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**Social Welfare in China  
in an Era of Economic Reform**

**Mok Bong-ho**

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**by  
Mok Bong-ho**

**Institute of Social Studies  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
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**About the Author**

Dr. Mok Bong-ho is Lecturer in Social Work at The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Introduction

China took the first bold step in the march of its economic reform in 1979 in the rural areas, a step which affected 80% of the Chinese population. The introduction of the "production responsibility system"<sup>1</sup> signified greater incentive for production and a shift from the collective (Commune, Production Brigade, Production Team) to the household as the basic economic unit. This economic experiment has been a success. For example, the real income of an average peasant doubled between 1978 and 1984<sup>2</sup>. Following the successful reform in the agricultural sector, the cities also launched new economic programmes. Central to the city reform is the decentralization of power in the industrial system. The purpose is to make each industrial enterprise an independent operating unit responsible for its profits, related naturally to performance. The results of the city reform have been impressive, with most enterprises having higher productivity and making more money.

The major consequence of the economic reform in China has been increased efficiency of production. At the same time, the problem of decreased equality of income is emerging. There are indications that the number of poor is a point of increasing concern, and that the gap between the

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high and low income groups is widening<sup>3</sup>. Individuals or households that have more labor, initiative, knowledge and skills are expected to do better than others, and income differentials will thus result. This inequality is true at the regional level. In fact, the problem of regional income inequality has grown seriously and has become the centre of attention in the present economic reform.

The trade-off relationship between efficiency and equality is well recognized by the Chinese reformers. Their argument is that by allowing some people to get rich first, everyone will benefit in the long run. The issue at stake is how the people who cannot cope with the ushering in of the economic reform are going to live or survive. The main question that this paper attempts to address is: How are those least able to help themselves being affected and helped in an era of economic reform? To set the stage for the discussion, the concept and boundaries of social welfare in China are reviewed briefly.

#### The Concept and Boundaries of Social Welfare

Under communism, social welfare services have been regarded as unessential and at best peripheral, because the society is one that believes in the communist principle of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." In the transitional period of socialism, however, social welfare services are required. The late Honorary President of the People's Republic of China, Song Qing-ling (1958) firmly believed that social welfare and social assistance are pre-requisites of social and economic

development, and that they should not be the monopoly of capitalist societies. For socialist China, there are specific reasons for adopting social welfare measures. Poverty is still a big problem which cannot be abolished quickly after capitalism. In addition, natural disasters, industrial accidents, traffic accidents and other social contingencies make it necessary for the state to provide assistance to people in need (Lu, 1984). Social welfare in China, therefore, aims at lessening the miseries of the mass at the grassroots level, and sharing the worries with the central (People's Government) at the top level<sup>4</sup>.

The concept of social welfare in China as well as in other countries has strong political overtones. In capitalist societies, social welfare is primarily used to preserve capitalism. In socialist states, social welfare is considered a means to enhance the socialist system. Thus, it is not surprising to find that social welfare measures in China are geared towards socialism and that the ultimate goal is to support socialist construction (Mok, 1983). In this regard, every social welfare measure is geared towards serving socialism, and the ultimate goal is to support socialist construction (Mok, 1983). In this regard, various social welfare programmes have been introduced since the Communist Party took power in 1949. These include labor insurance for all government employees and workers in the urban areas, services for the elderly, disabled, families with difficulties, families of servicemen and revolutionary martyrs.

While the existing social welfare programmes continue

to serve the needy, the Chinese leadership is increasingly concerned about how these programmes can be strengthened to meet the social needs arising from the new economic policies. Soon after the economic reform took place, the Chinese Government vowed to develop resources and potentials for various social welfare undertakings<sup>5</sup>. Since then, necessary steps have been taken to improve the systems of labor insurance and service delivery for different target populations.

There is no doubt that the Chinese Government is determined to expand and upgrade the quality of social welfare services. In the latest five-year plan (1986-1990) for economic and social development, the Government has proposed that a social security system should be put in place gradually.<sup>6</sup> This covers the establishment of a social insurance system, the promotion of social welfare schemes, the continuation of preferential treatment for families of service and revolutionary martyrs, and the provision of relief for the needy.

The overall development of social welfare services in China is encouraging. This paper will now focus on the services for the most vulnerable groups, that is, the poor, disabled and elderly. The emphasis will be on how these individuals and families are affected under the present economic reform, and what measures are being employed to help them by the government and their fellow citizens.

#### Welfare Recipients and the Economic Reform

The major vulnerable groups of people who receive

social welfare assistance in China are the poor, disabled and elderly. Conceptually, the disabled and the elderly may also be considered the poor. However, in China these three groups of people are distinguished clearly, and are helped by different methods.

