinating nursing policies and services, providing professional training for carers, providing differentiated services (home, community, and institutional nursing services) for the elderly with different needs, etc. As *He* recalled, some of these suggestions have been put into practice:

> At that time, we provided very specific and concrete suggestions. And now I can see that some of them have been adopted and implemented. For example, a lot of small-scale community daycare centres have been established recently. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

Besides rigid research, SWO leaders were also involved in field visits and field learning events, in which they could not only host field visits from the government but also could receive opportunities to participate in the government's research into social service programmes in other regions. During those visits, SWO leaders and government cadres could explore new ideas for developing social services together. According to two SWO leaders:

> One of the leaders of the provincial Communist Youth League came to visit our youth service centres. After that, he invited me to join in their field research in the youth service centres in another city. I accepted the invitation with delight because I wanted to have more discussions with him too. During those field visits, I got to know that the provincial Communist Youth League was attaching great importance to the building of the mental health service system for young people. He also showed me some of their internal policy documents that are not accessed by the public, and some policy drafts, and asked for my advice. Then I shared with him some ideas about providing online youth services and how Hong Kong social workers did similar work. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

> Many municipal and district Bureaus of Civil Affairs organise field learning sessions from time to time, which require social workers and government cadres to participate together. When we learn together, we have opportunities to discuss policy. For example, there was a time I was invited to join in a visit to Hong Kong, where the Bureau of Civil Affairs cadres and social workers attended some lectures on social service. When we came back, the Bureau of Civil Affairs convened a meeting to discuss what we learnt from the visit and how we could further develop social services. (Li, female, deputy director of a SWO)

As shown in the examples above, participating in government-organised research can be a co-learning opportunity for social workers and the government, in which social workers are not only expected to play the role of research assistants who conduct fieldwork and collect data but can also provide opinions and policy advice from the perspective of the social work profession.

7.4.3 Piloting and rolling out innovative social services

SWOs have contributed to the development of a large number of social services through top-down policy experimentation and bottom-up social service innovation. As discussed in previous sections, top-down policy experimentation is initiated by the government, which selects several pilot sites to test its policy scheme and may make the scheme a formal policy by promoting its scale. The example of the establishment of the community service centres in City B was given to describe the process of policy experimentation. Besides the top-down approach, SWOs also proactively make innovations in social service and find ways to collaborate with the government to roll out the pilot services or develop similar social service programmes with public funding. For example, by successfully carrying out a new self-funded project, *Yang*, the deputy director of a SWO, convinced the government of the importance of providing

development services for domestic migrant children and offered an example of what the government could do to support these children. According to *Yang*:

> We can use services to influence policy. When the government makes a decision, it can refer to what we did… Our organisation started a self-funded community service programme for domestic migrant children in an urban village. We found that many children were left behind in their communities by their parents, who worked long hours a day. So, we tried a new service in the urban village. Without any government funding, we established a child development centre, which provided safety education and development services. This centre drew the attention of the public and the government and was visited by the local Communist Youth League, Women's Federation, and the Bureau of Civil Affairs. We had a lot of discussions with these departments. And later I could see that they began to provide or outsource services for domestic migrant children, including safety education, caring, urban integration services, etc…
>
> There were two things we did. Firstly, with data from our service, we let the government recognise that these children needed more attention and support. We analysed the children's needs, and we fed back to the Communist Youth League. We worked very closely with the Communist Youth League on this issue. And secondly, the Communist Youth League began to think about what services could be provided to those children, how much money could be spent, and what could be included in its annual plan. We had a lot of discussions with the Communist Youth League. And in these discussions, I could influence the cadres' understanding and their strategies to develop services for children. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Another example of policy practice through social service innovation was given by *Sun*, the manager of the elderly department of a SWO who managed to persuade the

government to provide free home modifications for seniors ageing in place. When implementing the innovative project, *Sun* attached great importance to collecting data to show the importance, feasibility, and effectiveness of formulating a new policy based on her project. As narrated by *Sun*:

> One of our organisation's most influential social service programmes is providing home modifications for seniors ageing in place. We started to work on home modifications in 2014. In the past, the government did not recognise this social need. When we visited our senior service users in a community, we surprisingly found that many seniors lived alone and did not have a safe living environment. Six out of ten seniors faced a high risk of falls at home. What's worse, their apartments lacked fireproof walls and doors, and they were not aware of these threats to their safety. We believed that a lot of falls could be prevented if we could improve their living conditions…
>
> However, you know, it is not easy to do home modifications for seniors because a lot of things need to be taken into consideration. Can the structures of houses be changed? What if the service users regret and demand reversions? What if their belongings get broken during the modification process? How much would modification cost? Before we did this programme, nobody had an answer. If we just talked to the government, it would have no idea what it could do… When we give policy advice to the government, we should not only point out the difficulties facing the seniors but also provide solutions so that the government would know what they could do. This is how we social workers can make a difference…
>
> Therefore, our strategy was that we launched an experimental programme first, with money from a foundation and several fund-raising events. By doing so, we worked out the home modification budget for each household and established close working relationships with the construction team, furniture

> providers, grassroots government cadres, carers in the community nursing centres, and lawyers. We worked out the whole procedure from application to implementation and evaluation. For example, we invented the template for the modification contracts, we learnt how to communicate with seniors and make things transparent…
>
> After we successfully implemented the experimental programme, we showed the government all the things we did. The government was convinced of the feasibility of the home modification programme, and it began to encourage other SWOs to provide similar services. Later, as the government had stronger confidence in this solution, it put in more money and made it a formal policy. The district-level government included the provision of home modifications for seniors in its list of "top-ten projects to improve people's wellbeing". And now, this service has also become one of the 12 specified ageing-in-place services provided by the municipal government. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

By piloting an innovative social service, SWOs test and provide a solution to tackle a specific social issue, based on which the government can formulate a new policy. The key to successful policy practice through social service innovation is that SWOs not only provide a policy proposal but also convince the government of its feasibility and effectiveness by establishing a model of social service. As a result, the government can be clear about what should be included in its new policy and what outcome can be anticipated.

7.4.4 Participating directly in drafting policy documents

Many cases were reported in which SWO leaders were invited by the government to join policy formulation teams and assigned the tasks of drafting policy documents. For example, as the director of the research centre of a SWO, *He* participated in assessing

the social needs of several regions and drafting the plans for the regional development of social services. As recalled by *He*:

> We were one of the first SWOs that provided community services in our district, and the government cadres were quite satisfied with the effects of our services. Therefore, in 2012, when the district-level Bureau of Civil Affairs needed to make its *13th Five Year Plan for the Development of Community Services*, we were invited to join the policy formulation group and draft the plan. Because they hope that we… In the past, it was their cadres that drafted the plan based on their own experience. And this time they wanted more participation. They wanted to involve providers of community services and get a better understanding of the needs of the grassroots communities… Based on a lot of research conducted in grassroots communities and the existing national and provincial policies, we drafted a plan for the development of community services. After several rounds of discussions and revisions, the plan was finally enacted by the government…
>
> We also helped another district-level government develop a five-year plan for the development of social services. The process was similar. We organised a series of meetings with related government cadres, and then we did fieldwork in several communities. We visited existing community centres, community committees, grassroots social organisations, and voluntary groups, to get a comprehensive understanding of the social service resources of that region. In the end, we drafted the development plan. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

Sometimes SWO leaders even had the chance to take part in drafting national policy documents. *Huang*, the director of a SWO, became one of the lead drafters of a national policy on social work services for seniors by working with the local Bureau of Civil Affairs and the association of social workers through the hierarchical policy-making

mechanism. According to *Huang*:

> In 2014, the MCA at the central government started to formulate the *Service guidelines of gerontological social work*. The policy formulation task was assigned to the BCA and the association of social workers in City A because City A had rich experience in providing social work services for seniors. And I became the coordinator and the lead drafter in the policy formulation team. My colleagues and I visited many nursing homes and daycare centres all over the country and analysed a lot of existing policies on ageing and eldercare services. Based on the solid work, we drafted the guidelines, which were enacted by the MCA in 2016. (Huang, female, director of a SWO)

Directly participating in drafting policy documents indicates SWOs' remarkable influence over policymaking, but this entails a very close relationship between SWOs and the government. Only by gaining trust and recognition from policymakers can SWO leaders get involved in this task, which was mainly undertaken by government cadres and academics in the past.

7.4.5 Submitting motions and proposals to the PCs and CPPCCs

The PCs at different administrative levels are the legislatures of China, while the CPPCCs are the country's most important political advisory bodies. In recent years, an increasing number of social workers have been elected or nominated as representatives to local PCs and CPPCCs and given a certain degree of power over policy-making. As noticed by two SWO leaders:

> As a CPPCC member, I need to put forward at least one policy proposal every year. And the proposal will be sent to the related government departments, which must make a formal reply to it… The CPPCC provides a formal procedure for communicating with the government. No matter how the

> government replies to my proposal, it sees my policy advice and the things I propose and must reply to me. Also, the CPPCC will ask for my comments and feedback on the government's reply, whether I am satisfied or not. I think that this institutional arrangement enables me to hold a conversation with the government and see their responses. This is a very formal channel. It is different from… In many cases, when social workers provide policy advice to the government, the government can choose whether to reply to you or ignore you. However, as members of the PC or CPPCC, we have the legal power (to require replies from the government). (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

> The PC deputies and CPPCC members play an important role. They have the power to ask the government to reply to their proposals or take action to tackle social issues. The government is concerned and even worried about the issues raised by the PC deputies and CPPCC members, so it will think about how to solve those problems. Otherwise, the political performance of the government would be affected by the comments from the PC deputies… Normally, social workers do not have such power, so sometimes we don't know whether the government is paying attention to our policy advice or not. (Wang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

While the PCs exercise power to enact legislation and appoint cadres to the government, the CPPCCs only have the power to advise the government and demand formal replies. Therefore, the PC deputies and CPPCC members have different ways to influence policymaking. In PCs, only the designated deputies and delegations have the power to put forward policy motions for discussion and voting. Take my hometown Guangdong province as an example, according to the *Rules of procedure for the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress* (The Standing Committee of the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress, 1999), only the standing committee of the PC, the specialised committees of the PC, the provincial government, and sponsoring groups joined by

more than ten deputies can propose motions to the PC. A motion will be discussed by the PC deputies at full meetings of delegates or panel meetings, and later reviewed by related specialised committees, which will decide whether to submit the motion to the plenary session for a vote. Therefore, it is not easy for individual PC deputies to put forward motions. In many cases, they need to join a motion formulation group with other deputies or just take part in motion discussion and voting. While in the CPPCCs, there is no restriction on the number of sponsoring members. The CPPCC members put forward proposals to give comments and suggestions on a range of social issues and policies to the PCs and the government. Figure 7.2 illustrates the procedure for submitting a proposal to the CPPCC, which is summarised from the interview with *Ma*, a member of a district-level CPPCC.

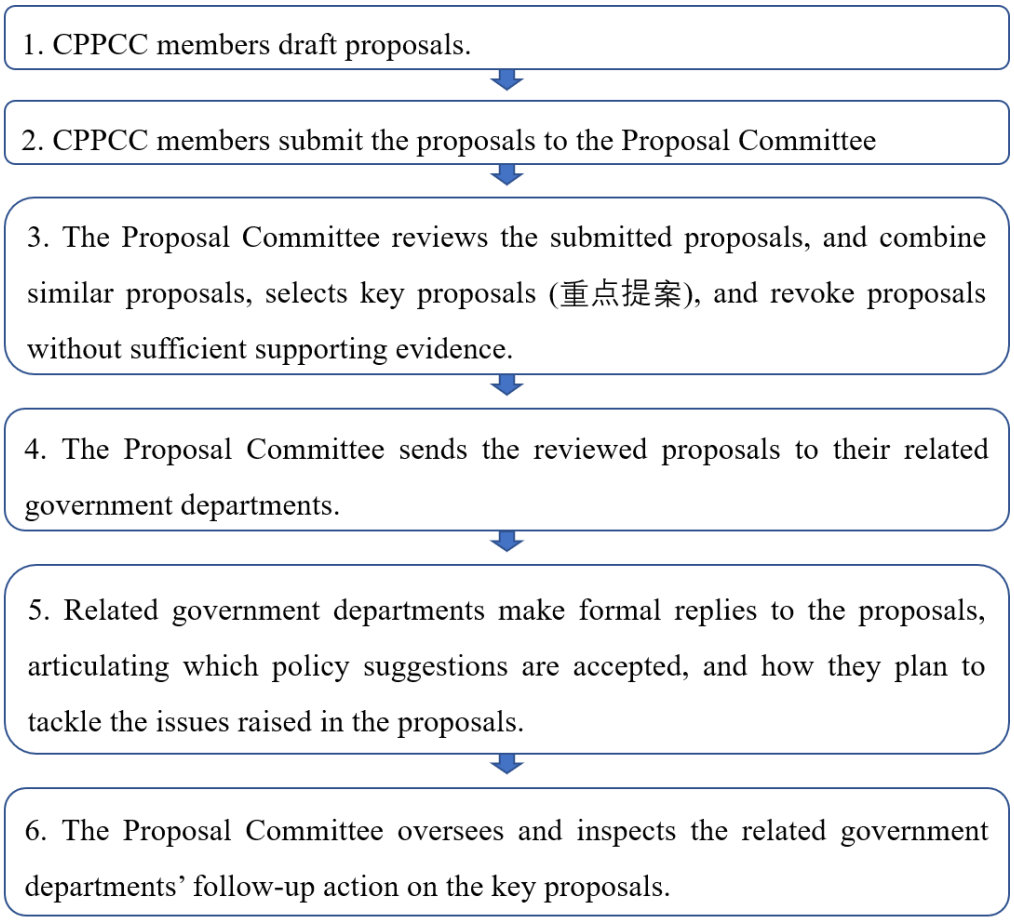

Figure 7.2 The procedure for submitting proposals to the CPPCC

Sun, the manager of the elderly department of an SWO, shared her experience of influencing policy through the city-level CPPCC. Although *Sun* was not a member of the CPPCC, she joined one of the eight legally recognised minor democratic political parties in mainland China, which had a collective seat in the municipal CPPCC. *Sun* decided to advocate free early screening for cognitive impairment and dementia for seniors when she was surprised by the results of the clock-drawing tests she did with her service users. As *Sun* recalled:

> When I did a needs assessment in a community, I was very surprised that more than 70% of the seniors I worked with failed the clock-drawing test. All of them told me that they would not get dementia. They had very poor awareness of the disease. Later, I organised some public education events trying to promote people's awareness of dementia. And after working with doctors to research seniors' cognitive impairment in a lot of communities, I came to realise that the provision of free early screening was crucial. That's why I wanted to submit a proposal to the government through the CPPCC. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

In 2019, *Sun* and some other members of her party formed a proposal formulation group and wrote a proposal on providing free early screening for seniors with cognitive impairment. This proposal was selected as one of the key proposals by the Proposal Commission of the CPPCC, and later awarded the Outstanding Proposals of the Year.

However, it is noteworthy that a proposal submitted to the CPPCC, even if it is selected as a key proposal, does not guarantee policy changes. As an advisory body, the CPPCC does not have the power to give instructions to the government. The government can decide how to tackle the issues raised by the CPPCC members and whether to adopt their policy suggestions. As commented by the director of a social work professional association:

> More and more social workers have become members of the CPPCC, and they can voice opinions as representatives of the social work profession. However, as for to what extent their policy suggestions were accepted, nobody ever did an evaluation. I think this is an interesting topic. (Zhao, female, general director of a social work professional association)

Ma shared an example of the government showing little interest in the proposals put forward by CPPCC members. She put forward a proposal on making a comprehensive plan for the design and development of social services in a district, which was selected by the CPPCC as a key proposal. However, this proposal did not lead to real changes made by the government. According to *Ma*:

> I was confident in the implementation of my proposal, which was selected as a key proposal. However, there was not much follow-up action, which quite disappointed me. In a CPPCC meeting with the cadres from the Bureau of Civil Affairs, although they replied to my policy advice, they spent most of the time defending themselves and explaining why they could not do so. And they also talked about the things they already had done. The conversation was not what I expected, and what's more disappointing was that they did not implement any suggestions given in my proposal. After the meeting, I realised that their responses might be linked to the changes in the policy environment of our district. In that year, the local government put forward a three-year plan for the high-quality development of the economy and turned its focus to economic policy. Social service was not prioritised. Therefore, whether your policy proposal is relevant to the government's agenda is important for influencing policy. (Ma, female, director of a SWO)

After this failed proposal, realising that the development of social service was not prioritised on the agenda of the government, *Ma* put less effort into writing and putting forward proposals to the CPPCC. Although it is a requirement that the CPPCC members

should submit at least one proposal a year, *Ma* met the requirement by simply adding her name to a proposal written by another CPPCC member. As recalled by *Ma*:

> In the third year, I did not write a proposal myself, I just added my name to another CPPCC member's proposal to complete the "assignment". I forgot what that proposal was about. I just tried not to fall behind, because our performance would be evaluated and marked. (Ma, female, director of a SWO)

In Chinese political culture, getting a seat in the PCs and CPPCCs implies a rather high social and political status, which is associated with more power and opportunities to influence public issues. However, the PC deputies and CPPCC members' actual influence over policy should not be overestimated, as there are many visible and invisible restrictions and factors affecting the outcome of policy practice in the PCs and CPPCCs. Nevertheless, getting into the political establishment has created more channels through which SWO leaders can formally give their voice to the government.

7.4.6 Working with the government through social work professional associations

Under China's regulations on social organisations, professional associations can only be set up with endorsement from the government. Therefore, almost all professional associations in China more or less have a government background or connection. For example, their founders may be former government cadres or nominated by the government. In this context, associations of social workers are not only professional membership organisations for social work but also function as the intermediating platforms between the government and social workers. These associations can create opportunities for the government and SWO leaders to work on policy issues together. For example, with advice from a SWO leader, the association of social workers in a district established specialised committees joined by both social work professionals and cadres from related government departments. According to *Ma*:

> Some social work professional associations have established specialised committees in social services, but they only include social workers. They are limited to internal communication within the social work profession. I think that the internal discussion is ineffective in influencing the government's decision-making or promoting policy changes. Therefore, when the social workers association in our district wanted to establish specialised committees, I strongly suggested that they should include representatives from the government. Only by doing so can we hear voices from both the government and the social work profession…
>
> The social work professional association in our district has established three specialised social service committees, including the youth service committee, medical social work committee, and drug rehabilitation committee. These committees not only include social work professionals specialising in these fields, but also cadres from the related government departments. Therefore, social workers can discuss policies and how to tackle social problems with the government in these committees. For example, recently, the local media reported a few cases of teenagers leaving home. Their families didn't know what to do except for sending out photos on social media. Even after the teenagers return home, they may face challenges getting along with their families and friends. As a response, the youth service committee convened several meetings and invite the police, Communist Youth League members, education department cadres, lawyers, and reporters to have discussions on what we can do. We put forward some concrete suggestions, and the professional association published some guidelines. I think this is an important way to influence policy. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

In some cases, when the government intends to make a new social service policy, it would consult a social work professional association, which would then gather a group of experienced social workers to participate in policy formulation. An example was

reported by a SWO leader:

> The district-level Communist Youth League planned to formulate the standards for youth services, and it decided to work with the association of social workers in our district. Then, the association invited several SWOs specialising in youth services, including my organisation, to formulate the service standards. We drafted and went through each standard and finally finished the document. It included what qualifications a SWO needs to provide youth services, what services can be contracted out, and what standards the services should reach (Zhu, female, director of an SWO).

Policy practice is increasingly viewed as an important function of the associations of social workers, which can take advantage of their position between the government and the social work profession. For example, the Association of Social Workers in City B articulates on its website that one of its five core missions is to participate in policy practice by conducting research, organising forums, and creating channels for government-SWO communication and cooperation[25].

7.4.7 Conducting research

Besides participating in government-organised research, SWOs also conduct research on topics relating to their services and provide reports including policy suggestions to the government. This is an important non-institutionalised method to influence policymaking. SWOs' research is usually based on their social service projects in which social workers raise research questions, collect data, do analysis, evaluate the effects of their interventions, and propose solutions to social problems. For example, *Luo*, the manager of the youth service department of a SWO, submitted a research report based on her organisation's anti-school bullying services to the Communist Youth League. As recalled by *Luo*:

[25] http://www.gzsg.org/about/id/2.html, accessed on 30th Sept 2021.

