

# The Art of Social Work Value Practice: A Case Study of Rural Governance in Yunnan, China

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## Abstract

*Social work has made significant contributions to poverty alleviation and rural development in China, with value practice at the core of achieving professional effectiveness. This study employs case interviews and a survey of secondary data to examine the value practice of social work in rural governance in Yunnan Province. Findings indicate that social work integrates with shaping of socialist values, governance that 'wins the hearts' through service, recognition of the ethical and moral values of ethnic minorities, the Confucian ethical care in rural society, and value consensus around a shared future for humanity. The complex connotation of social work value practice lies in the governance goal of integrating local, ethnic and personal identities into China's national identity. Additionally, social work participates in international cooperation. The value practice carried out by social workers based on sociocultural contexts is a fluid and creative process in which social workers employ pragmatic rational logic to achieve governance objectives.*

**Keywords:** *Social Work, Rural Revitalization, Governance, Chinese-Style Modernization.*

## Introduction

Since modern times, addressing rural problems has been considered crucial to unlocking China's development. In the 1920s and 1930s, intellectuals such as Shuming Liang (Liang, 1937) and Y.C. James Yan (Song, 1992) attributed China's underdevelopment to the decline of rural areas, and launched a rural construction movement. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the socialist transformation of agriculture took place. China's reform began in rural areas, marked by the implementation of the household contract responsibility system in Xiaogang Village, Fengyang County, Anhui Province. The system dismantled egalitarianism with everyone "eating from the same big pot", and implemented the approach of "dividing land to each household and being responsible for their own profits and losses" to incentivize villagers' agricultural productivity. After the reform and opening-up, the Central Government's No. 1 Document, an important policy guideline, focused on the three rural issues (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) for 21 consecutive years from 2004 to 2024. At the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, poverty alleviation was made a major policy focus – and absolute poverty has since been eradicated for a substantial part of the population. The subsequently implemented rural revitalization policy aims to expedite agricultural and rural modernization.

Yunnan Province, China has implemented the rural revitalization strategy since 2017 and comprehensively promoted rural revitalization in 2021, emphasizing rural development and governance. However, due to the mountainous terrain, dispersed rural settlements, and population mobility, the allocation and provision of rural public services remain relatively inadequate, hindering Yunnan Province's modernization efforts (Song, 2024). Social work facilitates the professionalization of grassroots governance through "service-oriented governance" (Wang, 2015), consolidating poverty alleviation achievements and enabling rural revitalization. Since 2013, Yunnan Province has deployed social work professionals to serve poverty-stricken areas, border ethnic minority areas, and old revolutionary base areas, namely the "three regions" plan. As of 2021, this plan has selected 944 social workers across 165 counties in Yunnan, trained 385 local social workers, and established more than 60 county-level social work organizations (Lu et al., 2023).

Li (2012) argues that border strengthening work constitutes a form of social work practice, with the definition of "border" encompassing both geographical and cultural factors. Social work adapts to border

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characteristics and can promote the development of governance systems and capacity, but its effectiveness relies on social workers possessing high cultural sensitivity. As social work is a value-based profession (Levy, 1976), and values are the core of social work practice (Ku, 2017), social work value practice becomes the central factor guiding rural governance in Yunnan. Governance effectiveness can be reflected in the recognition of the uniqueness of the social work value system, the internal balance of the practice value system, and effective output.

Accordingly, this study investigates the distinctive characteristics of social work professional value practice in achieving effective rural governance. It aims to explore the logical roots of social work professional value practice in rural governance. By providing a case study of a southwestern frontier minority province undergoing accelerated opening-up, this research enriches the theoretical and practical discourse on the social work profession's role in leading the modernization of rural governance.

## Literature Review

As a practice-based profession, social work research on values often explores their practical applications. The National Association of Social Workers (2021) has proposed core values that include: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence. These core values and their associated principles must be balanced within the context and complexity of human experience. Ku (2017) notes that “social justice”, as the most fundamental value, has also received extensive attention. Moreover, social work carries the weight of morality (Specht & Courtney, 1994), and is essentially a moral practice and political practice (Zhu, 2000). Social work participation in community governance adopts the basic principle of “helping people to help themselves”.

