Original Article

Exploring New Intermediate Domains in the Post-Socialist Situation in China: Restoring Connections through a Private Educational Center Supporting Children with Intellectual Disabilities

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Key words: China, post-socialism, people with disabilities, Jigou, an intermediary domain or organization, social work

Research Question
Since 2000, the government of China has developed systems and social environments related to disabled people along with marketing and globalization. In addition, the concept of social work has been imported from Western countries, which has led to increased interest in general social welfare. But, how do these policies and social changes influence those who are directly involved (people with disabilities and their families) and those who support people with disabilities on-site? Meanwhile, Yan Yunxiang, who focused on social changes in China since 2000, defined the nature of a society in which an unacquainted individual can meet other people who share the
same aspirations and establish social relationships across families and hierarchies as “New Sociality” (Yan 2009). However, the reality of that has not been proven. In fact, is it possible for parents having children with disabilities to build a network of support for each other beyond the boundary of family or social strata in China?

Based on this awareness, this study focuses on the organization, Jigou (public charity organization run by a private group), which was established during the post-socialist situation in China since 2000. Jigou is a private organization that provides services to people who need support and tries to solve social problems. In China, these organizations cannot operate freely without the supervision of government agencies in terms of business planning and funding. The formation and activities of such Jigou organizations have been discussed since the 1990s as prophetic of Chinese civil society (Brook, Frolic & Sharpe 1997; Gao 2006; Zhu 2010; Li 2012, 2018, etc.). In the preliminary research, there were studies of the institutional and policy aspects of whether it is possible to lead to the realization of a Chinese “Public” under the strong organizational structure of the party and the state from the standpoint of the founder and operator of Jigou with a view of how the organization is managed under the national and local regional power structure. In this study, “public” refers to “governance” (collaborative social management and operation), which is used to bring the power of “people” into the “public” over the past “government” (government social governance) (Li 2018: 49-51). In other words, the Jigou is shown as a multiplicity of state domains from an institutional and policy standpoint.

In contrast, this study regarded the Jigou as an intermediary domain or organization between individuals and the state that emerged in the post-socialist era and examined the methodological perspectives for empirical analysis as described in three discussions:
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1. Anthropological disorders study conducted by Kohrman (2005) in China,
2. Individualization of Chinese Society (Yan 2009), and

Specifically, based on participant observations conducted at the X educational center for supporting children with intellectual disabilities (“X Center” hereafter) located in Lanzhou city, Gansu, one of the regions with a high proportion of people with handicaps in China, and interviews with the manager and parents who send their children with disabilities there, the author clarified what role the Center plays as an intermediate domain or organization.

A Discussion of the Jigou: A case of X Center

The discussion consists of two parts. First, by reflecting the background of establishing the X Center and the difficulties faced by the management, the author described the perception of a disability by the parents of children with social and intellectual disabilities. In addition, through the relationship between the X Center and the public education system, and the consideration of enlightenment movements, the author pointed out that the X Center was reluctant to cooperate with Jigou, and similar public institutions and explored the cause of this. Then, the author described how the parents, who sent their children to the X Center, knew it was there and pointed out the problem that they were not able to accept the reality that their children were handicapped because they could not receive objective diagnoses and advice from experts. The author looked at the role of the X Center’s intermediate domain or organization and its limitations for parents who had such experiences.

The discussion led to the following conclusions: The X Center was established by P after discovering a problem where some children in
regular classes of kindergarten needed special assistance. With the development of the Internet, a wide variety of individuals can access information and make use of the resources of society, so parents can visit the Center even if there are no referrals. Parents can learn about the national policies for handicapped people through the X Center, and access services provided by private companies. For parents who have difficulty in living due to having children with disabilities and close their minds, the X Center is the place to meet with people who have the same pain and supporters. Parents can now accept the reality and receive the guidance on how to live with their children.

Having encountered the X Center, some parents have come to think about the options for the care of their children upon their deaths to an organization between their families and the state, such as the Jigou. That is, they can place more trust in cross-sectional relationships with others, which are different from family and state-led systems, to create the space for others to intervene in caring for their children instead of just relying on whole families. From the perspective of the parents, the space for others to intervene has emerged as an intermediate domain. It is different from the “public” (a space where the power of the “people” is involved in government social governance and jointly manages and operates society) (Li 2018: 49-51) that was described in civil society theory in China.

Intermediate Domains in the “New sociality”

The author can see the real nature of social work from the connections between the parents of disabled children and others through the X-Center. Akihiro Sugino defines the real nature of social work, from the grassroots view, as follows: “Social work can be defined as an effort to assist individuals and their families who have ‘difficulty in living’ by reconciling the ‘discord between individuals
and society’ or ‘difficulties in social relations’ that are the cause of the
difficulty in living.’ ‘Discord between individuals and society’ can
be restated as the ‘loss of connections’ and ‘reconciling’ can be
‘restoring connections’” (Sugino 2011: 26). Parents are able to
establish new connections with those who have the same pain points
and supporters, and their relationships with others, which have been
broken by the birth of a handicapped child, are being restored
through the X Center.

Thus, the X-Center, which emerged from the grassroots level,
provides opportunities to connect people across families and social
strata and serves the role of intervening with other people and
proving that the “new sociality” recommended by Yan is being
realized. This reflects the changes in the way resources are distributed
and connections with others in the post-socialist era since 2000.

However, there are limitations in restoring connections through
the X Center. One is restoring connections for children with
disabilities. For these children, the X Center serves as a preschool
organization, which encourages restoring connections as an
intermediary domain or organization. However, with regard to
self-reliance in general life, both P and the parents consider the
independence of children as needed self-help efforts and are aiming
for children to enter the world of healthy people. If it is not achieved,
the children with disabilities are returned to their families. This
means that they are being incorporated into the public.

Another limitation is that the autonomy of the X Center as an
intermediary domain or organization is fragile. This is because it is
necessary to find autonomy making a compromise with the social
work system led by the government. From the present state, the X
Center plays a subcontract role to the government, including
distributing information about the government’s policies on the
disabled to parties and supporting the parts of the community that public special education cannot reach. This is a circuit of power intervention. In order for the X Center to develop its autonomous activities in the intermediate domain, it is necessary to cooperate with various related actors, including similar organizations (Jigou), but it is not currently being done.

Furthermore, the vulnerability of the autonomy of an intermediate domain or organization called Jigou is also due to the tenuous solidarity between parents. The parents using the X Center prioritize the interests of their children, so that the problems of other children are someone else’s problem for them, therefore, you will see they are not facing the same problems together, such as preschool, self-reliance, and the issue of exclusion from society. The strong autonomy in which parents increase their intimacy and turn to the public sphere has not developed.

The above considerations have revealed that the organization (Jigou) as an intermediate domain or organization in terms of new societies is different from the nature and function of the intermediate organization that mediates the bio-power analyzed by Kohrman. It also shows an aspect of the different domain organization that cannot be explained from the perspective of the changes in autonomous public or private domains as discussed in post-socialist anthropology in the past. In other words, the intermediate domain or organization is in a receptive state where the “public” contains “new societies” and the “new societies” contains the “public.” It cannot be explained from a dualistic concept, which is the perspective of just public or private. In addition, the discussion in the study seems to demonstrate the process of developing China’s own welfare for disabled persons, which has failed based on the social model of disability. This point dissolves the monolithic nature of the “China image of the totalism model,” in
contrast to post-socialist anthropology, and suggests the regional uniqueness and specificity of the post-socialist society in China from the actuality of disability welfare.

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