> We did a study on anti-school bullying services based on our existing services in middle schools. We summarised the status quos of school bullying and illustrated the contents, process, and effects of the services we provided. We then wrote a report which included several policy suggestions and submitted it to the municipal Communist Youth League. The cadres told me that they sent the report to their leaders as an internal publication[26], which would increase the leaders' understanding of anti-school bullying services. (Luo, female, manager of the youth service department of a SWO)

Another example of successfully using research to influence policymaking is reported by *Zhu*, the director of a SWO. With *Zhu* and her colleagues' in-depth research and continuous efforts, treatment for thalassemia is now covered by the public medical insurance in City B. Below is *Zhu*'s monologue:

> In 2007, my organisation worked with a foundation to launch a service project in which we provided financial aid to children with thalassemia in City B. Thalassemia is most common in south China, and City B is one of the cities with the largest number of patients. It is a genetic disease, and children diagnosed with thalassemia require blood transfusions every month otherwise they cannot survive. However, we found that many patients lived in poverty, and they could not afford the medical expenses, which could reach about 6000 Yuan[27] each month. Even though they had public medical insurance, they could only demand reimbursement of only 200 Yuan…
>
> As social workers got a deeper understanding of the difficulties facing these children, we wanted to advocate policy improvement. Then what did we do? First, we did a survey with more than one thousand children with thalassemia

[26] "内参" in Chinese, *Nei Can*.
[27] Around 750 pounds.

in City B to find out how much they had to spend on medical care each month, how the expenses affected their lives, and what support they could get from the government. We also did field visits and interviews in hospitals, voluntary organisations, and the health bureau to explore what improvements could be made. We found that the biggest problem was that the treatment for thalassemia was not covered by public medical insurance, which caused a heavy financial burden on those children's families…

With findings from the research, we wrote a report and a policy proposal. At that time, the director of our organisation was a member of the CPPCC, so we thought that the CPPCC might be a useful way to influence related policy. So, our director submitted the proposal together with the report to the municipal CPPCC. We provided rich data showing the effects of medical aid for children with thalassemia, and the health bureau attached great importance to our proposal. And after a lot of discussions and collaborations with other organisations such as the finance bureau, hospitals, and pharmaceutical factories, treatment for thalassemia was finally covered by the public medical insurance in City B. Now children with thalassemia can claim about 3000 yuan for their treatment each month. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Research is usually combined with other policy practice methods. In *Zhu*'s case, social workers also piloted new social service projects and submitted a policy proposal to the local CPPCC. By conducting research based on their service projects, SWOs can gather and analyse data during service delivery, and use the research findings as evidence for their policy proposals. Solid research is believed to be very helpful for SWOs to propose solutions to specific social issues.

7.4.8 Using media

Both traditional media, such as TV stations and newspapers, and social media are used by SWOs to influence policy. By working with the media, SWOs draw attention from the public and policymakers to specific social issues and report how social workers can respond to social needs. The media coverage can also motivate policymakers to consult SWOs on policy improvement. Two examples were given by two SWO leaders:

> We established an anti-school bullying alliance with other nonprofit organisations in our district and launched service programmes in several schools. Surprisingly, the China Central Television noticed the things we were doing and came to report our services. The district-level government leaders saw the news report on TV and got to know that, wow, some people were working on such a project in their jurisdiction. The leaders then gave instructions that the government should strongly support the development of anti-school bullying services in our district. (Luo, female, manager of the youth service department of a SWO)

> I think that media and celebrities' participation is important. For example, we wanted to promote our services for seniors with cognitive impairment and make the public more aware of this issue. And we were very happy that many well-known doctors, local TV stars and celebrities were willing to help us make promotional videos and posters. Also, we provided stories and information to local TV stations and radios, whose reports were very likely to draw the attention of the government. And when the government wants to make a new policy or social service, it would recall those reports and contact us for further collaboration. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

Besides, some SWOs also created social media accounts and used them to display and

promote their social service programmes. The dissemination of SWOs' work on social media may create opportunities for them to work with governments in other regions to popularise the services they provide. For example, one SWO leader shared how she used social media to publicise and promote the child safety education model invented by her organisation:

> You can follow the official account of our organisation on WeChat or Weibo, where you can find the comprehensive illustration of the safety education service model we created. This social service programme is quite well-developed and well-known. We not only provide this service in City A but also support the governments of other regions to develop services for domestic migrant children. By using our social media, we drew more attention from the public and the government to the needs of domestic migrant children. This year, we are going to four provinces to help them develop these services. We are funded by their governments to provide training and support to local social workers. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

It is worth noting that although the media is often used by SWOs in their efforts to influence policy, it was seldom used in a confrontational way against the government. For example, they are least likely to criticise the government in the media. Instead, SWOs usually adopt a cooperative and moderate stance when engaging the media, as they wanted to seek collaboration with the government to tackle social problems. As commented by a SWO leader:

> When using media, I think that we should not adopt a confrontational stance. It should not be a life-or-death struggle. So, when I do media promotion or negotiate with the government, I try to be mild, tolerant, and understanding, rather than being tough and aggressive. I think that people should think from others' standpoints. For example, think about a service user who comes to me

> with anger and demands free home modifications, otherwise, they will send out a letter of complaint. I won't be happy, right? (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

Sun's comments indicate that maintaining and even promoting the relationship with the government is crucial when engaging the media. From the perspective of SWOs, the media can be useful agents to raise the government's awareness of specific social issues and increase their motivation to work with SWOs.

7.4.9 Networking with stakeholders

Networking with stakeholders is another important non-institutionalised method of policy practice. SWOs attach importance to collaborating with diverse partners and stakeholders through forums, conferences, and regular meetings in collaboration networks. For example, three SWO leaders shared their experience of building up collaboration networks to influence policy:

> Every year we convene a project forum to conclude our social service project, in which diverse stakeholders including the staff from related government departments, foundations, and media join together to discuss what we can do to promote child safety. In these meetings, we can exchange our ideas, and the government cadres can learn something that they didn't hear about and talk to people they didn't know before. I think that these events provide opportunities for all of us to exchange new ideas which can influence the government. (Yang, female, deputy director of a SWO)

> When we first started the anti-domestic violence project, there were very few people who were aware of domestic violence. We have been working on the project for about ten years. During the ten years, we organised some large-scale forums and built connections with a lot of stakeholders. We began with

> direct services but were not confined to just services. We wanted to promote changes in laws and policies. That's why we organised a lot of forums, meetings, exhibitions, community theatres, and policy discussions on domestic violence. Now the national anti-domestic violence law has been enacted, and we begin to provide training to front-line practitioners. I expect that stakeholders' participation will promote related services and policies. (Huang, female, director of a SWO)

> In this year's hospice care project, we hope to do policy practice through action research… We have built a collaboration network for our stakeholders and partners. We call the network "the actors' salon" and have invited the staff from the nursing homes, hospitals, and community health centres involved in our research to join. We hold regular meetings in which all of us can talk about the difficulties we face, explore possible solutions, link resources, and share experiences… By working together, we hope to create a service model for hospice care, so that it can apply to hospitals, nursing homes, and community daycare centres. As the project goes on, we get to understand the complexity of hospice care. There are a lot of useful discussions. I want to include them in a report and provide advice and solutions to the government. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

Although many of the networking events may not be directly linked to policy-making activities, they provide opportunities for people with shared interests and concerns to gather together to exchange stories and ideas. These networks may promote SWOs' motivation to engage in direct policy practice and lead to SWOs and their partners' joint efforts to influence policy.

7.4.10 Giving lectures to government cadres

SWO leaders who join the government's think tanks are sometimes invited to give lectures to government cadres, which are believed to be opportunities to put new knowledge and ideas into the authority. Giving lectures is regarded as an important way to promote SWOs' influence over policymaking, according to a SWO leader:

> As the director of a SWO, I sometimes have opportunities to give lectures to government cadres, which I think are chances to promote my influence. The Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs once organised a series of training sessions for middle- and high-level cadres, and I was invited to give a lecture on social service. Although it was difficult to judge whether they were really interested in what I talked about, my speech might increase their knowledge about social service. And I think it was a display of our influence. Sometimes I host field visits, sometimes I go out to give lectures. If I seldom speak, then fewer opportunities to speak I get, and fewer people know the good services we are providing. So, our influence over policymaking grows with the increasing opportunities we speak. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Having opportunities to give lectures to the government implies that SWO leaders are viewed as experts by the government, and their expertise is valued. In addition, because of the traditional Chinese culture of honouring the teachers[28], the lectures given by SWO leaders to government cadres have a symbolic implication: the government can, and even should learn from the social work profession. In this sense, the power relationship between SWOs and the government may be temporarily converted on these occasions, where social work leaders can teach government cadres something.

[28] "尊师重道" in Chinese, *Zun Shi Zhong Dao*.

7.4.11 Having informal policy discussions with government cadres

The implementation of contracting out social services has created a lot of opportunities for informal communication between social workers and government cadres, in which they can share opinions on policy issues. The informal policy discussions include catch-ups, casual chats, and visits to the government departments that outsource social services. Informal communication between SWOs and the government is believed to be crucial for coming up with new policy ideas which can be turned into the government's action to develop new policies. According to two SWO leaders:

> I think that informal and private communication with government leaders is an important process of influencing policymaking. This kind of communication has a significant influence… For example, after hosting a field visit from the Communist Youth League, I sent a message to one of its leaders and asked for his comments and suggestions on our work. The conversation began with just a casual talk on WeChat, but then we talked about a lot of interesting ideas, and he invited me to meet again to have further discussion… We have a lot of daily communication with government cadres. We visit them regularly to share what we have been doing and our new ideas for social services, and sometimes we can reach a consensus on initiating new projects. There are too many examples like this. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

> We have been trying to persuade the local Women's Federation to develop more child protection services. There were many child sexual abuse cases reported in the past few years, but most of the services for children funded by the local Women's Federation were about child development. So, we have been having ongoing communication with the Women's Federation's cadres to raise their awareness. Now we can see that they begin to fund more and more child abuse prevention services. The ongoing communication was

> crucial. Besides formal meetings, those informal and private chats were also very important. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

For some SWO leaders, informal policy discussions with the government even became a part of their daily routine. For example, according to *Wu*, the deputy director of a SWO, informal communication with the government made up social workers' continuous efforts to influence policy:

> Our organisation requires that project managers should visit related government departments on a regular basis. These visits are usually less formal. We not only report the progress of our work but also share our new ideas and explore what the government can do in the future. We proactively advise the government. As my colleague said: our goals should be achieved through continuous efforts. We should not rush. The government may not be interested in your ideas at the beginning, but with continuous efforts, they may gradually take your advice. Daily communication is crucial. (Wu, female, deputy director of a SWO)

The frequent informal communication between the government and SWOs in the incorporated spaces seems to indicate a close and trusting relationship between the two sides, in which the government welcomes and is used to new policy ideas coming from SWOs. In other words, the incorporated spaces have routinised collaborative policy discussions and made them normal parts of the government-SWO interactions.

Although the methods of policy practice are individually presented in this section, each of them is usually adopted in combination with the others. For example, in the case of policy practice reported by *Zhu* in which her colleagues and she successfully advocated public medical aid for children with thalassemia, several methods were used in combination to promote policy changes. The methods used by *Zhu* included piloting an innovative social service, conducting research, networking with stakeholders,

submitting a proposal to the CPPCC, and attending policy consultations.

Besides, although these methods provide different routes for SWOs to access the policy process and vary in terms of their degree of institutionalisation, they are all expected to contribute to the collaboration rather than struggles between SWOs and the government. A key feature of the incorporated spaces is that SWOs in these spaces behave as parts of the governing mechanism and avoid conflicts with the authority. By using these methods, SWOs attempt to establish a closer relationship with the government and get a position within the existing decision-making structure, which may lead to their ongoing influence over social policies.

7.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter reports how SWOs participated in policy practice in incorporated spaces. First, incorporated spaces have shaped SWOs' perception of policy practice in China by emphasising SWOs' performance in service delivery, their involvement in the experimentation-based policy process, and their collaboration with the government. Delivering social service is believed to be the foundation of policy practice upon which SWOs can be able to exercise their expertise to influence a range of social service-related policies. Research findings also reveal that SWOs' efforts to develop innovative social services enable them to participate in China's experimentation-based policy process, through which new policies can be formulated by rolling out small-scale policy pilot projects. In addition, because of the political constraints of the incorporated spaces, SWOs believe that maintaining a collaborative relationship with the government is crucial for gaining opportunities to influence policymaking while at the same time avoiding potential suppression. According to the Party-state's articulation of social governance, collaboration entails social organisations following the leadership of the Party and the government. As a result, SWOs in incorporated spaces perceive themselves as an arm of the Party-state that contributes their expertise in social service

to formulating or improving social service-related policies.

Second, the Party-state deliberately selects social work elites rather than front-line social workers to enter incorporated spaces. As shown in section 7.3, currently these spaces feature a hierarchical system and are less likely to enable the less powerful actors, such as service users and front-line social workers who are often treated as foot soldiers by the government, to take part in policymaking. In contrast, the SWO leaders that possess more authority and resources are the main targets for incorporation into the Party-state's social governance system. They also become the main actors in the incorporated spaces for policy practice.

Last but not least, SWOs adopt a range of institutionalised and non-institutionalised methods to influence policymaking in a collaborative and non-confrontational way. These methods include: (1) participating in policy consultations; (2) participating in research conducted by the government; (3) piloting and rolling out innovative social services; (4) participating directly in drafting policy documents; (5) submitting motions and proposals to the PCs and CPPCCs; (6) working with the government through social work professional associations; (7) conducting research; (8) using media; (9) networking with stakeholders; (10) giving lectures to government cadres; (11) having informal policy discussions with government cadres. These methods are usually used by SWOs in a combination with each other.

One of the key research findings reported in this chapter is that regardless of what methods are used, SWOs' influence over policymaking needs to be achieved through collaboration with the government eventually. However, it needs to be noted that collaboration may not imply equality and partnership. SWOs' participation in policy practice in the incorporated spaces requires the sacrifice of their political autonomy and agency, as SWOs need to pledge allegiance to the leadership of the Party-state and confine themselves to using a limited number of non-confrontational strategies to avoid irritating the government and being excluded from the policy process. Meanwhile, the

government has the power to decide whether to involve SWOs in policymaking and whether to take their advice. Within the power dynamics, it seems that SWOs can only play the role of a loyal, trusting, and helpful arm of the Party-state.

Nevertheless, SWOs still manage to influence many policies. In which case, where does their influence come from? Why can their policy practice make a difference while the efforts of more independent social organisations fail? These questions are addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter 8 SWOs' policy influence in incorporated spaces

8.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter depicts how SWOs participate in policy practice in incorporated spaces, this chapter aims to further explore why they can influence policymaking in the authoritarian context, and where their policy influence comes from. It examines the roles of the following factors in SWOs' efforts to develop their policy influence: 1) SWOs' social service performance and professional expertise; 2) the political trust that SWOs have earned from the Party-state; 3) SWOs' compliance with the Party-state's political agendas; 4) SWOs' contributions to the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and authority at the grassroots. In addition, this chapter draws on a comparison between an independent SWO and an incorporated SWO regarding their engagement in policy practice to identify two types of policy influence and explain the nature and distinct features of SWOs' policy influence in the incorporated spaces.

Based on the research findings, this chapter concludes with a discussion on the power dynamics of policy practice in the incorporated spaces. It reveals that SWOs' influence over policymaking is gained through the Party-state's top-down delegation of its power. This requires SWOs to play the role of a helpful, trustworthy, and loyal arm of the Party-state, which are supposed to contribute their professional experiences to the development of social policies and the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and authority.

8.2 Social service performance and recognition from the Party-state

In China, the development of the social work profession is largely a social engineering project orchestrated by the Party-state, which has adopted the strategy of contracting out social services to involve SWOs in its political agendas of achieving better social

governance (Gao & Yan, 2015). In response to the state's expectations, the social work profession has built its mandate upon its function of providing and developing welfare services. As shown in the previous chapters, SWOs' engagement in policy practice is associated with their role as social services providers. For example, the contracting out mechanism has contributed to the creation of the incorporated policy spaces, and SWOs tend to influence social service-related policies. In terms of their influence over policymaking, SWO leaders attributed successful policy practice to their organisations' outstanding performance of social services delivery and innovation. In other words, better social service performance helps SWOs gain more recognition from the state and lends them stronger influence over policymaking.

More specifically, SWOs' social service performance has two major effects on their efforts to influence policy. First, SWOs can extract persuasive evidence for their policy proposals and suggestions from the successful implementation of social service projects. The desirable outcomes of social services are perceived as the "bargaining chips" that can be used by SWOs in negotiations with policymakers. They enable SWOs to influence policymaking through "lobbying by doing". Second, SWOs' satisfying performance of social services enables them to establish their reputations and gain recognition from the Party-state for their ability to help with social governance. Being seen as experts holding expertise in developing social services and solving social problems, SWO leaders have been given a considerable degree of influence in the field of social policy.

8.2.1 Desirable social service outcomes as the "bargaining chips"

In recent years, China has experienced an unprecedented reform of the welfare system which features the invention and development of a number of contracted-out social services (Chan, 2018). SWOs are important actors in this welfare development scheme, as they not only replace governmental agencies and become the main welfare service providers, but also take part in the invention and design of numerous new welfare

services. In this context, SWO leaders tend to link their policy influence to their performance in delivering direct social services. By achieving and manifesting desirable outcomes of social service projects, SWOs can motivate the government to consult them on the formulation of specific social policies, and prove that their policy proposals and recommendations help meet social needs and are worth considering.

SWO leaders stressed the importance of using evidence to lobby local governments for their policy initiatives. They believed that they can use the outcomes of existing social services to convince the government of the necessity and feasibility of proposed policy solutions. Without solid evidence, SWOs' policy proposals and suggestions are less likely to be taken seriously and may even be perceived as unconstructive complaints. According to *Li*, the deputy director of a SWO, when participating in policy practice, SWOs should provide detailed and feasible policy solutions that emerged from existing social services. *Li*'s view reflects a pragmatic attitude towards policy practice: SWOs should base their efforts to influence policy on a solid practical foundation to avoid the government's dislike. According to *Li*:

> We provided many examples of social services for the government leaders. Also, we kept in mind that we did not go to the government to complain. Instead, we were to provide solutions. (Li, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Li's perception of policy practice indicates a strategy of "lobbying by doing": SWOs can gain more influence over policymaking when they can put their policy ideas into practice and show the effects of their services to decision-makers. This requires SWOs to initiate pilot social services or test some elements of their policy proposals in their existing social service projects. For example, *Ma*, the executive director of a SWO, shared her experience of persuading the local Communist Youth League to develop school social work services. She believed that setting good social service examples and achieving salient outcomes are crucial for successful policy practice. By using the strategy of "lobbying by doing", *Ma* managed to persuade the local Communist Youth

League to develop and fund school social work services. According to *Ma*:

> In the beginning, the government already recognised that communities should set up youth service centres, but it did not support the idea that social workers should also be deployed in schools. I think the school social work project we worked on at that time set a good example and achieved some salient outcomes. When the district-level Communist Youth League talked to us, we proactively illustrated the importance of deploying social workers in schools. If SWOs can demonstrate their expertise and the social service outcomes to the government, if they can make a difference to some issues, then they can influence the government. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

Similarly, *Hu*, another SWO leader, attached importance to developing signature social services that may interest the government. According to *Hu*, the government welcomed policy advice from those experienced social workers who could provide concrete evidence for their policy proposals and recommendations. In this sense, SWOs' ability to achieve the social effects recognised by the government constitutes an important part of their influence over policy. Also, SWOs' social service performance helps motivate the government to consult them and increase the government's intention to work with SWOs on the innovation and development of social services. As *Hu* stated:

> When we advise the government, we need to provide some concrete solutions and show our experience. Our services for women were quite successful and achieved some outcomes. As SWOs, we need to have our signature services, which can draw the government to consult us. To be honest, our government is very open-minded. Some people may say that they find no space to give their voice, but this is not the fact. The government is willing to talk to and consult those people with rich experience. We need to show data and provide examples so that the government would recognise and support what we do. If we just give comments but fail to give evidence, it would make no

difference. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Zhu, the director of a SWO, believed that the outcomes of SWOs' social service projects were their "bargaining chips" in negotiations with policymakers. This requires that when providing social services, SWOs should pay attention to collecting and analysing data relating to the effectiveness of their professional practice. As SWOs may test some social policy ideas in their services, these data can make their policy advice more convincing to policymakers. In *Zhu* and her colleagues' policy practice case in which they successfully made treatment for thalassemia covered by the public medical insurance, the data they collected from a medical aid project played a crucial role in convincing the government of their policy proposal. As recalled by *Zhu*:

> We had been working on this project since 2007, and the policy was finally enacted in 2012. During the five years, our project achieved excellent outcomes. A lot of data indicated that the medical aids made great changes to the families of children with thalassemia. We collected and showed very rich data, and it was with these data that we managed to convince the government to spend a huge amount of public expenditure supporting those children…
>
> I have been interacting with the government for many years. From my experience, I believe that the government wants to see the outcomes of the development of social service and the social work profession. When we negotiate with the government, our bargaining chips are the outcomes of our services and our in-depth analysis of specific populations or social issues. We need to be very clear about the needs of specific populations and report them to the government so that it would sit down and discuss what we can do together and involve us in policymaking. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Zhu's experiences indicate that although the government holds the power to decide whether to adopt SWOs' policy proposals or recommendations, SWOs' performance in

providing social services may help them gain more influence over policymaking in incorporated spaces. SWOs have adopted the strategy of "lobbying by doing" and pay attention to summarising and showing the desirable outcomes of their services. As SWOs' "bargaining chips", the outcomes of SWOs' past services can show policymakers what policy improvement is needed by people and how their needs can be met through proposed policy changes. By illustrating their social services achievements, SWOs have a greater chance to motivate the government to involve them in policymaking and convince the government of the feasibility and effectiveness of their policy proposals.