The total number of these "welfare recipients" is estimated to be around 100 million<sup>7</sup>. This is a substantial number because it constitutes almost one tenth of the total population.

#### The Poor

There is no official definition of poverty in China. But according to China's State Statistical Bureau, peasants whose annual income is below Y200 (US\$54 ) may be considered poor<sup>8</sup>. Since the income level is generally higher in cities than in the countryside, the urban dweller whose annual income is less than Y200 is certainly poor. If Y200 is seen as the poverty line, the poor are living below a subsistence level because that amount of money is not sufficient to meet basic human needs.

People become poor in China today for various reasons. The decline or loss of working capacity due to sickness, injury or old age; dependence of young children; lack of capital for production equipment; insufficient knowledge and skills, etc. are possible sources of poverty. In the past, these people did not have to worry about their living because the state or collectives almost guaranteed it. In the economic reform, individuals are being required to be more independent, and to be responsible for meeting their own needs.

In the countryside, the production responsibility system has been working well, so that most people are earning more money. Some have even got rich. On the other hand, some poor households are getting poorer. In a poor family for example, the breadwinner is chronically but not seriously ill, though able to work a few hours a day. In the past, he could work for the production team and be credited with work units which would provide some income for the family. Under the responsibility system, an individual or a group of individuals may accept a production quota which varies with the size of the land assigned. When the quota is met, the surplus output belongs to the individual or group. However, when the quota is not met, the individual or group not only has no income, but also faces a penalty. Under such conditions, it is unlikely that such a family will accept a production quota. As a result, the breadwinner will be completely out of work and have virtually no income.

In the urban areas, the reform in the industrial sector has generated more income for most workers, because in addition to earning higher wages, they also receive bonus or special allowances for better performance. However, certain measures in the economic reform may force workers to face higher risks of losing their jobs and benefits, thus paving the way to poverty. For example, an increasing number of industrial enterprises are given more power in making critical decisions, including recruitment and firing of workers, termination of contracts, reducing occupational benefits, etc. It is also possible that these

enterprises go bankrupt if they lose money. In fact, the Chinese Government considers that a bankruptcy system is one answer to the problem of factory losses, and the National People's Congress Standing Committee recently passed a bankruptcy law to allow factories to be closed down<sup>9</sup>. In that case, workers will be unemployed and lose their income. Until a new social insurance system (as suggested in the Five-year Plan for Economic and Social Development 1986-1990) is designed to cater for the needs of these workers, they have to prepare for the worst that may happen to them.

#### The Disabled

The disabled population in China includes the physically handicapped, the blind, the deaf and the mentally ill. They are being helped to rehabilitate to become economically and socially independent by receiving welfare services and/or participating in welfare production.

The severely disabled are placed in residential institutions or stay at home to be cared for by family members or relatives, with support from neighbors and relief services from government officials. In the latter case, the Resident Committee<sup>10</sup> of the neighborhood where the disabled lives plays a key role in the helping process. It helps organize the neighbors to develop a support network for the disabled, and channel the government relief. The less severe disabled who have working capacity are encouraged and helped to become involved in production

work. Welfare production factories are specifically established for them to manufacture products for sale in the market. By participating in the welfare production factories, these disabled persons are able to support themselves, at least partly. Thus, they do not need to depend solely on government relief.

Disabled persons receiving welfare services do not seem to be greatly affected by the reform because they continue to be helped through the joint efforts of family members, relatives, neighbors and government officials. Their worry, if they have, is that when family members, relatives or neighbors find their jobs more demanding, or hope to get more bonus by working harder, they may not be able to devote time and attention to the disabled as they used to. This would mean the weakening of the social support network that was well established.

As for those who are involved in welfare production, there is reason for them to be concerned about the future of their factories. Generally, the machines and equipment of the welfare production factories are old and inefficient. In addition, the management is inadequate. It will be hard for these factories to survive in an environment with increasing competition. Unless innovative ways of tapping the consumer's needs, and new production and marketing skills are introduced, the very existence of these factories will be threatened.

#### The Elderly

Sons and daughters in China are required by law to

provide the necessary financial support for their parents in old age. However, elderly persons who have no immediate family members may receive relief services from the government or are cared for in homes for the aged or infirm. In the countryside where institutional facilities are insufficient, these elderly persons stay at home and are listed as "Five Guarantees Household" - their food, clothing, housing, medical care and burial services are guaranteed by the government.