8.2.2 The Party-state's recognition of SWOs' professional expertise

With high-quality social service performance, SWOs can establish their reputations and gain recognition from the state for their professional expertise. In the Chinese context, professional expertise[29] is not only perceived as something held by individual social workers but it is also expected to be found in competent SWOs. From the perspective of the government, it outsources social services to SWOs rather than individual social workers, this is why professional expertise is often used to describe SWOs' ability to deliver social services professionally and competently. In addition, although SWOs are all established by and comprised of certificated social workers, not all SWOs are regarded as competent enough, because it is not very difficult for people without a social work education background to get a professional certificate of "Junior Social Worker" by passing the qualification examination. Therefore, SWOs' professional expertise needs to be constantly examined and confirmed through daily practice and interaction with the government. By showing high-quality social service performance, SWOs can earn a good reputation for applying social work knowledge and skills to meet social needs. The SWOs that are deemed professionally competent have more opportunities to win social services contracts and work with the government. More

[29] "专业能力" in Chinese, *Zhuan Ye Neng Li*.

importantly, SWOs' reputations play an important role in getting them involved in policymaking. According to *Sun*, a senior social service manager, SWOs with good reputations were more likely to collaborate with the government on policymaking:

> When the government wants to develop a policy or a service, it will first have a look at what SWOs did in the past. If the government thinks highly of SWOs' services, it would contact them and seek further collaboration. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

SWOs that specialise in specific fields of social services and are well known for their projects may have more opportunities to be consulted by policymakers. Also, with the accumulation of experience in participating in policymaking, SWOs' reputations grow accordingly, lending them more influence over the policies relating to their specialised fields of practice. For example, as the director of the SWO with the richest experience in providing services for the elderly people in City A, *Huang* was involved in the formulation of the city's elderly care policies. Her reputation for being a good policy advisor even enabled her to participate in the drafting of a national policy on gerontological social work. According to *Huang*:

> Our organisation has been providing services in many nursing homes in our city. And we were also one of the first SWOs that provided services for seniors in the city. We did a good job and received recognition from the municipal BCA. So, when the BCA wanted to make a handbook for services for seniors, it invited me to be the lead drafter and editor… I participated in the formulation of almost all policies relating to social work services for seniors in our city. There were not many social workers working in this field. When the BCA was assigned by the Ministry of Civil Affairs the task of formulating the national service guidelines of gerontological social work, it invited our organisation to participate. And because I had more service experience than my colleagues, I became one of the drafters of that policy

document. (Huang, female, director of a SWO)

The reputation of a SWO can also turn its leaders into social work elites and increase their political resources by gaining a position in the political establishment. The targets of the state's political co-option are usually those who can be deemed as the representatives of the profession. According to *Hu*, a SWO leader that joined several governmental think tanks, the size of a SWO, the number of its social service projects, and the professional expertise it displayed in its projects, all contributed to the organisation's reputation within the social work profession. SWOs with a good reputation are eligible for nominating members to governmental think tanks, who then can be given more influence over policy formulation as the government's advisors. As *Hu* stated:

> There are two ways to join the government's think tanks: nomination and self-nomination. If you believe that you are competent enough, you can nominate yourself as a member of a think tank, and then the government will examine whether you are qualified. For example, it will review your work experience. Also, big and influential organisations can nominate a social worker for the membership of a think tank. The nomination is based on professional expertise so that this person can make contributions. If you lack experience and capabilities, what you say may be deemed worthless even if you join a think tank. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

Luo, another SWO leader, shared her views about why she was selected as a member of the local CPPCC. She believed that her organisation's performance and her role as an expert in youth services convinced the government of her eligibility for representing the social work profession in the CPPCC. Also, *Luo*'s expertise and her leadership in her organisation were believed to help make contributions to policy formulation. According to *Luo*:

> I don't want to boast, but when the government nominated me as a member of the CPPCC, it definitely valued my expertise and my deep understanding of policy. The government also knew a lot of front-line colleagues, but it might think that they were too rooted in the grass root, and could not understand policy from a higher position. When the government consults me or asks for my advice, or invites me to take a position, it expects that I am competent to make contributions to policy development, or I can represent the profession. The government expects me to provide advice that can make policy and society move forward steadily and positively. (Luo, female, manager of the youth service department of a SWO)

It is worth noting that, theoretically, professional expertise can be a powerful weapon used by SWOs to put pressure on the government or counter unfavourable policy initiatives. For example, a SWO may discover a policy defect through reflection on the existing services and use their skills of organising citizens to advocate policy changes. However, for SWOs in the incorporated spaces, the aim of manifesting their expertise is to gain recognition from the state and thus obtain the chance to collaborate with the government to formulate and improve social policies. In other words, by emphasising their expertise and establishing their reputations, SWOs try to prove that they are worth being consulted and their advice can help the government improve people's wellbeing.

According to *Zhu*, a SWO leader, impressing policymakers with SWOs' performance was crucial for drawing policymakers' attention and motivating them to work with SWOs. To maintain the state's recognition and endorsement, SWOs needed to constantly prove their expertise by solving the social problems that concerned the government. Otherwise, the government might look down on SWOs and have less intention to take SWOs' policy advice. As explained by *Zhu*:

> I think that the most crucial factor for successful policy practice is that… I

> believe that if social workers can achieve good social service outcomes, they will gain recognition from the government, and the government will be willing to promote whatever they come up with. This is crucial but also very difficult. There are some social problems that even the government cannot solve, but the government expects that social workers can tackle them. If we fail to solve these social problems, the government may think that social workers are nothing more than that. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Hu, another SWO leader, used a successful example of policy practice to stress the relation between the state's recognition and SWOs' influence over policymaking. According to *Hu*:

> Generally, influential social service projects can gain recognition from the government more easily. Therefore, SWOs should devote themselves to improving their services and showing successful outcomes, so that the government will be interested in their projects and be willing to take the services further. For example, now all social work service centres in our city need to help the elderly people install handrails in their homes. This service was just an experimental project conducted by a SWO, but it achieved great success and gained recognition from the government, which then required all centres in the city to provide similar services. Many SWOs managed to influence policy by working on their social service projects. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

To summarise, SWOs' social service performance contributes a lot to their influence over policymaking. Their social service performance also provides support and evidence for their policy proposals, and enables them to gain recognition from the state for their professional expertise in solving social problems. Therefore, SWOs attach great importance to promoting social service performance and achieving favourable outcomes, so that they can play a more important role in the policy arena which is

dominated by the Party-state. SWO leaders' emphasis on the state's recognition seems to reflect the unequal power relations between the Party-state and SWOs in the incorporated spaces: only with the Party-state's recognition can SWOs develop their policy influence. Gaining the state's recognition requires SWOs to prove that they are not only professionally competent but also politically trustworthy.

8.3 A trusting relationship with the Party-state

For Chinese NGOs, engaging with the government is of critical importance, as it enables NGOs to gain public trust, access information, secure resources, and build social impact (Farid & Song, 2020). Interviews in this study found that a close and trusting relationship between the government and SWOs is also essential for successful policy practice. Research participants' explanation of the trusting relationships indicated two types of trust: interpersonal trust and cross-sector trust.

Interpersonal trust is built between individual SWO leaders and government cadres within their working relationships. According to research participants, interpersonal trust is government cadres' belief that specific SWO leaders and their organisations are competent, reliable, and will not trick them or make trouble for them. For example, *Wu*, the deputy director of a SWO, believed that an ideal relationship with government cadres should be based on trust, which could be built through continuous communication and collaboration. Through constructive communication and cooperation, SWO leaders can let government cadres realise the important role of SWOs in the development of welfare services. At the same time, SWO leaders can get to understand what government cadres want and express their willingness to collaborate with the government to put new policy ideas into practice. By doing so, SWO leaders can avoid failing the government's expectations, earn trust from government leaders, and seek policy influence. According to *Wu*:

> I contact government cadres from time to time to see what they think about the things we are doing and whether they are interested in collaborating with us. Just communicate. Sometimes the cadres share their ideas, and we can know whether there is something we can work on together. The daily relationship is very important. It is based on trust. The government trusts us to do things well and recognises the reputation of our organisation. SWOs can communicate with the government only based on trust. (Wu, female, deputy director of a SWO)

Interviews show that developing interpersonal trust usually entails SWO leaders and government cadres sharing the same goals. In fact, in many cases, it is SWO leaders that try to proactively find out what government cadres need and want, and tactically combine government cadres' motivation with SWOs' efforts to influence policy. For example, *He*, the director of the research centre of a SWO, stressed that SWO leaders should develop a close relationship with political elites who hold important resources and have motivation for policy development. By working with key policymakers, SWOs can promote the efficiency of policy practice. As *He* noted:

> Social workers need to develop a good relationship with the elites in the government. Although the government is an organisation, it consists of diverse members of staff, including some political elites who may be motivated to do something or have a strong commitment to something. It is crucial for us to work with these elites, because they may provide key resources for policy practice if they are interested in what social workers are doing. If SWOs share the same goals with these political elites, they can influence policy more efficiently than working on their own. (He, female, director of the research centre of a SWO)

As shown in the quotations and discussion above, an important function of interpersonal trust is to motivate government cadres to work with SWO leaders on policy issues.

SWO leaders were desirous of earning political elites' trust, as they believed that this could generate reciprocal policy collaboration. For local government cadres, an important motivation for working with SWOs relates to their political performance and promotion. Formulating new social policies to solve social problems contributes to local government leaders' political performance, which is linked to their opportunities to get promoted in the political system. Therefore, achieving policy development can become the shared goal of both government cadres and SWO leaders. For SWOs, strategically building a reciprocal relationship with government cadres enables them to make use of these cadres' political needs to develop and exercise their influence over policymaking. For example, a SWO leader stressed that:

> We should think from the perspective of government cadres first, and think about how they would respond to our advice. They need to show good political performance too. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

Gong, another SWO leader, discussed how she endeavoured to identify and target a key policymaker, establish a close working relationship, and seize opportunities to create a win-win situation in which she managed to persuade the policymaker to adopt her policy suggestions. As *Gong* stated:

> I believe that it is important to identify a key person in the government and find out what they are good at and what they want and combine these with the things we want to do. This is a way to seek a win-win situation because government cadres also want to show their work performance…I have been working with a member of the subdistrict Party committee for many years. It is easy for me to contact and talk to him. He is the same age as me, and he is a passionate person with a lot of new ideas. I can promote his interest in collaborating with me on some issues. (*Gong*, female, manager of the training department of a SWO)

By generating reciprocal relationships with government leaders, interpersonal trust can become a kind of political resource which is associated with SWO leaders' political positions and their influence in the policy arena. A trusting relationship with political elites is believed to help promote SWO leaders' positions in the political establishment and provide them with priority access to important information and resources. For example, *Luo* was a SWO leader who was nominated as a member of the local CPPCC. She attributed her nomination to her trusting relationship with local government leaders, which was built through years of collaboration. *Luo* believed that government leaders' trust in her helped her become a representative of the social work profession, and gain a political position that lent her more influence over policymaking. As *Luo* explained:

> Relationships really matter in China. Take the nomination of the members of the local CPPCC as an example. If I didn't know the government leaders, or they didn't know me or my organisation, I was very unlikely to get the opportunity to be nominated. There were a lot of experienced and influential social workers besides me that were competent enough to join the local CPPCC. It might be because the government trusts our organisation and because of our collaboration that lasted for years. That's why the government nominated me to take this position. A close relationship with the government enabled me to show my professional expertise and give advice and represent part of the social work profession. We know each other well, and the government would trust me and be more likely to take my advice. (Luo, female, manager of the youth service department of a SWO)

Besides interpersonal trust, interviews in this study also reveal another type of trust: cross-sector trust. Compared to interpersonal trust that takes place between individuals, cross-sector trust is built between the Party-state and SWOs across organisational and sectoral boundaries. It is a belief held by the Party-state that although SWOs are nongovernmental agencies, they have the capacities to help with the Party-state's needs

and will not stand against it or undermine its authority.

Theoretically, the relationships between the state and NGOs are multi-dimensional, in which there may be collaboration and confrontation, trust and distrust between different government agencies and NGOs in a range of situations. In addition, the emphasis on NGOs' monitoring power implies a certain degree of distrust of the government, while the government may be concerned about a potential decline of its authority and control. However, in the case of policy practice in incorporated spaces, SWOs believed that only by earning the government's trust in the social work profession can they play a more important role in the policy process.

The connotation and importance of cross-sector trust are further explained by *Zhu*, the director of a SWO. The trust that the Party-state places on SWOs has a strong relation to SWOs' political stance and their ability to help with social governance. *Zhu* used the example of social workers appeasing the anger of petitioners to point out that a trusting relationship between SWOs and the government requires SWOs to be capable to help the Party-state to fulfil its political goals, such as settling social unrest and maintaining social stability. Instead of representing or supporting the citizens who petitioned for their rights, to gain trust from the authority, *Zhu*'s organisation used community services to alleviate the anger of petitioners and disorganise the potential social action. In this instance, the SWO chose to be the helpers of the government rather than an activist advocating the interests of service users. As *Zhu* explained:

> I found that in the past two years, most of the community development projects were about community governance. A lot of social workers have already taken up the role of maintaining social stability. And if the government recognises social workers' capabilities to do this, it would put its trust in us. Yes, only when the government trusts us can our policy advice be accepted…

> (Researcher: What does trust mean?) We can do the things that the government is currently unable to do. Take petition as an example, which is very politically sensitive. Usually, the government has only one strategy to deal with petitions, which is to intercept the petitioners or track them so that they cannot reach the higher authorities to voice their demands. But social workers can do it differently. When we found that they had the intention and preparation to petition, we used a lot of community activities to guide them. "Hey, we are friends, come to our activities and don't do that…" And gradually, as long as we develop a trusting relationship with the petitioners, many of them are willing to participate in our service, and they can convert gradually and softly. If they have nothing to do, they will keep joining in petitions. Recently the government has contracted out a lot of services relating to social governance because it recognises that SWOs can play an important role in this field and accomplish the tasks that the government is unable to do. That's how a trusting relationship can be established. (Zhu, female, director of an SWO)

Zhu's story also sheds light on why China's social work profession can gain the state's endorsement and has experienced rapid development in recent years. The government's trust in SWOs has given them a great number of tangible and intangible resources, such as funding, operating sites, manpower, legitimacy, and opportunities to take part in policymaking. However, the state's cross-sector trust in SWOs seems to be conditional. It determines how many resources SWOs can get, but at the same time depends on what SWOs can bring to the state. *Zheng*, a researcher interested in the nonprofit sector of China, pointed out the instability of the trusting relationship between the government and social organisations. She compared working with the government to dating a temperamental person. To maintain a trusting relationship with the government, social organisations may need to constantly adjust their behaviours according to the state's political agendas. Betraying the government's trust may lead to a decline in resources and even suppression. As *Zheng* explained:

> A lot of social organisations would say that they have a good relationship with the government, and the government leaders trust their opinions and advice… I believe that the social organisations that can survive and operate quite well in China should have built a less confrontational relationship with the government. However, the relationship itself is very unstable. I have heard many stories in which a good relationship turned bad in the end. The change of a relationship makes you feel like dating a temperamental person. You may believe that you are close with them now, but you don't know their hidden agendas. There are a lot of factors that may influence their relationships. Anytime, anywhere, problems can emerge between social organisations and the government. (Zheng, female, a researcher located in Hong Kong)

Liang, the director of an independent social organisation providing services for migrant workers, has experienced significant changes in the relationship between his organisation and the government. *Liang* recalled that before the year 2014, he had a lot of opportunities to participate in policy consultation meetings organised by the government. However, his close working relationship with the government quickly deteriorated in 2014 when the government adopted a new political attitude toward labour NGOs. As recalled by *Liang*:

> The period between 2012 and 2014 was the spring for the nonprofit sector. For example, the government relaxed the regulation for NGO registration, and it gave a lot of opportunities for people like me to voice our opinions. At that time, some civil rights protection organisations even had opportunities to develop, and some labour NGOs were even awarded as outstanding organisations by the government. However, the situation has gone downhill since 2014, because the Umbrella Movement emerged in Hong Kong, and the government started to suppress labour NGOs harshly. (Liang, male, the director of an independent NGO)

The findings in this section seem to indicate that trust, including interpersonal trust and cross-sector trust, is not only a kind of resource but also a form of control. On one hand, a close and trusting relationship with the government or specific political elites is deemed necessary for SWOs to influence policymaking, as it can provide SWOs with important information and a lot of opportunities to take part in the policy process. On the other hand, the emphasis on earning the government's trust has put the Party-state in a more advantaged position in the government-SWO relationships. The prerequisite for a trusting relationship is believed to be the Party-state's perception of SWOs that they would not stand against it or challenge its authority, on the contrary, SWOs can be a professional and helpful force assisting with the Party-state's efforts to enhance social governance. Because a trusting relationship is highly dependent on the Party-state's political needs, it is unstable for SWOs which are in a more disadvantaged position. To maintain trust from the Party-state, SWOs may need to constantly adjust their missions and behaviours, and devote themselves to meeting the Party-state's political needs.

8.4 Compliance with the Party-state's policy agendas

As discussed in the previous section, the establishment of a trusting relationship requires SWOs to assist the government with its political needs. This section further explores the role of the government's policy agendas in SWOs' policy practice. Research participants believed that SWOs need to know the priority issues of the government and try to combine government expectations with their practice. Making use of the government's political agendas is an important strategy used by SWOs to influence policy-making, as it enables SWOs to seize opportunity windows to lobby the government for their policy proposals.

SWO leaders attached great importance to the timing of submitting their policy proposals or recommendations to the government. The government's intention to

develop specific policies can create an opportunity window for SWOs to participate in policy formulation. From the perspective of SWOs, if they could respond to the government's policy agendas by proposing policy solutions, then their policy practice would be more likely to lead to policy changes. In this sense, successful policy practice requires a combination of SWOs' efforts (eg. promoting social service performance and demonstrating good outcomes as the evidence for their policy suggestions) and support from the government. For example, *Gong*, an experienced social worker who was in charge of the training department of a SWO, believed that "successful policy practice results from a combination of favourable timing, geographical conditions, and human collaboration[30]". Here, *Gong* quoted an old Chinese saying about how to win a war. It means that success requires a range of favourable external and internal conditions. In terms of policy practice, the results depend on not only SWOs' efforts but also on several external factors such as the government's policy agendas and the government's willingness to collaborate with SWOs. As explained by *Gong*:

> In other words, when you want to do something, it is important that a government leader is interested in your idea and is willing to support you or at least does not set barriers against you. The government may give us some room to do experiments, and if we can achieve success, it may be willing to work with us to promote our projects. (*Gong*, female, manager of the training department of a SWO)

Another SWO leader, *Zhu*, expressed similar opinions:

> To influence the government, it is important that the government wants to develop a new policy and it wants to listen to the opinions of SWOs. In addition, it is also important that SWOs show some outcomes of their social service projects. Influencing policymaking requires the demonstration of

[30] "*天时地利人和*" in Chinese, *Tian Shi Di Li Ren He.*

> service outcomes that can convince the government that specific policies are worth developing. Also, there is a premise of successful policy practice: if the central government is determined to develop specific policies or social services, then the local government would be willing to formulate relevant policies. In this context, SWOs may be involved in trying new services. If SWOs can achieve good outcomes, they are more likely to be involved in the policy-making process. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Zhu's views also point out the role of the central government in SWOs' attempts to influence local policies. Although most SWOs seldom have opportunities to directly work with the central government, they can make use of its top-level policy planning to support their policy proposals submitted to local governments. Because of China's hierarchical central-local government relations, when the central government gives overall directions for developing policies in specific fields, local governments need to experiment and formulate policies that apply to the regional contexts of their jurisdictions. Therefore, the central government's policy agendas may create opportunity windows for SWOs to engage in local social policy formulation. For example, *Su*n, a SWO leader, attributed her success in persuading the local government to provide home modification services for the elderly people ageing at home to a national elderly care strategy which gave a strong endorsement for her policy proposal. According to *Sun*:

> I believed that why we could successfully advocate the provision of home modifications for seniors ageing in place was connected to the national policy direction. The MCA has developed the "9073" strategy[31] for elderly care and proposed that in the future 90% of the elderly should age at home. And ageing at home requires the prevention of falls, otherwise the elderly may be faced with a high risk of getting disabled. Therefore, to implement the "9073"

[31] According to the "9073" strategy, 90% of the elderly people are expected to age at home, 7% are cared for in and by communities, and 3% are cared for in nursing homes.

> strategy, the government needs to ensure safe living conditions for the elderly. When we proposed our plan to the local government, it knew that our plan was in line with the central government's strategy. Also, the data we provided could let the local government know clearly what it could do, so it was quite willing to work on that. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

SWOs have learnt from their experiences of working with the government that complying with the Party-state's policy agendas may promote the effectiveness and efficiency of their policy practice. As a result, SWO leaders not only pay a lot of attention to learning and following the Party-state's agendas, but also appropriate the state's political rhetoric to justify their policy proposals. However, what if there are differences or even conflicts between SWOs' missions and the state's political agendas? According to *Ma*, a SWO leader, SWOs need to adjust their practice to what the government expects from them so that they can keep their practice consistent with the government's political rhetoric. *Ma* explained her view by sharing how her organisation dealt with the differences between community development and community governance:

> We need to understand the core of the government's discourse system and check whether our values and the things we do are in line with it. If not, what is the difference? Take community governance and community development as examples. Community development features the agency of the residents, who are key to promoting community development. For example, the community development projects in Taiwan follow a bottom-up approach. It stresses that social workers should motivate residents to make their efforts to improve their communities. However, the social governance we talk about in the Chinese context features the leadership of the Party and the responsibility of the government. Society and the public's role in community governance are just to participate and assist. The positions (of different actors in these

two concepts) are different…

Therefore, even if I need to do community mobilisation in community governance projects, such as motivating residents to participate in community activities, I follow a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up approach that is used in community development. Although these two concepts both require participation, participation is different in different discourse systems. Therefore, we need to understand the actual contents of different discourse systems. This is a political issue. You know, policy practice is linked to political factors, so we need to navigate through different discourse systems and find out the differences…

Since last year, our organisation has started to emphasise the importance of understanding policy. We need to understand the overall policy trend so that our services can be consistent with policy and we can assist (with policy formulation and implementation), and our practice can be consistent with the state's discourse system. In the past, I often found "schizophrenia" in social service. When social workers tried to apply for government funding, they used the state's official discourse system. For example, they quoted a lot of sentences from the Party's policy documents. However, at the implementation stage, those projects had nothing to do with the Party's policy instructions. This year, we decide to promote our staff's understanding of policy, so that their practice can be more consistent with the state's discourse. We want to avoid speaking about community governance but doing something else. This gap may still exist, but we want to adjust our organisation's strategies and internal institutional arrangements so that we can narrow the gap and make things more consistent with the state's policies. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

Ma's experience reveals the effects of the government's political agendas on SWOs'

professional practice. Initially, to get local governments' approval and support for their policy proposals or application for social services funding, SWOs might strategically appropriate the Party-state's political rhetoric and policy concepts. This strategy not only enabled SWOs to secure political safety by expressing their subordination to the CPC's leadership, but it also increased the possibility that local governments would endorse SWOs' proposals, as it built connections between the Party-state's policy and political agendas and what SWOs wanted to promote. While in practice, social workers could set aside the political cover and carry out social services projects using their professional autonomy and discretion. For example, when *Ma*'s organisation tried to apply for public funding for a community development project, it decorated its proposal with the concept of community governance, which was a buzzword frequently used by both the central and local governments in recent years. During the project implementation process, social workers did not follow the principles of community governance, such as strengthening the leading role of the Party and guiding residents to participate in community affairs in a way favoured by the government. However, this strategy was abandoned after *Ma* reflected on the "schizophrenia". Instead of reestablishing an independent professional role, *Ma* decided to narrow the gap by designing and carrying out social work projects according to the government's political requirements. SWOs have learnt from their interaction with the government that to survive and thrive, they need to perform the political function assigned by the Party-state.

Although complying with the Party-state's agendas may enable SWOs to seize opportunity windows to influence policymaking, it may lead to a shift in SWOs' missions and practice, and result in the loss of their autonomy. Eventually, it is likely to limit the impacts of SWOs' policy practice. For example, focusing on those issues that have already been recognised by the Party-state may make SWOs overlook other important issues, especially those facing the disadvantaged groups whose voices are seldom heard. Also, if SWOs only work on the policy initiatives favoured by the Party-state, they would be unable to explore more policy options, even though these options

may gain the greatest support from the disadvantaged groups. Therefore, it was not surprising to see that SWOs' compliance with the state's agendas has attracted criticism from independent social organisations. Both *Xu* and *Liang*, the leaders of two independent social organisations, compared SWOs following the Party-state's agendas to doing business, which might promote their economic and political resources but at the same time damage their autonomy and professional values. As *Liang* and *Xu* commented:

> SWOs always say they can influence the government. However, they just say what the government wants to hear within the government's policy framework. Well, there is nothing to blame because SWOs need to make a living. This may lead to two consequences or attitudes: treating social work as a business or treating it as a career based on values. If they treat social work as a business, they would just follow the state's policy and give some advice, and then their advice may turn into some contracted-out projects. For example, if the state's policy is about developing real estate, exports, or some new products, then businessmen will work in these fields. It is no different from NGOs focusing on poverty alleviation which has been prioritised by the state in recent years. However, in many cases, their policy advice does not come from the grassroots. (Liang, male, director of an independent NGO)

> SWOs may view it as an opportunity to make money. Of course, there may be some SWOs that stick to the values of social work and have a commitment to social work practice. However, in general, there are very few of them. (Xu, female, director of an independent SWO)

However, the leaders of the SWOs in the incorporated spaces have very different views on the topic. For example, *Hu*, a SWO leader, justified his compliance with the state's agendas by stressing the importance of developing policy sensitivity, especially in China's political environment. According to *Hu*, policy sensitivity is about SWOs'

ability to obtain information on the government's plan for policy development. It requires SWOs to notice and follow the national policy trend, and select those issues prioritised by the government to work on. Although policy sensitivity may make SWO leaders look like "politicians" who are eager to affiliate themselves with the ruling party, it helps them gain more policy influence. As explained by *Hu*:

> Successful policy practice is closely linked to the current social environment. For example, poverty alleviation is prioritised on the government's agendas this year. If policy practice follows the national policy trend, it would be easier for SWOs to make a point. If SWOs advocate something else this year, for example, environmental protection, especially environmental protection in urban areas, this issue would be given less attention. It is because the government prioritises different policy issues every year, and we need to be in line with its policy themes and tasks. Every government department has its tasks and plan, so we need to develop our ability to obtain information when we interact with the government...
>
> Some people think that I am more like a politician than a social worker. In fact, it is not what they think about. As a social worker or a leader of a SWO, it is important for me to develop policy sensitivity, because only when you understand policy can you do the right things. And only when you do the right things can you make achievements. Only when you make achievements can you have your say. If you do not work on the right things, it is useless to spend time advocating something. (Hu, male, director of a SWO)

As discussed in this section, compliance with the Party-state's agendas can enhance the legitimacy of SWOs' policy practice and reduce the possibility of confrontations between SWOs and the Party-state. By showing their willingness to participate in policy formulation under the CPC's leadership, SWOs can earn trust from the Party-state and avoid potential suspicion and even suppression that are experienced by independent

social organisations. More importantly, choosing the government's existing agendas to intervene can create opportunity windows for SWOs to propose policy advice to tackle the government's priority issues. SWOs often use the Party-state's agendas and political rhetoric as the endorsement for their policy practice, which makes their policy proposals and advice more appealing to policymakers. In this sense, SWOs' policy influence depends on the proximity of their policy proposals to the Party-state's agendas. However, following the Party-state's agendas may lead to the loss of SWOs' autonomy and the constraints of the scope of their policy practice. As *Hu* contended, policy sensitivity required SWOs to choose "the right things" to work on. And only by doing "the right things" can SWOs make changes to policies. However, what can be perceived as "the right things" in China? And who has the power to define what is right?

8.5 Consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and authority

What can be regarded as "the right things" (Hu, male, director of a SWO) that SWOs should do to gain influence over policymaking? The criteria may not only relate to what is done by SWOs (for example, SWOs should work on the policy issues concerning the government), but they are also about the political effects of SWOs' policy practice. As argued in this section, "doing the right things" requires SWOs to devote their professional expertise to consolidating rather than undermining the Party-state's legitimacy while participating in policy practice. In other words, SWOs' policy influence fundamentally comes from their role in the Party-state's scheme of strengthening its legitimacy in grassroots communities by emphasising its irreplaceable leadership in social welfare provision and development.

8.5.1 Crediting policy achievements to the Party-state

With the retreat of the government from direct welfare provision, SWOs have been increasingly involved in providing social services. These changes have raised the

government's worry about losing its presence and prestige in grassroots communities. To avoid its leadership being downplayed, the government has sought to appropriate SWOs' contributions to policy changes and associate the development of social welfare with the leading role of the CPC. From the perspective of SWOs, meeting the government's political needs is crucial for maintaining a close and trusting government-SWO relationship. Therefore, SWOs tend to keep a low profile and credit policy achievements to the government. *Sun*, a senior social worker, stressed the importance of "political propriety", which implies that even if SWOs play a key role in coming up with new policy proposals, credit should be given to the government, especially in propaganda campaigns. According to *Sun*:

> During the process (of working with the government on policy formulation), the social work profession or SWOs should develop a sense of propriety. In other words, as the government spends so much on developing a new social service, it is understandable that it hopes its contributions to be emphasised when publicising the service. I think that as long as we achieve our goals, it is unnecessary to highlight the contribution of the social work profession or the name of my organisation. (Sun, female, manager of the elderly department of an SWO)

To attribute the improvement of the people's well-being to the leadership of the CPC, policy drafts usually include statements of allegiance to the CPC. These political statements seem to have more symbolic meanings than practical implications, as they mainly aim to stress that social development can only be achieved under the Party's correct leadership. For example, *Zhu*, a SWO leader who participated in the formulation of a policy on the provision and development of youth services in her city, recalled that several political statements were added to the draft policy sent to the government for review and revision. As stated by *Zhu*:

> The draft policy was formulated by several SWO leaders and later sent to the

> municipal Communist Youth League, which convened a series of meetings to review and discuss each item of the policy. They made some changes to the draft. The most important changes were that a lot of CPC and political elements were added. For example, "we should uphold the leadership of the Party." (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Although SWOs' contributions to policy development may be overlooked by the public, crediting policy achievements to the state has become an unwritten rule for SWOs involved in the policy process. It aims to ensure the expected political effect of policy practice: to highlight the leading role of the state and reconsolidate its legitimacy, especially in the context featuring social organisations' increasing participation in meeting social needs.

8.5.2 Participating in Party-building work

As discussed in previous chapters, the CPC has sought to incorporate SWOs into its rank and involve them in Party-building work, which requires SWOs to combine welfare provision with the Party's political activities. The new service-centred Party-building strategy enables the CPC to appropriate social forces including SWOs to reestablish its image as a paternalistic redistributor of welfare and strengthen its legitimacy (Kan & Ku, 2021). For SWOs, the Party's new political scheme has not only assigned them more explicit political tasks but has also created increasing opportunities to participate in policymaking and given them more policy influence. More specifically, the combination of social services and Party work has two main effects on SWOs' policy influence. Firstly, local governments are required to work with SWOs to develop service-centred Party-building projects. This directly involves SWOs in the design of many new social services that feature the participation of the CPC members and organisations. Secondly, by playing an increasingly important role in Party-building work, SWOs' political position has been promoted, lending them more influence over policymaking.

Ma, the executive director of a SWO, provided a detailed and informative example of how SWOs were involved in service-centred Party-building work, and how this involvement promoted their influence over policymaking. The example shared by *Ma* was about the formulation of a new drug rehabilitation service that required the collaboration between SWOs and the local CPC organisations, and the participation of the Party members who worked as volunteers and partners. The example will be presented first, and more discussion will be made later. Here is *Ma*'s monologue:

> Recently, the local government wants to promote the implementation of the "double contacts"[32] projects, and it wants to combine community drug rehabilitation service with "double contacts". The government convened a consultation meeting and invited the police and some senior social workers including me to give advice. Many institutional arrangements were made soon after the meeting. At that time, the government leader in charge of social welfare believed that social workers played a crucial role in social service. However, social workers' role might be overlooked by other government departments, which might think that social workers could only put the icing on the cake[33]. So, the leader wanted to push social workers towards a more important position. To push social workers forward, it wanted to combine social workers' practice with what the government was concerned about and its key tasks. At that time, the government was paying a lot of attention to drug abuse and drug abusers…
>
> In addition, Party building was a priority, and the government wanted to involve social workers in Party building. The government leader held the

[32] "*双联系*" in Chinese, *Shuang Lian Xi*. "Double contacts" is an important strategy adopted by the CPC to maintain and strengthen its connection with grassroots communities. It requires state organs to make contact with grassroots community and village committees, and the CPC members to make contact with the disadvantaged population.

[33] "*锦上添花*" in Chinese, *Jin Shang Tian Hua.*

opinion that if social workers just provided social service on their own, then the service users would only appreciate social workers rather than the Party and the government. From the perspective of the Party and the government, what social workers did would backfire. Therefore, the government tried to combine these two things…

The government leader proposed that the CPC members should make contact with our service users. In the past, they usually contacted the people living in poverty. Why did the government come up with this idea? It might be because we regularly talked to the government about our work. We reported how we provided drug rehabilitation services in communities, how social workers visited the service users and conducted urine drug tests, how social workers provided psychological support and helped the service users rebuild their social networks and family relationships, and how social workers helped them get reintegrated into the society. Through ongoing communication, the government got to understand how we worked. From its standpoint, the government wanted to promote the position of SWOs by adding some political elements such as Party-building work. In fact, as the service users' neighbours, the Party members and the secretaries of the Party committees in their communities are important parts of the service users' social network. The idea could work by involving the Party members and Party committees in service delivery and highlighting their roles…

In the consultation meetings, we gave many suggestions about how to establish relationships with service users, how the Party members and volunteers can participate, what roles they should play, and what should be paid attention to when conducting home visits. You know, the government favours large-scale social mobilisation. However, the users of drug rehabilitation services want privacy and confidentiality, and they are sensitive to communication with others. Therefore, we suggested that the government

> should develop some pilot projects rather than immediately rolling out the service so that they could avoid potential negative effects. We also advised how to find suitable pilot sites. For example, is the community Party secretary really interested in working on the project? What is their own value? We advised that the government should look for suitable community leaders to work with. In many cases, the government may overlook the importance of humanity when making a new policy or institutional arrangement. That's why we pointed out these challenges. In addition, we gave suggestions about providing training for the Party members involved. We talked about many practical details and gave some professional advice. In the end, a lot of our suggestions were adopted, and now the government is piloting a few experimentation projects. (Ma, female, executive director of a SWO)

In the interview, *Ma* shared her conversation with the government leaders, which revealed the government's motivation to involve SWOs in service-centred Party-building work. Some key government leaders were not satisfied with SWOs' role of merely providing social services, and perceived this work as "putting the icing on the cake". In other words, they did not think that what SWOs had been doing was related to the real problem that they were concerned about. From their perspective, what really mattered was to solve the social problems that might threaten social stability, for example, drug abuse, and to innovate Party-building work to enhance the Party's influence over grassroots communities. However, initially, SWOs did not make sufficient contributions to the government's political scheme. Even worse, SWOs' role in welfare provision raised the government's suspicion and worry that the development of SWOs would "backfire" and weaken the government's presence in grassroots communities because service users might believe that nongovernmental SWOs were more helpful and reliable than the government. In addition, through years of collaboration and communication with SWOs, the government got to recognise SWOs' professional expertise and understand how it can contribute to social governance by meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. Therefore, the government started to think

about appropriating SWOs' work to serve its political interest.

As a result, the government decided to "push social workers forward" by incorporating them into the CPC's rank and assigning them with an important political task: to combine Party-building work with drug rehabilitation service. To accomplish this task, SWOs needed to participate in policy formulation and contribute their expertise to designing and delivering the service. Although the new policy idea might lack "humanity" and be harmful to the users of drug rehabilitation services who required privacy and confidentiality, social workers could only comply with the government's agenda, as the political scheme of strengthening the state's legitimacy and social control is an overriding consideration, which cannot be challenged. In this context, what social workers could do in the policy process was to provide practical suggestions and try to minimise the potential harm to service users. Nevertheless, *Ma* managed to influence the policy by persuading policymakers to adopt many of her constructive suggestions which were expected to protect service users on the one hand and serve the government's interest on the other hand. In this case, *Ma* had to carefully balance the interests and values of the government, service users, and the social work profession.

Ma's experience seems to indicate that both the government and SWOs could be empowered by service-centred Party-building work. From the perspective of the government, SWOs' policy practice contributes to the consolidation of its legitimacy and authority by helping the ruling party rebuild its connection with, and control over, grassroots communities. As for SWOs, by being a helpful arm of the state, they are given recognition and legitimacy and are put in a more important position in the Party's political system. As such, SWOs not only play a professional role in welfare provision but also establish a political role which gives them more policy influence in the incorporated spaces.

However, the seemingly mutual empowerment entails SWOs' subjection to the Party's policy and political directions, and this may lead to the disempowerment of SWOs.

Similar to *Ma*, another SWO leader, *Hu*, also emphasised the state's intention to "push SWOs towards a more important position". He further explained what SWOs need to do to maintain this position: following the government's policy directions and participating in policy practice and services provision accordingly. As *Hu* explained:

> Over the past few years, a lot of policies, such as many social service standards, have been formulated, which gradually influence our communities. And the government put forward some important policy concepts, such as community governance and "tripartite collaboration"[34]. Although these concepts involve some political elements such as Party building, they more or less push social organisations and the social work profession towards a more important position…
>
> This year, we need to do a new task. Party-building is a priority this year… The Communist Party of China is a unique political party. It is connected to politics and everything. To be honest, all social work service centres in the city are talking about and working on Party building and strengthening the leadership of the Party. If we can combine our work with Party building, we will have more opportunities to speak out. (Researcher: What does "combine" mean?) It means that we need to make our work more connected to the state's policy directions and the social development trend. For example, if you come up with an anti-social proposal, something confrontational, then it would be difficult to achieve your goal. One advantage of Chinese society is that many social policies are beneficial for the people, and they aim to promote social welfare. Therefore, there are many spaces where SWOs can have a say because what we do are consistent with policy. (Hu, male, director of an SWO)

[34] "*三社联动*" in Chinese, *San She Lian Dong*. "Tripartite collaboration" refers to the collaboration among community committees, social organisations, and social workers. It is adopted as a key strategy by the state to conduct grassroots community governance.