These elderly welfare recipients appear to benefit from the economic reform in terms of the improved standard of their living both in the institution or at home. The level of improvement is hard to know because there are great variations in different regions, provinces, cities or villages. The general picture is that the government is able to obtain more welfare funds through taxation, donation or other channels under the economic reform. These funds are being used to upgrade and promote services for the elderly.

A more significant impact of the economic reform is the new trend of the elderly persons' participation in welfare production. Not all the elderly welfare recipients have completely lost their working capacity. Some of them may be able to carry out light jobs, others may be able to work part-time or half-time. The fact that they are involved in welfare production will give them not only the money, but also a sense of usefulness.



### New Approaches to Helping the Needy

While the economic reform is moving forward in the desired direction, the Chinese leadership acknowledge that many people still encounter difficulties in making a living. The Communist Party Chairman, Hu Yaobang instructed that, in dealing with this problem, the impoverished citizens must be aided to increase production and income<sup>11</sup>. This call to help the poor has become one of the priorities in the economic reform, and has been closely observed and supported by various government departments, particularly the Ministry of Civil Affairs<sup>12</sup>.

As a social welfare service provider and coordinator, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has singled out two approaches to helping: "raising the poor" and "creative expansion of welfare production".<sup>13</sup> These two approaches are by no means recent inventions, but new elements have been added to make them more compatible with the new economic principles. It has to be noted here that although these two approaches to helping the poor have been widely reported in Chinese official documents and publications, the extensity and intensity of their operation in China have yet to be determined.

#### Raising the Poor

The main thrust of this approach is to aid impoverished farmers to become economically independent. This goal is expected to be achieved through concerted efforts of various government departments and citizens, and

by various means. The impoverished farmers are the target of assistance because they constitute the great majority of the poor in this country.

In the past, poor peasants were mainly helped through social relief, which was temporary and minimal. The new approach stresses helping the poor to help themselves by developing production. The emphasis is on changing the helping process from "blood transfusion" to "blood synthesis".

Principles. The overriding principle of raising the poor is self-reliance. This means to discourage dependence, and encourage self-help and independence. This principle is in line with the national guideline of self-reliance in all spheres of life.

Accompanying self-reliance is the principle of mutual aid, which is part of the socialist ideology of mutual care and mutual responsibility. It advocates "people helping people" in the economic reform. In particular, those who have got "rich" first are encouraged to help the poor.

Under these two general guidelines, government officials identify and select peasants to be helped. Not all impoverished farmers are selected. Only those who demonstrate potential in developing production will be given a chance. That is, they have to have at least some capacity to work. Those who cannot participate in production at all will be given social relief. If the number of eligible farmers is too great to be handled with the existing resources, government officials again have to make a decision as to whom should be helped first. The

priority list differs in different regions. Some areas favor giving priority to those who demonstrate highest potential to succeed, whereas other areas support the idea of helping the most needy first. When the targets for assistance have been selected, they are "raised" in several ways.

Strategies. The strategies for raising the poor farmers depend on the problems of the farmers and the resources they have. Generally, four types of assistance can be identified. First, financial assistance. Poor farmers may obtain grants or loans to buy seeds, fertilizers, cows or machines for agricultural production. Those who live close to towns may use the money to set up a small private business, such as repairing shoes, sewing, etc. This would generate stable income for the family. Secondly, technological assistance. Farmers are helped to learn specific knowledge and skills in farming, such as efficient ways of developing a chicken farm, scientific methods of growing fruits or flowers, etc. Thirdly, "labor assistance". For those who lack sufficient labor in production, volunteers are organized to help. Fourthly, "mechanical assistance". Machines for ploughing, planting or harvesting are pooled together to help the poor to farm more efficiently.

The financial, technological, labor and mechanical assistance are given to poor farmers mostly by government officials, rich farmers, volunteers, and welfare production enterprises in towns. For example, in the Laian County of Anhui Province, 3,900 government officials took part in

helping poor farmers, in addition to their official duties, from 1980-1985. As a result, 5,101 households were lifted from poverty<sup>14</sup>. In many villages, farmers who have got rich since the economic reform have offered financial help to their poorer counterparts.<sup>15</sup> In the Chu County of Anhui Province, 70,000 youth were mobilized to help 22,300 poor households with labor and technology.<sup>16</sup> In the Longtang Town of Talien City, some welfare production factories guaranteed workers from poor households an annual income above Y300(US\$80), provided they agree to work to the best of their ability.<sup>17</sup>

Whoever are involved in aiding the poor seem to recognize the importance of psychological support in the helping process, in addition to material and technological assistance. The standard procedure appears to be: strengthening the poor's will to become economically independent; building up their confidence in production; and developing enthusiasm and an optimistic outlook on life.<sup>18</sup>

#### Creative Expansion of Welfare Production

Another approach to helping the needy is expanding welfare production in creative ways. Welfare production refers to the involvement of the urban poor, particularly the disabled in economic production. The purpose is to help them to make use of whatever capacity they have to work and produce commodities or services.