SWOs' policy influence in the incorporated spaces seems to be conditional. It comes from the government's top-down delegation of power to SWOs and depends on whether SWOs' efforts to influence policy are consistent with the Party-state's political needs and whether they can contribute to the consolidation of the state's legitimacy. In other words, for SWOs, the prerequisite for gaining policy influence is their subordination to the ruling party. From the perspective of the government, this can make sure that the improvement of social welfare and the promotion of people's wellbeing will be credited to the Party rather than an independent civil society. By lending conditional power to the SWOs it trusts, the government can appropriate their expertise to improve social policy while at the same time reconsolidating its legitimacy and dominant position. As for the SWOs that remain more independent, because of the lack of political affiliation with the state, it is very difficult for them to develop this kind of policy influence outside the political establishment. The picture of their engagement in policy practice is very different.

8.6 Two types of policy influence: A comparison between the independent and incorporated SWOs

Chapter six has described how the Party-state marginalised the SWOs that reject incorporation into the Party's rank and excluded them from the policy-making process. Why does the Party-state give a certain degree of policy-making power to some SWOs while at the same time suppressing other SWOs' efforts to influence policymaking? The answer may relate to the nature of SWOs' different kinds of policy influence and their different effects on the Party-state's authority and legitimacy.

This section draws on a comparison between an independent SWO and an incorporated SWO regarding their participation in policy practice to further discuss SWOs' policy influence in the incorporated spaces. These two SWOs, Organisation A and Organisation B, both specialise in services for domestic migrant workers but vary in

values, missions, and proximity to the Party-state. The comparison indicates that whether SWOs can use their professional expertise to strengthen the state's legitimacy plays a decisive role in entering the incorporated spaces and gaining policy influence from the authority.

As an independent SWO without political affiliation with the Party, Organisation A was established by a former migrant worker, *Xu*, who decided to become a social worker after receiving support from other labour NGOs. Organisation A now provides a range of community services for domestic migrant worker and their children, including a community library, early childhood development services, parenting education, and entertainment activities. Its previous participation in policy practice featured a bottom-up approach to social mobilisation. Social workers tried to organise and support migrant workers that shared the same concerns to take collective action to defend and advocate their rights. Organisation A wished to remain in a more independent position and sought to influence policy outside the political establishment. *Xu*, the director of Organisation A, shared how she was involved in a case of policy practice in the past, in which a group of migrant workers advocated changes to a pension insurance policy and demanded fair pension insurance paid by their employers.

> In the past, the social climate was relatively relaxed. We were permitted to organise petitions, write joint letters, contact the PC deputies, and seek media coverage. The pension problem was reported by the media, and it drew the public's attention. After watching the media coverage, a lot of people were shocked by the injustice, and they supported the workers' demands. The issue itself was a matter of concern to many people. And the social climate at that time was not as difficult as it is now. In addition, we organised a group of workers facing similar difficulties and sharing the same important interest. They showed solidarity with each other. (Xu, female, director of a SWO)

However, with the Party-state tightening its control over social organisations in recent

years, Organisation A's participation in policy practice drew distrust from the government, which perceived its action as a challenge and threat to social stability and the leadership of the Party-state. As a result, Organisation A has experienced diverse forms of suppression from the Party-state, including surveillance, limitations on information dissemination, restrictions on fund-raising, warnings, and coercive orders. What is even worse, when the thesis was about to finish, Organisation A was closed down due to the pressure from the government. Considering the political risk to its survival, Organisation A decided to stay a low profile and constrained itself from engaging in any politically sensitive activities, including policy practice. For example, Organisation A once tried to organise service users to send comments and suggestions to the public consultation draft of a new policy on public education for the children of domestic migrant workers without local household registration. Organisation A's action soon drew warnings and even coercive orders from the police, who commanded social workers to stop working on this issue and dissolve the online chat group joined by concerned migrant parents. *Xu* learnt from this incident that it would be risky to engage in bottom-up policy practice. As *Xu* recalled:

> For example, a big problem facing migrant workers now is their children's access to public education. The government is aware of this problem and tries to gradually solve it. Our organisation is also concerned about this problem, but we are unable to push for changes from the bottom. Just because we sent out a link to a government survey of people's comments on a new education policy, we were given a lot of attention by the police…
>
> To be honest, we are in a confused state of mind. The bottom-up approach doesn't seem to work anymore. In the past, we adopted the bottom-up approach and tried to influence some policies. We have a lot of experience in policy practice, and we still keep our policy sensitivity. However, even though there is a suitable issue to tackle and good timing to do something, it is very difficult for us to take action now. (Xu, female, director of an SWO)

The bottom-up approach that *Xu* talked about requires SWOs to mobilise and organise the disadvantaged groups, who are encouraged to use their power to influence policy and tackle social injustices. In the case shared by *Xu*, the root of inequality concerning domestic migrant workers was the household registration system that prohibits the fair distribution of public education resources. However, as *Xu* noticed, although the Party-state wants to improve the household registration to provide migrant children with more access to public education, it has a very intolerant attitude towards independent social forces' attempts to promote policy changes. From the perspective of the Party-state, the policy influence of independent social organisations and the disadvantaged groups they work with is uncontrollable and unmanageable, because it may raise people's dissatisfaction with the ruling party, propose competing political agendas, and even lead to social unrest. Therefore, independent SWOs' capacities for social mobilisation and bottom-up policy practice are perceived as a threat to social stability and the Party-state's authority and legitimacy.

Compared to Organisation A, Organisation B is a more common SWO that has a close working relationship with the government and has established a CPC branch within its organisational structure. It specialises in the services for migrant workers and is well known for its community service project which was named "Community College". This project aims to "help domestic migrant workers integrate with the local communities", and "transform their role from peasants to citizens by uplifting their spirit and morality"[35]. More specifically, it provides domestic migrant workers and their children with a range of free services, including vocational training, civic morality education, early childhood development services, entertainment activities, and community leadership education. These services are believed to be helpful in promoting the social integration of migrant workers into urban living. In addition, Community College is labelled as a "community governance project" on the organisation's official website, as

[35] Quoted from the official website of Organisation B.

it features the orderly participation of social organisations and grassroots communities in serving the domestic migrant workers under the leadership of the Party-state.

Community College has gained great recognition from the government for its social effects, and it was perceived as a successful model of domestic migrant integration. It has been visited by many leaders from both local governments and the central government. Through Organisation B's policy practice, similar services have been rolled out in more urban communities populated by migrant workers. *Zhu*, the director of another SWO, attributed the success of Organisation B to its helpful role in helping the government maintain social stability. As *Zhu* commented:

> At that time, the local government as well as the central government were looking for methods to integrate domestic migrant workers into local urban communities. The government found that a lot of social problems emerged in the cities where there was an increasing migrant population. For example, migrant workers may have nothing to do after work and may be involved in gambling, drug abuse, and the sex trade. The government began to think about how to solve these social problems. During those years, the government attached great importance to maintaining social stability by providing social services for domestic migrant workers. Organisation B seized this opportunity and developed a successful service project…
>
> This project helped meet the needs of domestic migrant workers, promoted their knowledge and skills, and helped them stay away from gambling, drug abuse, etc. This project was in line with the state's policy agendas at that time… In addition, the key to success was that it developed a service model from its project and reported it to the Bureau of Civil Affairs which praised and discussed this model in its internal meetings. And later this model was introduced to other regions as an outstanding example. Now, all subdistricts in the city are required to develop similar services for domestic migrant

workers. (Zhu, female, director of a SWO)

Instead of organising migrant workers to voice their concerns and demands, or mobilising them in defending their rights and advocating changes to the structural inequality resulting from the household registration, Organisation B's policy practice is more focused on developing and providing social services. These services aim to promote migrant workers' ability to settle down in the urban environment and prevent possible social problems caused by rural-urban migration. By setting up an excellent model of social integration services, Organisation B managed to persuade the local government to roll out similar services in more communities. Organisation B's policy proposal had gained great endorsement from the government because it could help with the Party-state's agenda of maintaining social stability. As such, Organisation B's participation in policy practice contributes to the consolidation of the Party-state's authority and is not perceived as a challenge to its legitimacy. In recognition of Organisation B's contributions to social governance, the CPC branch of Organisation B was awarded "the advanced Party branch" by the local CPC committee, which marked its promoted political position and increased influence over policymaking.

It should be noted that engaging with domestic migrant workers is perceived as highly politically sensitive in China, and many labour NGOs have been closed down because of their involvement in social action and labour movements. Although Organisation A has survived the Party-state's crackdown by retreating from labour movements and limiting its role as a community services provider, it has been kept under strict surveillance and excluded from the policy arena. However, Organisation B, a social organisation working with the labour, has not only survived but also developed its policy influence and gained opportunities to participate in policymaking. Why are these two SWOs treated so differently by the authority? What leads to their different roles in the policy process?

Table 8.1 summarises the main similarities and differences between the independent

SWO (Organisation A) and the incorporated SWO (Organisation B) regarding their engagement in policy practice. The comparison indicates two types of SWOs' policy influence: one is generated from bottom-up social mobilisation, and the other is gained through the top-down delegation of the Party-state's power.

Both Organisation A and Organisation B were formally registered as nongovernmental social work service organisations and were established and operated by certificated social workers. Also, these two SWOs both provide a range of community services for domestic migrant workers and their children. However, their participation in policy practice has shown significant differences in terms of political affiliation, the goals, methods, and impacts of policy practice, and the sources of policy influence. First, while Organisation A remains independent from the Party-state, Organisation B has incorporated itself into the CPC's rank by establishing a Party branch and participating in Party-building work. Organisation B's political affiliation to the Party-state is not only a "death-exemption card" (Liang, male, director of an independent NGO) but also a key to gaining policy influence in the incorporated spaces. As for Organisation A, its independent position and its engagement with migrant workers drew suspicion from the Party-state.

Table 8.1 Comparison between the two SWOs' engagement in policy practice

	Organisation A	**Organisation B**
Target group	Domestic migrant workers.	
Personnel	Certificated social workers.	
Main services	A range of community services for domestic migrant workers.	
Participatory spaces	Created spaces and later closed spaces.	Incorporated spaces.
Political affiliation	Independent.	Incorporated into the CPC rank.
Goals of policy practice	Advocate migrant children's access to local public education; tackle the structural cause of welfare inequality.	Provide more community services for migrant workers; promote urban integration and maintain social stability.
Methods of policy practice	Organising service users to advocate for their rights.	Piloting and rolling out community services.
Impacts of policy practice	Empowerment of the disadvantaged groups; a challenge to the dominating power.	Improved social services, consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and authority; reproduction of existing power relations.
Sources of policy influence	Bottom-up social mobilisation.	Top-down delegation of the Party-state's power.

Second, Organisation A's interrupted policy practice targeted the welfare division caused by the household registration system, and it aimed to support domestic migrant workers in their demand for their children's access to local public education. For migrant workers, their offspring's educational opportunities were their main concerns. However, addressing the educational issue was not easy, as it might require fundamental changes to China's deep-rooted redistributive institutions, which might put the advocates in confrontation with the authority. In comparison, Organisation B's policy practice did not directly address the structural cause of the difficulties facing migrant workers. Without challenging the household registration system, Organisation B advocated more community services for migrant workers so that they can be enabled to adapt to the urban environment and better fulfil their social functions. From the perspective of the Party-state, Organisation B's proposal was more appealing and cost-efficient, and it could contribute to the improvement of the Party-state's social governance capacity and the maintenance of social stability.

Third, in terms of the methods of policy practice, Organisation A adopted the bottom-up approach to influence policy and stressed building solidarity among migrant workers and bringing them together to take action around their common interests and concerns. Organisation B, however, attached more importance to gaining recognition and endorsement from the Party-state by piloting a new social services project and achieving desirable outcomes. Like most SWOs in the incorporated spaces, Organisation B used the evidence emerging from the pilot project to interest the local government and persuade it to formulate a new social service policy.

Fourth, these two SWOs' engagements in policy practice may lead to different impacts on the power relations between domestic migrant workers and the Party-state. Although Organisation A's preliminary efforts did not result in policy changes and were interrupted by the police, it encouraged domestic migrant workers to share their concerns and voice their opinions to policymakers. In this way, the disadvantaged

population could be empowered to challenge the dominating power which hindered them from claiming their rights. In comparison, by working closely with the government, Organisation B's policy practice has led to real policy change which would provide more migrant workers with more community services, resources, and support. However, even though migrant families were very likely to benefit from the increase in community services, the household registration that limits their access to other important public resources, such as health care and education, remained unchallenged and intact. In addition, the role of migrant workers in policy practice seems to be merely the receiver of help and the beneficiary of the government's new policy. While Organisation B's policy practice might overlook the agency and power of migrant workers, it at the same time reinforced the Party-state's role as a paternalistic welfare distributor. As such, it helped with the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy and authority, and the reproduction of the existing power relations between domestic migrant workers and the Party-state.

Finally, these two SWOs showed two routes to developing policy influence. Organisation A's attempts to organise migrant workers to send out their comments on a policy consultation draft represented a bottom-up approach to social mobilisation. Without a collaborative relationship with the authority, Organisation A participated in policy practice as an independent social force allied with the disadvantaged group. Its potential influence over policymaking was developed through grassroots mobilisation which was external to the political establishment and the formal policy process dominated by the Party-state. As such, its capacity for bottom-up social mobilisation as well as its potential policy influence was perceived as uncontrollable and challenging to the authority of the ruling body.

By contrast, Organisation B's policy influence was linked closely to the Party-state's social governance power. By affiliating itself with the CPC and engaging in community governance, Organisation B earned trust and recognition from the authority for its political stance and professional expertise in providing social services and maintaining

social stability. The Party-state saw Organisation B as a helpful and subordinate social force, which could contribute to its political agenda of reconsolidating legitimacy and authority at the grassroots. Therefore, the Party-state decided to further involve this SWO in collaborative social governance and policymaking. In this way, Organisation B developed its policy influence through the top-down delegation of the Party-state's dominant power.

The comparison between independent and incorporated SWOs sheds light on the nature of SWOs' policy influence in incorporated spaces. The legitimacy of SWOs' engagement in policy practice is largely given by the Party-state, which deliberately delegates a certain degree of policy-making power to SWOs in the expectation that they can improve the Party-state's social governance capacities. In spite of a seemingly collaborative relationship, SWOs need to be subject to the Party-state's political interests, as their policy influence highly depends on whether, and to what degree, their policy practice can help consolidate the Party-state's legitimacy and authority.

8.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter analyses SWOs' influence over policymaking in incorporated spaces. While SWOs' social service performance and their professional expertise have provided the foundation for their policy influence, their role as a helpful, trustworthy, and loyal arm of the Party-state has allowed them to contribute their professional experiences to policymaking. The comparison between an independent SWO and an incorporated SWO regarding their engagement in policy practice further indicates that without the authorisation given by the Party-state, SWOs may find it difficult and even risky to turn their professional expertise, especially their skills in organising grassroots communities, into policy influence. Although SWOs are given increased opportunities to participate in policymaking, the Party-state tries to make sure that their policy influence is controllable and useful, rather than aggressive and challenging.

Given that the Party-state holds the power to decide which SWOs can enter the policy process, what issues are put on the agenda, and how social issues are tackled, SWOs have attached great importance to gaining recognition and endorsement from the authority. Based on the research findings reported in this chapter, figure 8.1 illustrates the power dynamics of policy practice in incorporated spaces and shows the power relations among the Party-state, SWOs, and service users.

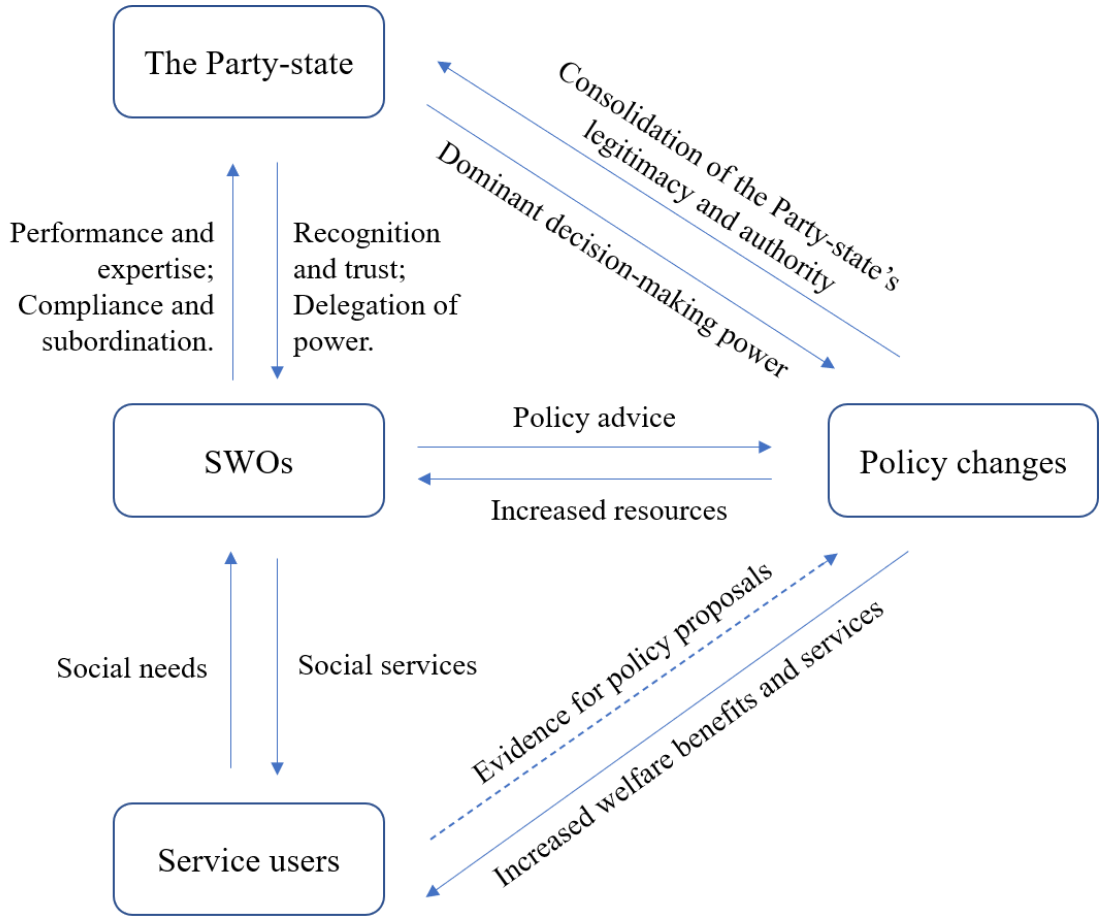

Figure 8.1 The power dynamics of policy practice in the incorporated spaces

In the authoritarian context, the Party-state is the real decision-maker on policy in China. As SWOs do not hold decision-making power, and it is harmful to get involved in confrontations with the authority, they can only try to lobby policymakers to adopt their policy proposals or suggestions by exercising their policy influence which is largely given by the Party-state. To develop their policy influence through the Party-state's top-

down delegation of power, SWOs need to gain recognition and trust from the ruling body. This requires them to demonstrate their social service performance by achieving desirable service outcomes. SWOs' professional performance can provide support and evidence for their policy proposals, and at the same time prove that they are competent in social service delivery as well as social policy formulation. In addition to SWOs' professional expertise, their compliance with the Party-state policy directions and their subordination to the CPC play a crucial role in earning the Party-state's political trust. To do so, SWOs follow the Party-state's political agendas, establish the CPC branches within their organisational structures, and credit the policy achievements to the leadership of the Party-state. With the Party-state's permission and endorsement, SWOs can contribute to policy changes by proposing new policy options and giving policy advice, based on which the Party-state's policy-making agencies will make decisions.

The Party-state requires that the policy changes resulting from SWOs' policy practice should be helpful in consolidating its legitimacy and authority at the grassroots and strengthening its role as a generous welfare generator. SWOs' subordination enables the Party-state to appropriate their policy contributions and label them as the Party-state's efforts. In this sense, SWOs would not develop into a challenging power, and their participation in public affairs would not "backfire": to reduce and even take over the Party-state's role in the promotion of the people's wellbeing. In addition, as SWOs' policy practice is usually aimed at providing more welfare benefits and services for the disadvantaged populations, it contributes to the maintenance of social stability, which is one of the priority concerns of the Party-state.

It is worth noting that SWOs can also benefit from policy changes, which provide them with increasing economic, social, and political resources. New policies usually require the government to spend more public expenditure on the provision of social services. This can create more social service contracts and promote SWOs' income. Also, some new policies can be used by SWOs to help service users apply for more welfare benefits, and they enhance SWOs' ability to support service users. In addition, through

successful policy practice, SWOs can be put in a more important position in the Party-state's scheme of improving social governance, which provides them with more opportunities to participate in policy-making and increased policy influence.

Compared to the bottom-up social mobilisation approach, service users' participation in policy practice in incorporated spaces is more limited. Instead of being empowered to take collective action around their concerns and interests, their role is more confined to helping SWOs discover social needs during service delivery and showing evidence regarding the positive outcomes of desired policy changes. Service users seldom have opportunities to interact directly with policymakers, instead, they are often depicted as the beneficiaries of the Party-state's efforts to promote social welfare. Although service users can benefit from SWOs' successful policy practice that provides them with increased welfare benefits and services, whether they can be empowered to make changes to the policies relating to their lives remains questionable. From the perspective of SWOs, they need to strike a balance between serving the Party-state and serving the people. This does not mean that these two sides have completely contradictory interests. In many cases, they share the same goals regarding the development of social policy and social welfare. However, on specific issues and in certain situations, the authority and the grassroots communities may have different needs and propose different agendas, which are even sometimes conflicting with each other. On these occasions, it is still doubtful whether SWOs can work with disadvantaged groups to propose alternative policy options. The power dynamics in the incorporated spaces have important implications for SWOs' engagement in policy practice. Further discussions will be made in the next chapter.

Chapter 9 Discussion and conclusion: Implications for social work policy practice in China

9.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have reported how incorporated spaces are created, what methods SWOs employ to influence policymaking, and where SWOs' policy influence comes from. Drawing upon the research findings, this final chapter aims to discuss the implications of incorporated spaces for China's social work profession and its engagement in policy practice. It begins with a comparison between incorporated spaces and invited spaces, which indicates that although both of these two types of spaces are created by the more powerful authority, incorporated spaces show more authoritarian features in terms of the purpose of participation, the process of space creation, and the role of participants. Then, this chapter examines the impacts of entering incorporated spaces on SWOs' independence and autonomy, and their ethical commitments to the core values of social work. Following the critical discussions, this chapter goes on to explore the transformability of incorporated spaces and offer some recommendations for social work policy practice in China. Next, I review the research journey, reflect on the limitations of the study, and provide some suggestions for future research. Finally, the chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the key findings from this study and its contributions to knowledge.

9.2 A comparison between incorporated spaces and invited spaces

This thesis adopts the concept of "space" to explore SWOs' participation in the policy-making process, as it helps understand how participation is filled with and bound by power relations that create and frame the "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests" (Gaventa, 2006, p.26). Different types of power relations

lead to very different types of spaces for public participation. Therefore, it is important to examine which actors are in a more powerful position to create spaces and set the agendas and rules for participation. As Gaventa (2006) observes, spaces can be categorised into a continuum ranging from closed spaces to invited spaces and created spaces according to the configuration of power relations. This study reveals that even in the authoritarian context, nongovernmental SWOs have still found spaces to participate in social work policy practice and developed their influence over policymaking. In these spaces, which I call "incorporated spaces", SWOs are incorporated into the social governance system which is led and controlled by the Party-state, and get involved in the policy-making process as the professional assistants of the Party-state. Then, how do we locate incorporated spaces in the continuum of spaces? What are the similarities and differences between incorporated spaces and other types of spaces?

First, incorporated spaces are different from closed spaces as they are inclusive to some extent allowing and enabling selected SWOs to participate in policymaking. Although SWOs are not state agencies, they are provided with opportunities to voice their opinions and advise the government on policymaking. Therefore, incorporated spaces differ from closed spaces where policymaking is conducted merely by state officials behind closed doors (Gaventa, 2006). This challenges the conventional notion that the policy-making process is a closed space in China, and social organisations can hardly influence policy in an authoritarian regime where the ruling party has exclusive political power and rejects the influence of civil society.

Second, incorporated spaces are intentionally brought into being by the Party-state through the mechanisms of contractual incorporation and political incorporation, rather than through proactive efforts by SWOs. As such, incorporated spaces are different from created spaces which are created by the less powerful actors with their political agency and thus involve more radical possibilities (Cornwall, 2002).

Third, incorporated spaces are similar to invited spaces, as they are both produced by the state or other forms of authority. However, when looking into the details of how incorporated spaces are created and SWOs' role within these spaces, we can identify several differences between these two types of space. The following sections provide a comparison between incorporated spaces and invited spaces, from which we can develop a deeper understanding of the nature of incorporated spaces for policy practice. The similarity and differences between incorporated spaces and invited spaces are summarised in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1 Similarity and differences between incorporated spaces and invited spaces

		Incorporated spaces	Invited spaces
Similarity		Authorities create spaces and provide a frame for participation within them	
Differences	Purpose	Better governance under authoritarianism	Improvement to representative democracy
	Creation processes	Inducement and coercion (Carrots and sticks)	Inducement (Carrots)
	Role of participants	SWOs as lower-level professional assistants of the Party-state	Citizens as beneficiaries, consumers, and service users that are empowered to choices

9.2.1 Similarity: The dominant role of the state

A common feature of both incorporated spaces and invited spaces is that the state or other forms of authorities bring them into being, select certain actors to participate, and produce a frame for participation within them. Cornwall (2004) has given an accurate account of the dominant role of the state in creating and framing invited spaces:

> If not of the state, they are often for the state: aimed at enhancing the state's

> performance, whether in terms of accountability and responsiveness, or equity and democracy… All of these spaces are bounded: only certain members of the public are able to participate within them. Their purposes, mandate, and remit tend to be circumscribed by the agendas of implementing agencies and are rarely, if ever, open to negotiation by citizens who are invited to take part in them. The role of such institutions and initiatives in securing legitimacy for intended policy directions rests on forms of discursive closure and bound what can be discussed and frame the versions that emerge. These framings affect how issues are debated within them, how the perspectives of different kinds of participants are viewed, whose participation and contributions are regarded as legitimate, and indeed who gets to participate at all. (Cornwall, 2004, p.18)

Similar to invited spaces, incorporated spaces are created by the authority, which deliberately proposes to make innovations to the social governance system and provides opportunities for social organisations to take part in policymaking. As the creator and leader of incorporated spaces, the Party not only involves SWOs in the policy process through contractual incorporation and political incorporation but also provides a frame for participation within these spaces.

First, similar to the more powerful actors in invited spaces, the Party-state can decide who is eligible to enter incorporated spaces. It selectively provides opportunities for SWOs to participate in policymaking and excludes those that are deemed politically untrustworthy. To gain access to the policy process, SWOs need to fulfil both professional and political requirements: they need to prove that they are both professionally competent and politically obedient. In addition, the independent SWOs that are politically disobedient are excluded from the policy-making process. These organisations include those that defy the government, refuse to promote Party-building work, receive funding from foreign foundations, once organised or participated in politically sensitive activities such as organising workers, spreading criticisms of the

government, etc.

Second, similar to invited spaces where the authority can decide what issues to be tackled, incorporated spaces feature the more advantaged role of the Party-state in setting the agendas for SWOs' policy practice. SWOs are often involved in reactive policy practice, in which the government has already decided to formulate or improve specific social policies and intentionally invites SWOs to participate in the practical policy formulation process and give policy suggestions. Besides, even if SWOs can proactively propose policy options to policymakers, they are often guided to work on the social issues that the government prioritises. In this way, SWOs can justify their attempts to influence policymaking, seize policy windows, and use the policy directions of the central or upper governments as the endorsement for their policy proposals and suggestions. This is believed to help promote the efficiency and effectiveness of policy practice. However, as for those issues that have not yet drawn much attention from the government, they are less likely to be channelled by SWOs into the government's policy agendas.

The similarities between invited spaces and incorporated spaces indicate that these two types of participatory spaces are highly politicised in the interest of the state. They are both characterised by the limited autonomy and agency of citizens and social organisations in challenging the existing power relations. More importantly, they are both mechanisms through which the authority can sustain and consolidate the preferred political systems, be they liberal democracy or authoritarianism/one-party polity. However, the different political contexts have led to different features between invited spaces and incorporated spaces. Although both of these two types of spaces are created by the state or other forms of authorities, they differ from each other in terms of the purpose of spaces, the process of creation, and the role of participants.

9.2.2 Difference 1: Purpose of participation

While invited spaces function as "an extension of, a complement to, even sometimes as an alternative to, representative democracy" (Cornwall, 2002, p.19), incorporated spaces aim at achieving better social governance under authoritarianism. Many democratic regimes around the world have carried out schemes to create invited spaces for institutionalised participation which are aimed at promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of the public policy, enhancing citizens' access to the policy process, democratising decision-making, and promoting the state's performance in liberal democracy (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). These state-engineered democratic spaces are expected to address the deficits of representative democracy and create more direct forms of citizen engagement in governance by "urging politicians to listen more to those who elect them and bureaucrats to become more responsive to those they are meant to serve" (Cornwall, 2004, p.1). Although invited spaces feature, and are often criticised for, the strong intervention of the state, as forms of democratic practice, they tolerate dissent and provide channels for citizens and NGOs to voice alternative views which may be different from, and even conflict with, the government and politicians' policy directions and interests. As Brock et al. (2001) observe, on the occasions of invited participation and consultation, although the authority may have in advance set the agendas for meetings, decided the processes and rules for participation, and even drafted the policy documents for discussion, actors who might otherwise have been excluded from formal policy arenas can still gain entry points into the consultative process where they can bring other issues and interests into policy deliberations and seek for policy alternatives. Overall, in democratic regimes, the state is more tolerant of dissent and conflict, and actors involved in invited spaces enjoy more freedom to express their views without worries that they may be then excluded from the consultative process or even incur suppression from the state.

In comparison, as this study indicates, the purpose of the creation of incorporated spaces is not to democratise the decision-making process, but to appropriate SWOs, with their

abilities and resources in the field of social service, to improve policymaking and enhance the Party-state's social governance ability under authoritarianism. Without any pretence of promoting democracy and accepting pluralism, the Party has barely concealed its intention in creating these spaces: to direct social organisations' participation in tackling social issues and to consolidate the leadership of the Party (CCCPC, 2019). It is not surprising to find that the creation of incorporated spaces is simultaneously accompanied by the marginalisation of more independent social organisations and the exclusion of these organisations from the policy-making process, because the Party-state worries that its leadership may be undermined if independent social forces can exercise their political agency and autonomy to influence policymaking. The Party-state's suppression of independent SWOs' participation in policy practice indicates that incorporated spaces are not created to promote democratisation.

To make sure that SWOs' policy practice would not challenge or undermine the Party-state's authority, the Party-state has set a list of taboo issues for discussion and intervention. By exercising its contractual and political control, the Party-state can prevent SWOs from working on the structural problems that are regarded as politically sensitive in China. These social problems include the welfare exclusion caused by the household registration system, the violation of human rights, and diverse forms of social, economic, and political oppression and barriers faced by the disadvantaged groups. The Party-state worries that open discussion and debates on these social injustices may lead to the public's discontentment with the ruling party. From the perspective of the incorporated SWOs, putting forward alternative policy agendas unwelcomed by the Party-state is not only futile but also risky, as it may damage their relationships with the Party-state and even result in suppression. Therefore, SWOs tend to avoid getting involved in activities around these taboo issues. It is worth noting that the Party-state does not explicitly or straightforwardly provide a list of taboo issues that it is not permitted to discuss. On the contrary, the Party-state intentionally makes the red line ambiguous and fluid, so that SWOs must constantly observe the political

dynamics and exercise self-censorship to explore what issues can be discussed and what cannot. In this sense, the Party-state can control what can be discussed within incorporated spaces, how issues are presented and debated, and what policy solutions can emerge.

Through policy practice in incorporated spaces, SWOs have contributed to the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy by improving the social welfare system. This thesis has presented a lot of examples of how SWOs collaborate with local governments to invent and improve welfare service programmes. When the Party-state becomes more effective and efficient in providing social services to promote the wellbeing of the people, it can strengthen its prestige and legitimacy in grassroots communities. More importantly, in the context of making innovations in social governance and promoting Party-building work within social organisations, SWOs need to deliver social services and contribute to policymaking in the name of the Party. That is to say, the policy improvements resulting from SWOs' policy practice are largely credited to the leadership of the Party rather than the efforts of non-governmental actors. This has even become political propriety for SWOs that wish to remain in incorporated spaces.

As incorporated spaces do not follow democratic principles that allow conflicts and plural views to exist, SWOs need to carefully balance the interests of the Party-state, service users, and themselves. They face serious restrictions on their autonomy as well as on what they can voice and how they can act in incorporated spaces. To secure the political and economic resources that are crucial for their development in the Chinese context, SWOs have to prioritise the needs and interests of the Party-state and at the same time try to advocate and protect the rights of their service users, whose interests, however, may have to be sacrificed in some cases. As a result, ultimately, incorporated spaces for SWOs' participation in policymaking are created to enhance the Party-state's social governance capacity and maintain the single-party system.

9.2.3 Difference 2: Process of space creation

The second difference between invited spaces and incorporated spaces is reflected in the process of space creation. Invited spaces are invitational as the state plays the role of the host which provides opportunities for participation and invites or induces citizens to join in (Cornwall, 2002). These spaces are produced with a tempting promise that those who lack presence or voice in conventional political institutions can be involved in policymaking and influence the decisions that affect their lives (Cornwall, 2004). To realise this promise, many governments across the world put forward appealing schemes, such as users groups, deliberative councils, co-management committees, public consultation meetings, etc., to support citizens and encourage them to participate in decision-making (Barnes, 1999; Coelho et al., 2002; Cornwall, 2002).

It is important to note that citizens are willing to enter invited spaces and bring their opinions into the policy-making process only when they feel welcome and supported, and perceive these spaces as legitimate and invitational and the government as cooperating and open-minded (Visser et al., 2021). And when citizens recognise that the invitation from the government may be a false pretension and their plans for change are hindered by the intricate bureaucratic procedures, they become less inclined to put forward new initiatives (Visser et al., 2021). In other words, citizens have the freedom to choose whether or not to enter invited spaces, and they can leave these spaces when they feel disappointed with the government's responses to their voices. Besides, in liberal democracy, the existence of an autonomous civil society allows these actors to continue to voice out and act upon their dissents outside the invited spaces and even create their own spaces for advancing their policy agendas. The creation of invited spaces does not squeeze out other forms of participation of citizens in achieving policy and social changes. Thus, the process of the production of invited spaces is mainly characterised by the state inducing and inviting citizens and NGOs to participate.

In comparison, the creation of incorporated spaces under authoritarianism features both

inducement and coercion. This study reveals that incorporated spaces are produced through two main mechanisms: contractual incorporation and political incorporation. These two mechanisms create both positive and negative incentives for SWOs to get incorporated into the Party-led social governance system, and they constitute the Party-state's carrot and stick approach to turning SWOs into the Party's lower-level assistants. The positive incentives or inducements for SWOs to enter incorporated spaces include more economic, political, and social resources that SWOs can gain in these spaces. More specifically, by becoming an active part of the Party-led social governance system, SWOs are rewarded with eligibility for receiving governmental social service contracts, political and semi-political positions in the establishment, opportunities to promote their social service projects and benefit more service users, access to as well as influence over the policy-making process, increased social reputation, and perhaps most importantly, a politically qualified status or what a research participant called "death-exemption card" (Liang, male, director of an independent social organisation). The "death-exemption card" is particularly important in the authoritarian context, in which the state rejects conflicts and plurality as normal elements of politics, imposes restrictions on civil and political rights, and puts social organisations under strict surveillance and control due to the fear that the state's exclusive authority may be otherwise undermined (Howell and Pringle, 2019). Without a politically qualified status that proves that specific SWOs are with and for the Party-state, it can be sensitive and even risky for them to work with the disadvantaged groups and advocate policy changes. The significance of gaining the "death-exemption card" also implies a coercive power that drives SWOs to enter incorporated spaces.

In addition to inducement, the Party-state also uses "sticks" to coerce SWOs into incorporated spaces where they are subject to more sophisticated forms of control. The coercive measures include the enforcement of Party-building work within SWOs, contractual control that manipulates SWOs into working on the government's administrative and political tasks, and suppression of those independent SWOs that wish to remain external to the Party-state system, and exclusion of the SWOs that speak

against the Party-state. These coercive measures are effective because, under the authoritarian regime, the Party-state controls essential resources for SWOs' development, and SWOs would pay a big price for rejecting incorporation. For example, SWOs without establishing a Party branch are very unlikely to win a governmental social service contract, and it is almost impossible for them to receive funding from international foundations because of the enactment of the *Overseas NGO Management Law* which imposes strict regulation on international NGOs' activities in China (Feng, 2017). Even if independent SWOs manage to survive, they may encounter harsh warnings and suppression (eg. interruptions to their fundraising activities) from the Party-state when they attempt to work with the disadvantaged groups and advocate policy changes outside incorporated spaces.

In addition, while invited spaces are tolerant of citizens' dissents and criticisms against the government, and citizens can still find ways to express their opinions outside invited spaces, SWOs that speak up against the Party-state may lose their voice and the chances to participate in policy practice both inside and outside the incorporated spaces. When citizens and NGOs are invited by the authority to participate, they can accept or reject the invitation. However, once SWOs are incorporated into the Party-led social governance system, they cannot reject or quit, otherwise they may face serious consequences. Given the coercive measures and their remarkable impacts, the majority of SWOs decide to comply and take up their cooperative role in incorporated spaces. The coercive power used in the creation of incorporated spaces has significant implications for SWOs' autonomy in the policy arena.

9.2.4 Difference 3: Roles of participants

The simultaneous use of inducement and coercion in the creation of incorporated spaces further leads to SWOs' role as the Party-state's lower-level professional assistants, which differentiates incorporated spaces from invited spaces in terms of the role of the actors involved in participatory spaces. Shaped by different configurations of power

relations, actors take up very different roles in different types of spaces. Cornwall (2002) examines the tracks and traces of participation in invited spaces and created spaces and points out that the role of people as beneficiaries and consumers of services features needs-based participation in invited spaces, while the role of people as citizens and advocates with political agency features rights-based participation in created spaces. As Cornwall (2002) observes, people involved in invited spaces are usually depicted as passive beneficiaries, consumers, and service users who are empowered to make choices and participate in, and also have some input into, the planning and implementation of service delivery so that the authority can achieve cost-effectiveness, consensus, and compliance. On the contrary, actors involved in created spaces perceive themselves as agents, makers, and shapers of their own development, who have the right to "participate more actively in determining the shape of those services", and can enhance their "capabilities to advocate for their entitlements from those who are charged with service provision" (Cornwall, 2002, p.16). It is important to note that service users who are invited to participate can produce created spaces out of invited spaces by empowering themselves and becoming policy advocates with more agency (Cornwall, 2002). As such, the roles that actors play are fluid, and they define the characteristics of certain participatory spaces.

In comparison to invited spaces and created spaces, incorporated spaces feature SWOs' role as the Party-state's professional assistants and their expertise- and subordination-based participation. In these spaces, SWOs are neither service users that would directly benefit from the improvement of policies nor independent policy advocates with political agency. Although SWOs can discover and report the needs of the disadvantaged groups to policymakers, they seldom bring service users or citizens directly into the policy process. In incorporated spaces, SWOs become a part of the Party-led social governance system and take up the role of the Party-state's lower-level assistants that contribute their professional expertise to policymaking. While SWOs are provided with more opportunities to influence social service policies, they have to become subject to the explicit unequal power relation that demands their political

compliance with the leadership of the Party. The loss of SWOs' political autonomy and independence results in their lack of ability to voice dissents and criticisms, and to explore alternative solutions that are not favoured by the Party-state. In this sense, incorporated spaces are the domesticated sites of controlled participation.