As stated earlier, welfare production is not a new invention. It was introduced in the early 50's to promote

the urban poor's material life and to reduce their dependence on government relief. The central government proclaimed welfare production as a national policy in 1958 to help the urban poor. In a national conference on social welfare and social relief in 1979, the government reaffirmed its commitment to using welfare production as one of the major approaches to helping.

Welfare production takes place mainly in welfare production factories operated either by the Ministry of Civil Affairs or by local governments with assistance from the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Before 1979, many of these factories lost money and had to depend on subsidies from the government. The machines were old, the facilities outdated and the management inadequate. The major problem was the lack of incentive on the part of both the workers and the management, since rewards were not related to performance, and since factories would seldom be closed down even if they were running at a financial loss.

The economic reform provided an excellent opportunity for making changes in the form and management of welfare production. The following are some major innovations.

"Horizontal cooperation". An important element of the economic reform in the cities is to give industrial enterprises a high degree of autonomy in making major decisions. Many welfare production factories take advantage of this policy and develop joint ventures with other factories to increase production. By so doing, the resources and facilities of the parties involved can be utilized more fully. A welfare production factory in

Tianjin is a typical example.<sup>19</sup>

This factory manufactured cartons, with printing as a sideline. In 1984, tremendous efforts were made to boost production. First, in view of the decreasing demand for cartons in the market, the factory changed its production line to printing. Pooling resources from various channels, the factory was able to buy a number of advanced printing machines. However, these new machines required trained personnel to operate them, and new forms of management was also necessary. The next step was to contact a nationally known printing factory located in the nearby city. Subsequently, an agreement was reached, with the welfare production factory providing the machines, facilities and labor, and the printing factory providing the technology and training. As for the carton machines, the welfare production factory was able to make a contract with a nearby town enterprise. This time the welfare production factory provided the machines and skills, and the town enterprise supplied the factory facilities and labor. Along with these changes, a new wage structure based on merits was also set up to stimulate work incentive. As a result, the profit doubled in one year's time and workers' income was greatly improved.

Urban-rural cooperation. Welfare production factories are traditionally located in cities or towns. Their target population is the urban poor and disabled. The fact is that there is also a vast number of poor and disabled persons in the countryside who can and wish to work in welfare production factories. The economic reform provided

greater flexibility in selecting the factories' location.

In some rural areas, the local office of the Ministry of Civil Affairs started to set up welfare production factories to cater for the needs of the poor and disabled. Some factories located in towns also began to take in rural residents in welfare production. For example, since 1984, the Weiyuan District of Xian has set up 31 welfare production factories, which has employed all urban disabled persons who have working capacity, and 43% of rural disabled persons.<sup>20</sup>

Development of small economic entities. While most welfare production factories are operated by the government or collectives, a recent trend is to encourage the poor and disabled to cooperate with each other and develop their own small businesses. These businesses can focus on services or production of commodities. The government still provides the necessary assistance, particularly production materials such as offices or factory facilities. A limited amount of capital may be loaned by the government, and the poor and disabled may have to borrow the rest of the necessary funds from other sources. In the latter case, the government will serve as a guarantor.

These small businesses enjoy a high level of independence in operation, and they are managed by the poor and disabled themselves. This means that they will be solely responsible for the profits and losses. So far, this form of economic assistance is welcomed by the poor and disabled, and has proved to be successful in generating income for them.

The above ways to expand welfare production have produced impressive results. More poor and disabled persons are employed with a stable income. Welfare production factories or small businesses operated by the poor and disabled seem to be doing well in making profits. At least no losses have been reported so far. It has to be pointed out here that while most of the profits are shared by the workers, some is also used to develop or support welfare institutions such as homes for the elderly and disabled. This is a way of "the poor helping the poor". It demonstrates one of the different forms of pursuing the ideal of mutual care and mutual responsibility in China.

#### Discussion and Conclusion

The economic reform since 1979 has greatly improved the economy. As a result, the material life of the Chinese people has been improved to a large extent. But it has also brought about new needs and new problems. The foremost is increasing inequality of income.