The subordination of SWOs to the Party-state is enforced through the use of political discourse and the practical arrangements it leads to (contractual incorporation and political incorporation). The Party-state has the power to define and shape the roles and actions of the SWOs in incorporated spaces by enforcing its political discourse and rhetoric on them. Cornwall (2002) has made a fascinating explanation of the role of different discourses in defining the boundaries of participatory spaces:

> Discourses of participation and the mechanisms they give rise to might be seen, in this analysis, as a way of defining those boundaries. What "participation" is taken to mean makes available particular subject positions for participants to take up within particular spaces, bounding the possibilities for inclusion as well as agency. Being constructed as "beneficiaries", "clients", "users" or "citizens" influences what people are perceived to be able to contribute or entitled to know or decide, as well as the perceived obligations of those who seek to involve them. This frames the possibilities for engagement, circumscribing what can be said and what cannot by defining the contours of what is up for discussion or decision-making, and shunting other considerations out of the frame (Cornwall, 2002, p.8).

Similar to Cornwall's observations, this study finds that the Party-state uses the power of discourse to maintain and strengthen its dominant position and domesticate SWOs' participation in policy practice by setting what can be done and what cannot. For example, the political rhetoric on social governance has defined SWOs' role as the assistants of the Party and the government, which play the role of the leader and the executive body in charge of social affairs. Through constant indoctrination and political

practice decorated with the Party-state's rhetoric (for example, the design and implementation of community governance projects and service-oriented Party-building projects), the incorporated SWOs have internalised the superior-subordinate relationship. As reported in the research findings, some SWO leaders believe that it is unrealistic for SWOs to become partners of the government. Instead, SWOs should do their best to be good servants of the government. And only by emphasising their role as the government's good servants can they be provided more opportunities to influence social policies. However, when the Party-state becomes SWOs' leader or boss, it then obtains the power to decide what forms that SWOs' policy practice can take.

9.3 The impacts of incorporated spaces on China's social work profession

9.3.1 Contractual and political incorporation: Turning SWOs into the Party-state's lower-level assistants

As revealed by the study, incorporated spaces for policy practice are created through the mechanisms of contractual incorporation and political incorporation, which reflect the interactive effects of the marketisation of social services and authoritarianism on SWOs. Contracting out social services brings SWOs into the policy process and enables them to acquire knowledge and skills of policy practice, promote collaboration with policymakers, and eventually develop their influence over the interrelated stages of the policy process. How SWOs perceive and engage in policy practice is closely linked to their role in social service delivery. Also, successful policy practice often leads to new or scaled-up contracted out social services, which can increase SWOs' financial resources and promote their ability to provide welfare services. Meanwhile, contractual incorporation defines and reinforces the superior-subordinate relationship between the government and SWOs. It has limited SWOs' role as social service providers and consultancies giving policy advice to the government.

Studies have shown that in the authoritarian regime, contracting is less likely to generate partnerships between the government and SWOs (Huang and Yang, 2015; Chan and Lei, 2017). On the contrary, the inequality of the power relation between these two parties makes social service contracts less effective in protecting the rights of SWOs but more efficient in enabling the government to manipulate SWOs into meeting its goals. The government can extend its regulation on SWOs and intervene in their practices beyond service contracts, generating a "strong government, weak profession" power relation (Zhu and Chen, 2013, p.49) and turning social workers into its extra cost-efficient workforce (Huang and Yang, 2015; Chan and Lei, 2017). Some social work academics and professionals even compare some SWOs to labour dispatching companies, which send social workers to undertake the government's administrative work regardless of their professional missions (Xu and Yang, 2016; Zheng and Zhang, 2021). SWOs' dependence on government contracts has a great impact on their participation in policy practice. While the Party-state becomes SWOs' economic and political boss, SWOs need to prioritise the needs of the Party-state, comply with its political and policy agendas, avoid criticisms and conflicts, and maintain the Party-state's authority and legitimacy.

Besides contractual incorporation, the Party-state has developed the strategy of political incorporation to turn SWOs into its political subordinates. This strategy further enables the Party-state to co-opt social work elites into the establishment controlled by the ruling party and to directly incorporate SWOs into the Party rank and turn them into the Party's political subordinates. More specifically, political incorporation includes two tactics. The first one is to provide SWO leaders with political or semi-political appointments in the PC, CPPCC, governmental consultative committees, governmental think tanks, etc. While the co-opted SWO leaders obtain more opportunities to submit policy proposals to the government, they must follow the political rules and comply with the leadership of the Party to maintain their positions in the political establishment. The second tactic of political incorporation is to promote Party-building work within

SWOs, including setting up Party branches within their organisational structure, carrying out political education and propaganda activities, providing social services in the name of the Party, etc. By engaging in service-oriented Party-building work, SWOs deliver social services in the name of the Party, and their contributions to the improvement of social service policies as well as the wellbeing of the people are appropriated by the Party to reconsolidate its legitimacy within grassroots communities (Kan and Ku, 2020). As a result, SWOs are politically disciplined and incorporated by the Party-state.

In addition, in recent years, the Party-state has set political requirements for SWOs' eligibility for contracting out social services. To compete for social service contracts, SWOs need to establish Party branches within their organisational structures and actively organise and participate in Party-building work. Therefore, to some degree, a social service contract also means a political contract, by signing which SWOs can obtain more economic and political resources but have to give up their political autonomy. As such, political incorporation and contractual incorporation are interconnected in the authoritarian context. When SWOs lose their political autonomy, the mechanism of contractual incorporation further turns them into professional consultancies that can help with the government’s policymaking.

9.3.2 Delegation of power: empowerment or control?

As the Party-state’s professional assistants, SWOs’ policy influence comes from the top-down delegation of the Party-state’s power. SWOs offer their professional expertise and political allegiance to the Party-state, in return, they are given opportunities to make input into the design and implementation of social policies. On the one hand, the nature of SWOs’ policy influence — the Party-state’s deliberate empowerment of SWOs — makes their policy practice more efficient and effective in achieving policy development. In the context of the rapid development of contracting out social services, SWOs are authorised to and provided with many opportunities to, work with the

government on social service innovation and development. It is very often that SWOs work on the issues that are already on the government's policy agendas and even prioritised by policymakers. Therefore, the government has a strong intention to work with SWOs on policy formulation. With the support and endorsement from the government, SWOs are often involved in policy experimentation. They have developed the strategy of lobbying by doing, which often entails the authorisation given by the government to design and try out pilot social service projects and examine their potential for being promoted to a larger scale. There is a close affinity between SWOs' policy practice and the government's formal policy-making activities. This makes SWOs feel safe when they make efforts to influence policymaking, especially in an authoritarian context.

On the other hand, the top-down delegation of the Party-state's policy-making power can also become a kind of discipline and control. With their policy influence coming from the powerful policymakers rather than the autonomous and collective action of professionals and citizens, SWOs' participation in policymaking is under the Party-state's control. It restricts the possibilities of policy practice and confines SWOs' participation in policy practice to using collaborative and incremental methods, rather than the radical and confrontational ones, to help with tackling the policy issues that concern policymakers. For example, SWOs tend to influence policy through participating in government-organised policy consultations, participating in government-initiated research, collaborating with the government to pilot and roll out innovative social service programmes, joining policy formulation groups, and submitting policy proposals to the CPPCCs, etc. SWOs tend to refrain from taking part in radical actions and other forms of confrontation with the government. Although SWOs' policy practice has led to a lot of new social services and the improvement of social policies, it avoids tackling the structural social problems that are overtly controversial and may draw criticisms towards the Party-state. Also, once SWOs lose the delegation of authority by the Party-state, their participation in policy practice is likely to become difficult and even politically sensitive and risky. The examples of the

independent SWOs show that unauthorised policy practice may result in the Party-state's suspicion and even diverse forms of suppression.

In addition, although SWOs have opportunities to advise the government on policymaking, they do not hold or share the decision-making power. The research findings show that the government is increasingly dependent on SWOs' professional knowledge and experience to formulate or improve social service policies, however, it still holds the power to decide whether or not to adopt SWOs' policy proposals and suggestions. Consultation without other modes of participation, as Arnstein (1969) contends in her conceptualisation of the Ladder of Citizen Participation, can be merely a sham since "it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account" (p.219). In this sense, the power dynamics in incorporated spaces have generated the co-existence of opportunities and constraints, participation and control.

9.3.3 The restrictions on the autonomy and independence of SWOs

Given the interrelated effects of the contractual and political incorporation, it is questionable to view SWOs as independent social agents with complete autonomy from the Party-state. The boundary between SWOs and the Party-state is rather ambiguous and blurry, making it difficult to adopt the state-society division perspective to define SWOs as complete social agents or state agents. This study indicates that the boundary between these two parties is multi-dimensional. While SWOs can maintain more autonomy in some aspects, they have to become subordinate to the Party-state in the others. In the ideological and political aspects, SWOs must comply with the leadership of the Party and even build political affiliation with the Party. The Party-state adopts an uncompromising attitude towards political control over SWOs. However, SWOs still have a certain degree of operational autonomy and professional discretion in terms of staff recruitment, organisation management, project design, and implementation, social service delivery, etc. The Party-state does not exercise direct and complete control over SWOs' operation, which may be regarded as too inefficient for the government, and

these nongovernmental organisations can still maintain independence from the Party-state in these operational aspects. As for policy practice, SWOs can exercise their autonomy and agency to conduct research, draft policy proposals, carry out pilot social service projects, and provide policy suggestions for the government.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the operational autonomy of SWOs is conditional and is constantly defined through the interaction between the Party-state and SWOs. In China's current political environment, it seems that the most important prerequisite for SWOs' operational autonomy, and even for their survival, is their political compliance with the Party-state. Also, instead of directly controlling SWOs' professional activities, the Party-state chooses to draw an ambiguous and fluid red line over the domains and actions that SWOs should not get involved in. If SWOs unintentionally or deliberately cross the red line, the Party-state can intervene in SWOs' operation to stop or modify their activities.

Through the indoctrination of its political discourse and the concrete mechanisms of contractual and political incorporation, the Party-state's power permeates every corner of incorporated spaces, constantly affirming and reconsolidating its dominant position and defining what forms of policy practice are permitted and encouraged. Although SWOs hold a certain degree of operational autonomy, they need to sacrifice their political autonomy and independence for opportunities to take part in policymaking. As the concept of civil society implies an independent and even opposite role of NGOs, the notion that SWOs are a part of China's emerging civil society (Zhu and Chen, 2014) is contested. Through the use of more sophisticated tools of control, including social service contracting and service-oriented Party-building work, the Party-state can steer the social work profession into undertaking the tasks assigned by the Party-state and working on its priority issues. Therefore, incorporated spaces may reinforce the "strong government, weak profession" power relation (Zhu and Chen, 2013, p.49).

9.3.4 The political commitments to the Party-state and the compromise of professional values

Social work academics in Western democratic countries usually view policy practice as an important way to "re-engineer social work's political passion" in the era of neo-liberalism featuring the marketisation of social services (Strier and Feldman, 2018, p.751) and re-politicise the profession by promoting social workers' involvement in the policy-making process (Feldman, 2020). This notion is based on the belief that social workers participate in policy practice according to the core values of social work that highlight human rights, social justice, and social change (IFSW, 2014). However, this study suggests that certain spaces for social work policy practice, especially those embedded in the state-led social governance system in the authoritarian context, can be politically repressive and disempowering for social workers.

Having internalised their role as the Party-state's lower-level assistants, SWOs tend to adjust their participation in social service delivery and policy practice according to the Party-state's political directions. This study finds that SWOs often appropriate the Party's rhetoric to enhance their social service projects so that these projects are more likely to be funded by the government. For example, in recent years, SWOs have designed and implemented a lot of social service projects relating to social governance, community governance, and Party-building work, although these projects have the explicit political purposes of enhancing the leadership of the Party and promoting citizens' support for the authority. Once these projects receive funding from the government, SWOs need to put those political concepts into practice, which implies that they need to add more political elements into social service. For instance, to highlight the leadership of the Party in social governance, SWOs may need to involve Party members or Party organisations in social service delivery, organise political education events in communities, or at least label their services as the Party's care for the people. Besides, when participating in policy practice, they also need to add political statements into their policy proposals to pledge their allegiance to the Party, and credit

the promotion of people's wellbeing to the leading role of the Party.

These examples show how the Party-state's political agenda can shape SWOs' participation in social service delivery as well as policy practice. In other words, their professional practices have been politicised according to the mainstream political ideology and requirements. SWOs' political commitments to the Party-state also exclude the possibility of alternative agendas, such as civil society, citizen movement, democratisation, and right-based participation, as well as the social and political practices that these alternative agendas give rise to. As a result, SWOs lack the ability to challenge the status quo, which is believed to be one of the core missions of the social work profession.

In incorporated spaces, SWOs' professional values and ethical commitments may be often compromised for their political commitments to the Party-state, which require social workers to contribute their knowledge and skills to the consolidation of the Party-state's legitimacy. Although social work is believed to be a value-laden profession, it seems that SWOs' engagement in policy practice can be separable from some of the core ethical commitments of social work, such as protecting human rights and challenging social injustice. While SWOs are increasingly involved in policymaking, they seldom explicitly promote the profession's fundamental values. Instead, they have to help with the Party's ideological and political indoctrination. These findings echo Yan's (2013) observation of a pragmatic approach to importing social work from the West into China. This pragmatic approach views values, knowledge, and skills as separable components of social work, and it emphasises social work's problem-solving function by attaching more importance to knowledge and skills than values that are deemed not consistent with the indigenous culture and political ideology in China (Yan, 2013). Similarly, a study on contracted-out social services in China reports that social workers have to embrace dominant political ideologies, use their skills to pursue social stability, and maintain an informal subordinate relationship with government officials in exchange for resources and support (Lei et al, 2022).

The findings of this study also indicate that it is difficult for SWOs to reconcile some of the core values of social work with the Party-state's political requirements and control. As a result, they have to compromise. SWOs' policy influence largely builds upon their ability to manage individual problems, and their policy practice focuses on developing welfare services rather than tackling the structural roots of social problems and social injustice. China's social work professionals may need to rethink the ethical foundation of their practice at both the micro and macro levels. Should they seek to uphold the core values of social work advocated by the international social work community (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014) in the context of strict state control? Or should they develop new core values of social work with Chinese characteristics? What are the consequences of different choices? These questions are worth further exploration.

9.4 The transformability of incorporated spaces and recommendations for policy practice

Although incorporated spaces are created by the authority as the domesticated sites for social work policy practice, it is too early to assert that these spaces are not able to incubate new possibilities for SWOs' and citizens' participation in policymaking. As Cornwall's (2002) work reminds us, participatory spaces are fluid and always open to strategic resistance and transformation, as new actors, discourses, agendas, and actions entering existing spaces can lead to the changes in power relations, even if these changes take very small steps. According to Cornwall (2002):

> … the "strategic reversibility" (Foucault, 1991, p.5) of power relations means that governmental practices such as invited participation are in themselves always already sites of resistance. As such, they are productive of possibilities for subversion, appropriation, and reconstitution… Particular spaces may be

> produced by the powerful, but filled with those whose alternative visions transform their possibilities. Spaces may be created with one purpose in mind, but used by those who come to fill them for something quite different. The fluidity and ambiguity of efforts at enhancing participation mean that spaces produced to lend legitimacy to powerful interests can become a site for expression and expansion of the agency of those who are invited to participate. Efforts to control outcomes can only be partial, and the impotence of initiating agencies to direct or close down emergent processes is part of their inherent dynamism. The most nominal efforts at involvement can be used as a lever to create more space; the most token invitations can be seized and deployed to widen spaces for others or to gain opportunities for visibility and voice outside the strictures of consultative processes. Nothing can be prejudged. (Cornwall, 2002, p.9)

The potential for transformability also applies to incorporated spaces. This study discovers that SWOs have been increasingly involved in policymaking and have already influenced a lot of welfare service policies. This marks big progress in state-SWO collaboration in China in recent years. Around two decades ago, when many of the social work services that people are familiar with now (eg. school social work services, medical social work services, etc) had not yet come into being, and when the scanty nonprofessional social services were still provided by local governments, mass organisations, and government-run welfare institutions (Wang and Yuen-Tsang, 2009), most people could not anticipate the rapid emergence and development of nongovernmental SWOs. Although they are born in the political and social constraints in China, SWOs manage to take root in communities, build close relationships with the disadvantaged groups, contribute to social services and social policies, develop local knowledge about micro and macro practice, and broaden government-SWO collaboration. With their increasing influence over social services in grassroots communities, SWOs obtain more recognition from the Party-state and are given a more important role in the policy process.

Despite the original purpose of incorporated spaces, which is to appropriate the social work profession to improve social governance and consolidate the Party-state's leadership, SWOs can still seize these spaces to strengthen their competency, promote their social influence, widen public participation, and bring new visions and solutions into policymaking. The reason why the Party-state wants to incorporate SWOs and even rely on them to rebuild the Party's tie with grassroots communities is that SWOs have their unique strength and advantages, which enable them to do the work that local governments cannot do. In the context of dramatic social transformation, the Party-state relies on SWOs' professional competence and experience to improve social policies. This, as some research participants believe, gives SWOs bargaining chips in their efforts to influence policymaking. Although the use of these bargaining chips is subject to many conditions and restrictions, SWOs can still strategically "dance with wolves" and explore the transformability of incorporated spaces. This requires SWOs to promote self-empowerment and use their role in incorporated spaces to input new ideas into the policy process and increase the participation of both social workers and service users. Like the Trojan Horse, SWOs can come into the space with hidden alternative agendas and transform the space when conditions permit.

Nevertheless, it is too idealistic to think that SWOs can reverse the power relations in incorporated spaces within a short period regardless of the constraints and threats. Transforming incorporated spaces into those featuring more needs-based and rights-based participation, or alternative types of civic participation that are more empowering, entails both patience and strategies. To survive the Party-state's surveillance and control, SWOs need to compromise sometimes. However, this does not mean that they are unable to promote their ability, polish their skills, put up micro resistance, and gradually achieve changes. It should be recognised that SWOs involved in this study have provided a lot of fascinating cases of successful policy practice in which they managed to make the authority accept their opinions. Considering policy practice is almost neglected in China's social work education, and the Western knowledge of policy

practice may not be fully applicable to the Chinese context, it is admirable that SWOs have explored many ways to influence policymaking from scratch. Thus, they are the real experts in the domain of policy practice. As a researcher, it would be too naïve to believe that I could come up with some strategies or solutions that could immediately guide SWOs and service users towards fighting against the status quo and producing created spaces that involve more radical possibilities. Instead of being ambitious, I wish to draw on SWOs' experience and come up with some realistic, reflective, and practical recommendations which can be tried out in their practice. Strength comes from continuous effort, and every small step leads us closer to great changes. Listed below are my recommendations for social work policy practice in China, drawing on the findings of my research. They include some strategies that some SWOs have been already using but could be further generalised and several suggestions about widening and deepening social workers' and citizens' participation.

First, social work professionals and academics need to raise the profession's awareness of policy practice. Currently, in the media and China's social work education programmes, social workers are usually depicted as those who work on the frontline and deliver services to the people in need. However, social workers can do more than direct social service delivery, and some of them already have experience in influencing policymaking. It is important that social workers, including SWO leaders as well as frontline practitioners, develop an awareness of how policy practice can contribute to the improvement of service users' well-being and the promotion of equality and social justice. In their daily work, social workers should analyse the structural roots of the problems facing their service users and think about what policy changes can make a difference. In addition, social workers should be further encouraged to participate in policy practice. The social work professional associations, social work academics and educators, and SWO leaders should help social workers develop a sense of confidence that SWOs have both opportunities and the ability to influence policies.

Second, SWOs can use and improve the strategy of "lobbying by doing" to influence policymaking. Policy experimentation is a key mechanism in China's policy-making process, which gives local governments chances to launch experimental policy programmes in selective sites first and formulate formal policies in wider areas later (Heilmann, 2008). The findings of this study indicate that SWOs can play an important role in policy experimentation, as they are often involved in carrying out pilot social service projects, collecting data relating to the implementation and outcomes of these projects, and contributing their experience to formal policymaking. In this process, SWOs have invented the strategy of "lobbying by doing": by putting their policy ideas into practice and showing the effects of their proposed policy solutions to decision-makers, they can develop more influence over policy formulation and decision-making. This strategy is widely used by SWOs and is believed to be rather effective in persuading and convincing the government of the merits and feasibility of specific policy solutions. Nevertheless, the use of this strategy can be further developed, and knowledge can be produced to improve future practice. For example, social workers attach great importance to collecting evidence from service projects to support their policy proposals. Then, what forms of evidence are needed and work better? What social workers can do to collect evidence during service delivery? What are the more effective ways to present the evidence to policymakers? What techniques and tactics can be useful for dialogues with policymakers? By trying to answer these questions and reflecting on their experiences, social workers can polish their skills and make "lobbying by doing" more systematic, efficient, and effective.