Inequality of income may or may not lead to unfairness. The question is: fairness to whom? Fairness to some may mean unfairness to others. Before the economic reform, workers or peasants of the same collective received similar incomes, with only slight variations. The incomes were more or less equal, but this was not fair to those who worked more and harder. Now that the merit system has replaced the old one, inequality is expected. Again, it is unfair, but this time to those who have been with the old system for so long that they cannot adjust to the new

system.

For those who face difficulties in the economic reform, the government is obligated to provide necessary assistance. Social welfare measures play an important role in this respect.

These social welfare measures, be it "raising the poor" or "creative expansion of welfare production", lay heavy emphasis on the individuals' responsibility to help themselves or help their fellow citizens. Seeking assistance from the government is the final resort. This policy seems to be reasonable in view of the fact that China is still a developing country and the limited resources it has must be used for more urgent development projects. However, the government should also recognize the need to provide sufficient funds for the poor to take the first step of moving towards self-help. Encouraging the rich to help the poor would be useful, but using the profits of welfare production factories to support other social welfare services will not solve the problem of poverty. It redistributes income only horizontally.

Apart from the financing issue, the personnel aspect of these social welfare programmes should be carefully examined. The effectiveness of helping depends very much on the commitment and ability of the helper. Officials of the Ministry of Civil Affairs are mostly communist party members. There is no question about their commitment to helping the poor. However, being a member of the communist party does not guarantee their ability to give aid effectively and efficiently. Knowledge and skills in

service delivery and service coordination should be helpful to their work.

A last but significant point concerns the place of social welfare recipients in socialist construction under the economic reform. These people are helped and encouraged to carry out profit-making projects and act according to market principles so as to get rid of poverty or to get rich. The goal is to achieve a higher standard of material life. Further, they are urged to promote the spirit of mutual help, and at the same time, to pursue self-interest. Do they feel that they are being led to support socialist construction, or go capitalist? And why? These questions cannot be easily answered unless empirical data is gathered and analysed directly from these welfare recipients.

### Notes

1. The production responsibility system in agriculture takes different forms. The basic idea is that individuals or groups are given a quota for production, the surplus production will be kept by the individual or group. However, it is the sole responsibility of the individual or group to meet the quota, once they have accepted it. If not, they will face a penalty.

2. China Daily, 17 December, 1985, p.1.

3. See W.P. Tan, "New Life to Farming Households in China Brought About Reform," Outlook Weekly, 15, Hong Kong: China Book Resources Ltd., 1986, pp. 11-13; Shehui Baozhang Bao (Beijing), Issue 14, 3 July, 1986, p.3.

4. This view was expressed by participants in a National Conference on Urban Social Welfare and Social Assistance organized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs held in Beijing in December, 1979. See People's Daily (Beijing), 29 December, 1979, p.4.

5. See The Sixth Five-Year Plan of the People's Republic of China for Economic and Social Development 1981-1985, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1984, pp. 243-244.

6. See Main Documents, The Fourth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1986, p. 136.

7. See Z.H. Meng & M.H. Wang, A Historical Review of Chinese Civil Affairs, Harbin: Heilongjiang People's Press, 1986, p.52.

8. Shehui Baozhang Pao (Social Security Bulletin), (Beijing), 21 August, 1986, p.3.

9. South China Morning Post, 11 January, 1987, p.2.

10. Resident Committees are one form of neighborhood organizations. Officially, they are not part of the government. But they help a lot in carrying out governmental policies, delivering social services and collecting grassroots opinion for public decision-making.

11. See The Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party of China Documents (September, 1982), Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1984, p.27.

12. The Ministry of Civil Affairs was set up in 1978, mainly to plan, deliver and coordinate social welfare services. It also plays a key role in building and consolidating grassroots governments (governments below the county level).

Staff of the Ministry includes party officials, administrative officers, and civil affairs assistants. Civil Affairs Assistants are directly involved in working with the welfare recipients. For details, see Z.H. Meng & M.H. Wang, A Historical Review of Chinese Civil Affairs, Harbin: Heilongjiang People's Press, 1986; B.H. Mok, "Portrait of a Social Worker in China", Social Work (forthcoming).

13. These two approaches to helping the poor have been widely reported recently in major Chinese newspapers such as People's Daily (Beijing), China Daily (Beijing), Shehui Baozhang Pao (Beijing).

14. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 15, 3 July, 1986, p.1.

15. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 17, 24 July, 1986, p.2.

16. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 27, 2 October, 1986, p.1.

17. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 15, 10 July, 1986, p.2.

18. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 29, 16 October, 1986, p.2.

19. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 12, 19 June, 1986, p.1.

20. Shehui Baozhang Pao, Issue 20, 14 August, 1986, p.1.

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