Third, SWOs can try to proactively set the agendas for policymaking. In incorporated spaces, it is very common that the government decides the agendas for SWOs' policy practice, which is an important feature of the Party-state's control over these participatory spaces. And SWOs are often involved in reactive policy practice in which they respond to the government's request for professional advice on the policies that the government has already decided to formulate. Although there are some taboo policy agendas that may draw suppression from the Party-state (eg. the abolishment of the

household registration system, the formulation of independent trade unions, etc.), SWOs can still proactively bring some salient issues that they discover during service delivery into policymakers' agendas. They can put forward new policy agendas in a less radical and confrontational way and with a more cooperative gesture so that they can reduce the risk of irritating the government but also expose the social problems that need to be addressed. SWOs should enhance their participation in setting policy agendas, as they work closely with the disadvantaged groups and have a first-hand understanding of what service users need and what hinders them from a better life. It is important that SWOs become more aware of the relations between social policy and the sufferings of the disadvantaged groups, and try to bring these issues, as well as social workers' understanding and interpretation of these issues, into the policy arena. Also, proactively putting forward new agendas is an important attempt to strengthen SWOs' influence in the participatory spaces and to counterbalance the Party-state's control over policymaking. Agenda setting is a starting point that gathers stakeholders together to strive for change. If SWOs can take more initiative in defining social problems at this stage, they can be in a more advantaged position to propose solutions and influence decision-making. And even if their policy practice does not lead to policy changes immediately, they can still raise policymakers' and the public's awareness of the social problems they target, which may lead to gradual changes in the long term.

Fourth, it is critically important that SWOs enhance the participation of service users in policy practice. So far, service users only play a limited role in incorporated spaces. They seldom have opportunities to directly interact with policymakers and take part in designing the policy schemes that would affect their lives. SWOs often function as the representatives of service users to some extent. They report service users' unmet needs to the government, deliver innovative social services to service users, and collect evidence for proposed policy solutions. The evidence is usually about the positive changes to service users' wellbeing, which result from the implementation of experimental projects. Therefore, service users' role in policy practice is usually confined to the potential beneficiaries of desired policy changes. In most cases, SWOs

work for service users rather than work with them. However, the more active participation of service users can lead to a significant impact on power relations in incorporated spaces. It can make policymaking more inclusive and more accessible to ordinary people, not just selected social work elites. Service users should be empowered to raise their voices in the policy arena and use their life experience to improve policymaking, as they may know what works the best for themselves. More importantly, new actors involved in incorporated spaces and new interactions can mean a seed of change. As agents who are previously excluded from the policy process, service users can bring in new agendas, new views, and new solutions, which may challenge the status quo and the existing power relations. However, as shown in the experiences of the more independent SWOs, mobilising citizens into collective action is still very politically sensitive in China. Suppression from the Party-state is a high price to pay for radical action.

To enhance service users' participation while surviving the political environment, SWOs need to develop new strategies to realise this goal incrementally and gradually. For example, SWOs can involve service users as collaborators in research, needs assessment, service design, and project evaluation. A range of participatory methods and creative tools, such as photovoice, participatory mapping, storytelling, world café, etc., can be used to enable service users to express their views and put forward their policy suggestions. SWOs can organise community forums or workshops and invite both service services and policymakers to take part, and they can also try to involve service users or their representatives in policy consultation meetings convened by the government. It is important that SWOs extensively explore the use of different methods and find out which ones are more effective in promoting service user participation and also more acceptable to the government. The forms that service user participation takes can be creative and innovative, as long as they can enable ordinary people to play an active and influential part in decisions that affect their lives. It is also essential that SWOs find ways to raise the policy awareness of service users and motivate them to participate in policy practice. SWOs can provide education and training for service

users on social policy knowledge and methods of working with the government.

In addition, social work practitioners and academics should think beyond the dichotomy between needs-based participation and rights-based participation and explore more possibilities of civic participation that can better empower citizens and mobilise them into striving for change. These alternative types of participation should be based on Chinese culture, which would make them resilient in the face of state control and suppression. For example, compassion is an important element of Chinese philanthropic culture. Studies indicate that compassion can be mobilised to promote Chinese people's understanding of social suffering and promote their engagement in voluntary work (Kuah-Pearce, 2014; Kuah-Pearce and Guiheux, 2014; Xu, 2017). Given the potential of compassion for pursuing change, social workers can try to incubate service users' and stakeholders' compassion-based participation[36] in policy practice.

Fifth, SWOs can promote their collaboration with stakeholders. Cross-sectoral and cross-professional collaboration is particularly useful for social work policy practice. Stakeholders can help detect social issues, collect data for policy analysis, contribute their knowledge and experience to proposing policy solutions, and assist with the implementation of policies. Their involvement in policy practice can help develop more comprehensive and feasible policy solutions. This study discovers that some SWOs are already aware of the importance of building collaboration networks with multiple stakeholders and partners, including hospitals, nursing homes, other welfare workers, social policy academics, government officials, nonprofit partners, etc., through task groups, forums, conferences, and regular meetings. However, not all SWOs use this tactic and many of them still rely on their own expertise to influence policymaking. Therefore, SWOs should attach more importance to working with stakeholders and try to improve their skills in collaboration. For example, SWOs need to identify what

[36] The concept of "compassion-based participation" was originally contributed by one of my supervisors Dr. Sui-Ting Kong in one of our meetings.

parties have a role in the issues that they are going to tackle and find out their interests, concerns, and resources. Social workers also need to manage the expectations of the actors involved and coordinate their actions. It is important that SWOs explore what forms of stakeholder collaboration can be more effective in achieving policy change in the social and political context of China.

Sixth, social work professionals and academics should pay more attention to producing and promoting the local knowledge of policy practice. The interviewed social workers reported that although they knew the term "policy advocacy/practice", they never received specific training in this field as policy practice is not included in most social work education programmes in Chinese universities. In addition, the current textbooks and articles on policy practice are mostly written in English and based on the practice of social workers in the USA, the UK, and Europe (eg. Jansson, 2014; Cummins et al, 2011; Klammer et al, 2019). It is questionable to what extent they can fit the Chinese context. Also, because of some politically sensitive content (eg. radical policy practice and social workers' involvement in social action) included in these textbooks, it is very unlikely that they can survive the education censorship in China and be used by social work educators and students in universities. However, despite the limited knowledge transfer from the West, when SWOs make efforts to influence policymaking and achieve some outcomes, they produce their own knowledge of policy practice. The growth of SWOs' ability to influence policy largely comes from the process of learning by doing and learning by reflecting. Therefore, social work professionals should be encouraged to produce and accumulate indigenous knowledge of policy practice with the help of academics. This can be achieved by conducting research (especially action research), organising workshops, seminars, and conferences, publishing reports and articles, and developing toolkits and guidance.

Seventh, policy practice should be included in social work professional education and training. Policy practice is an overlooked field of social work practice in China and is seldom included in university curricula or vocational training provided by social work

professional associations. Although social work students and professionals can receive training in social policy which enables them to understand and use social policies, they are seldom taught how to influence policymaking. Nevertheless, social workers show a considerable degree of involvement in policymaking, and they have developed their methods and skills of policy practice. The knowledge they produce should be systematically summarised and disseminated so that more social workers can be better equipped for engaging in policy practice. Social work educators and professional associations should play an important role in disseminating policy practice knowledge and providing training for social work students and professionals. University modules, training courses, and workshops can be developed to promote social workers' capacity for policy practice.

9.5 Reflections and recommendations for future research

Due to the challenges and difficulties that I faced during the research journey, this study is subject to several limitations. First, as discussed in the methodology chapter, the political sensitivity and concerns involved in this study have led to a limitation of data sources and a relatively small number of research participants. Also, this study lacks data collected from government officials and service users, which makes me unable to examine social work policy practice from diverse perspectives. Future research should try to involve more participants from the government, SWOs, service users, and other stakeholders (eg. health workers, carers, NGO partners, etc.) involved in SWOs' policy practice to make a more comprehensive picture of social work policy practice in China. Researchers that are based in Chinese universities and have collaboration networks with SWOs and government departments would have an advantage in recruitment.

Second, while most research data were collected from semi-structural interviews, this study lacks direct observation of SWOs' participation in policy practice. Participant observation can enable researchers to collect vivid data and get a direct understanding

of how things are doing. However, I learned from research participants that it would be very unlikely for me to take part in policy consultation meetings or other forms of interaction with the government because I was not a staff member of their organisations. My role as a UK-based researcher might also raise suspicion from the government. In addition, SWOs' participation in policy practice can be a lengthy process, which makes it difficult for me to trace the incremental changes of a specific policy by directly participating in policy practice activities during a time-bound Ph.D. study. As policy practice remains an overlooked field of research, this study is rather exploratory, which adopts semi-structural interviews as the main research method to produce preliminary findings on how SWOs participate in policy practice.

Third, this study cannot evaluate or explain the causal relation between SWOs' policy practice and actual policy changes. Although research participants reported the development of a range of social policies and they believed that they had contributed their expertise to policymaking, it is hard to evaluate to what extent these policy changes result from SWOs' policy practice. Are there any other political, social, and economic factors that lead to policy changes? How important is SWOs' role in policymaking? Without SWOs' expertise input, would the government still formulate similar policies? This study focuses mainly on how SWOs participate in policy practice rather than the causal relation between policy practice and policy change. However, this is definitely worth further research.

Fourth, this study is based on only two developed cities in China, with a particular focus on SWOs that work closely with the government. As China is a large country with considerable differences and diversity across regions, whether the conceptualisation of incorporated spaces applies to SWOs in other Chinese regions requires further examination. Besides, there may be different types of participatory spaces for social work policy practice other than incorporated spaces. For example, this study shows that independent SWOs are often faced with closed spaces, and some of them try to find or create alternative spaces to influence policymaking. Future research should involve

more SWOs from more regions to make comprehensive discussions on social work policy practice in China.

Based on the reflections on this study, there are several recommendations for future research. First, researchers need to strategically navigate through the political constraints in China and promote research on policy practice. Similar to social work professionals that attempt to promote changes at the policy level, researchers in China also need to explore safer and smarter ways to produce knowledge on policy practice. For example, they can make their research more collaborative and acceptable to the government by inviting government officials to take part and convincing them that the aim is to promote social governance. Second, future research can recruit participants representative of diverse stakeholders, including SWO leaders, front-line social workers, government officials, service users, and other actors that are affected by certain policies. Third, future research should be conducted in more regions with different types of SWOs (eg. SWOs specialising in different fields of practice, and SWOs having different kinds of relationships with the government). This will help draw a more comprehensive picture of policy practice in China. Fourth, future research can focus on a specific social policy and analyse the role of SWOs in promoting changes to this policy. By researching the trajectory of policy development and examining SWOs' involvement in the policy process, researchers can investigate the causal relation between policy practice and policy changes. Last but not least, researchers can use a participatory action research approach to involve multiple stakeholders, including service users and front-line social workers, in collaboratively producing knowledge and making efforts to change social policies and welfare services. This approach helps empower the actors that are previously excluded from the policy process and make their voices heard. Therefore, it can help broaden participatory spaces and transform the existing spaces into more collaborative ones. New ideas and actions can be incubated in this process, which may lead to alternative and innovative ways to achieve policy changes and social justice.

9.6 Concluding remarks

As an important component of social work practice, policy practice has drawn increasing attention from Western social work practitioners and academics but has not been widely studied in China. Based on a grounded theory study, the thesis contributes to the knowledge of SWOs' policy practice in mainland China by examining the participatory spaces where social workers attempt to influence policymaking. The study has made several original contributions to the literature.

First, this study develops the new concept of "incorporated space" to understand SWOs' participation in policy practice in the Chinese context. Incorporated spaces refer to those incorporated into the CPC-led social governance system in which SWOs become a skilful and loyal arm of the Party-state assisting with social service delivery and policymaking. The study reveals how incorporated spaces are constructed through contractual incorporation and political incorporation. On the one hand, these two mechanisms involve SWOs in the policy process and provide them with increased opportunities to influence policymaking. On the other hand, they enable the Party-state to regulate SWOs' participation and turn them into its lower-ranking assistants. As a result, incorporated spaces feature both opportunities and constraints, participation and control at the same time, which have great implications for SWOs' policy practice. The discussion around incorporated spaces contributes to the literature on public participation and social work policy practice, which is largely based on Western contexts. The novel concept of "incorporated space" may also be applicable in other contexts, and it reminds us to examine the subtle power relations in diverse social and political contexts which shape social workers' engagement in policymaking.

Second, this study illustrates how Chinese SWOs participate in policy practice with a lot of examples from the participants' experiences. It reports six institutionalised and five non-institutionalised policy practice methods used by SWOs and analyses their strategy to influence decision-making, including lobbying by doing and seizing policy

windows. The study may raise the Chinese social work profession's awareness of policy practice and inspire their future efforts to take part in policymaking. Also, drawing on the research findings, the thesis provides recommendations for SWOs on how to transform incorporated spaces and widen the participation of social workers and service users. Therefore, the study may help promote social work policy practice in China.

Third, this study identifies two types of policy influence: one is developed through the bottom-up social mobilisation, and the other is gained from the top-down delegation of the state's policy-making power. In incorporated spaces, SWOs contribute their professional expertise to the improvement of social governance and pledge their allegiance to the Party-state. In return, they are provided by the Party-state with a certain degree of influence over policymaking. This type of policy influence limits SWOs' political agency and autonomy and confines them to the role of the arms of the powerful authority. The findings challenge the notion that policy practice can revive social work's political passion and enable social workers to challenge the status quo. They also remind us about the importance of examining the role of social workers in the policy process and the interactions between social workers and the authority.

The study has revealed that SWOs' participation in policy practice has made significant contributions to the development of a range of social services in mainland China. Nevertheless, the unequal power relations between the Party-state and SWOs have considerable impacts on SWOs' independence and autonomy in incorporated spaces. It is important that China's social work profession continues to actively participate in policy practice, produce knowledge, polish skills, and at the same time keep under constant review their role in the policy process and their ethical obligations. By exploring how SWOs participate in policy practice in incorporated spaces, this study identifies an important topic for future research and practice.

Appendix 1: Participant information sheet and consent form

Exploring Social Work Organisations' Policy Practice in China

Participant Information Sheet

Hello, my name is Tian Cai and I am currently a PhD student of Department of Sociology at Durham University, UK. I am undertaking research exploring how social work organisations (SWOs) in China engage in policy practice. I understand that you have rich experience of social work practice in China, therefore I would like to invite you to participate in this study and share your valuable experience and opinions. Please read this information sheet carefully before you decide to take part. Please contact Tian Cai (contact details below) if you have any queries.

Research outline

Policy practice refers to activities undertaken by social workers which focus on contributing to the formulation and implementation of new policies as well as on existing policies and suggested changes in them. Sometimes policy practice is also known as policy advocacy. Policy practice reflects the missions of social work such as promoting social development and social justice. It is regarded as an essential aspect of social work practice by many professional organisations, such as International Federation of Social Workers, British Association of Social Workers, and Council on Social Work Education (USA). However, existing literature mainly focuses on Western social workers' engagement in the policy process, very few empirical studies explore how Chinese social workers influence policies.

This study aims to explore how social work service organisations in China engage in policy practice. More specific objectives include: ①to explore how social workers in China understand policy practice; ②to discover the approaches by which SWSOs attempt to influence social policy; ③to explore the factors associated with SWSOs'

policy practice engagement; ④to make comparisons between policy practice in China and Western democratic countries; ⑤ to develop recommendations for SWSOs regarding how to influence social policy effectively.

Your participation

You are invited to participate in a one-to-one in-depth interview during which you will be asked questions related to policy practice. Topics of the interview include: ①how you understand policy practice; ②your concerns about engaging in policy practice; ③ your experiences in policy practice; ④ your strategies to influence policies; ⑤ consequences of your previous engagement in policy practice; ⑥ challenges of participating in policy practice in China; ⑦ the characteristics of indigenous/indigenized policy practice model in China; ⑧other topics related to policy practice in China that you think are important. You can talk freely and there is no right-or-wrong answer of these questions. The interview is expected to take about two hours and will be audio-recorded with your permission. I may invite you to participate in a second-round interview within three months after the first interview, if I think it is necessary to collect more data about your experiences and opinions.

Besides, you are also invited to provide documents related to your engagement in policy practice, such as proposals or plans to engage in policy practice, records of policy practice, the minutes of policy consultation, policy drafts, policy evaluation reports, research reports, news reports, etc. These documents provide extra information which can help me better understand how you engage in policy practice.

The data collected will be used for my doctoral study and possible publication. I will not provide the data to other researchers or research institutions unless I have gained your consent.

Your rights in this study

Anonymity will be assured in this study. Your name, the name of your organisation and

any other identifying information will be excluded from transcripts to ensure anonymity. In all cases, your real name and the name of your organisation will be replaced by a pseudonym or number when referring to your data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide that you no longer wish to participate in this study, you are welcome to withdraw at any time without providing an explanation. During the interview, you may choose not to answer any question that you are not willing to answer.

The data will be treated with confidentiality. Interview recordings, transcripts, and other documents that you provide will be stored electronically on a password-protected device. I will also send the data back to my protected Durham email Onedrive account every day. I will make every effort to ensure that the data will not be lost or stolen. All data will be destroyed no later than 5 years after the conclusion of this study.

The risk for participation in this study is relatively low. However, the interview may cover some topics about your interaction with the government. You will be encouraged to express your opinions in a way that you think is proper and safe. Also, you may choose not to answer any questions that you think are politically sensitive. If you believe that participation in this study is likely to result in distress, anxiety or any negative consequences, you may choose to withdraw this study and ask me to destroy the data or some parts of the data. If you have any considerations or suggestions regarding the safety of this study, you are welcome to talk to me at any time.

I wish that the research findings could improve Chinese social workers' engagement in policy practice. I will be happy to provide a summary report of this study if you wish. If you have any idea about conducting joint research related to policy practice, you are welcome to talk with me at any time.

If anything in this information sheet is not clear or you wish to ask any questions, please

contact me. My email address is tian.cai@durham.ac.uk, my telephone number in China is 13924201493, my telephone number in the UK is 07494630721. If you have any further concerns, or if you are unhappy about any aspect of the research, please write to my supervisor Pro. Sarah Banks (s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk).

Informed Consent Form

Please read the participant information sheet carefully. If you agree to participate in this research, please confirm the following information and sign this consent form.

I have read and understood the Participant Information sheet.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and therefore that I may refuse any question asked of me and withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty.

I understand that I can ask for any information I provide to remain confidential and not be used in this study.

I understand that anonymity will be assured in this study.

I agree that the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

I agree that the data collected can be used for Tian Cai's doctoral study and publications.

I agree to participate in this study, I agree to participate in the interview and provide relevant documents.

Participant's name:	Researcher's name: Tian Cai
Signature:	Signature:
Date:	Date:

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Exploring Social Work Organisation's Policy Practice in China

Interview Guide

Part one: basic information

Please provide the following information. Please note that your name and the name of your organisation will be replaced by a pseudonym or number when referring to your data in the thesis. Your contact details will not be included in the thesis.

Name		Gender		Age	
Academic and professional qualification					
Number of years of delivering social service					
Organisation					
Position					
Field(s) of service					
Phone number					
Email address					

Part two: Main themes of interview questions

Based on your own experiences, please share your opinions on the following questions:

1. Tell me about your career in social work. When did you start working in the Social Service field? What other jobs have you done?
2. Tell me about this oragnisation. What does it do? How many staffs? How is it funded?

3. Tell me about your role in this organisation. What do you do on a daily basis? What responsibilities do you have? What is good/bad about this job?
4. Do you have any experiences in policy practice? Please give some examples. What did you do? How well did it work?
5. How do you understand policy practice?
6. What are your concerns when engaging in policy practice?
7. What strategies do you employ to influence policies?
8. What are the consequences of your previous engagement in policy practice?
9. What are the challenges of participating in policy practice in China?
10. What do you think are the characteristics of the indigenous/indigenized policy practice model in China?

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