Rural governance is a distinct issue in China. The construction of professional social work values primarily encompasses localized value construction, value practice conflicts, and their responses, etc. Existing research indicates that several perspectives are particularly valued in the development of social work values. From a socialist perspective, Luo (2005) proposed that social work values and ethics are the practice of socialism. From a cultural perspective, social workers' value construction and moral practice must exhibit cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness (Li, 2012; Ku et al., 2007; Huang, 2012; Jiao, 2021), including the excavation and transformation of excellent traditional culture and local culture (Hou, 2023; Yang & Lü, 2023). From a relationship perspective, Zhao & Kong (2022) argue that social work ethics is relationship-based, emphasizing the selfishness and altruism of the self, mutual responsibility and care between people, and the moral implications of social systems. Social work ethics change with the shifts in relationships. Social work ethical practice presents an integrated approach that combines virtue ethics, care ethics, and justice ethics. He & Xu (2022) explore how Confucian ethics often leads Chinese people to be embedded in complex relationships and act according to actual situations. From a situational perspective, Mary Richmond (1922) proposed “to help the person in his situation”, and Gordon Hamilton (1951) introduced the concept of “the person-in-his situation”. These views are widely recognized in China. Tong & Wu (2022) point out that limited rationality assumption of local social work can promote the combination of civilian care and scenario-based professional practice, realizing the integration of ethical reflection and practical practice. Guo (2024) constructed a new theoretical foundation of “person-in-environment” for social work practice based on sorting out the viewpoints about human being, development and practice from social sciences. Wang & Xu (2022) note that, given the particularity of border village governance, social workers should possess the value concepts of “multicultural integration” and “geo-sensitivity”.

In summary, the aforementioned academic perspectives provide valuable insights for studying the value practice of social work in rural governance.

## Methodology

This article utilizes secondary data analysis and in-depth case interviews for data collection. The authors collected policy texts, research papers, statistical data from authoritative departments, and news reports pertinent to the research topic. The interview was derived from interview materials of a grassroots

government officer (anonymous as “O”, and use O<sub>1</sub> as interview case numbers), two social organization managers (anonymous as “M”, and use M<sub>1</sub>, M<sub>2</sub> as interview case numbers), and two social workers (anonymous as “W”, and use W<sub>1</sub>, W<sub>2</sub> as interview case numbers).

## Findings and Discussions

The value system of professional social work primarily originates from the values of mainstream culture in Western society, with Protestant ethics, humanitarianism and social welfare concepts as its core content. Social work is regarded as a service with strong ethical value care. It is not only incapable of being objective and neutral, but also requires a clear ethical value foundation and the maintenance of ethical value vigilance (Tong & Wu, 2022). Chinese social workers demonstrate cultural consciousness in value production. “Drawing on the value system of social work in western developed countries, they also absorb the value concepts of ancient Chinese social work practice and the dominant cultural values in contemporary China (Wang, 1999, 53).” In 1994, the “Professional Ethics of Chinese Social Workers” was promulgated, marking the first task completed by professional social work in China besides organizational construction.

In addition to possessing intrinsic values such as professional values, professional ethics, and operating codes, professional social work participating in rural governance also highlights the cultural sensitivity of workers and their cultural awareness of value construction. As a general principle, the professional value of social work is centered on altruism and aims to achieve social justice. However, in the process of taking root at the grassroots level, attention should be paid to the subjectivity of regional culture, which should be transformed into local situational expressions and moral practices. Through the power of professional ethics, people’s hearts can be reached directly, and real “good governance” can be achieved through practical service participation. In Yunnan, the practice of social work values has become the core action of professional guidance in rural governance, while simultaneously, its unique dimension must be recognized.

### *Shaping Socialist Values to Consolidate Political Power*

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the state’s presence has played an unprecedented positive role. The state has formed a unitary dominant value system to cultivate citizens, namely the “Core Socialist Values”, advocating prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; advocating freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. The New-Era Civilization Practice Center (Institute, Station) were established to bolster these core socialist values. Yunnan Province began constructing New-Era Civilization Practice Centers in 2018. By 2022, 129 county (city) practice centers, 1,416 practice institutes, and 15,374 civilization practice stations had been built in administrative villages (communities) (Lang et al., 2022). A social work organization manager and a grassroots government staff discussed the collaborative model between the government and social work organizations, revealing the political action logic of their cooperation.

The construction of the Yunnan New Era Civilization Practice Center (Institute, Station) is carried out through the government purchase project operation model, and social work organizations are the main actors of the project (M<sub>1</sub>, 2023). The social work organizations and social workers, who undertake the project, widely mobilized volunteer service groups to carry out five projects: advocacy and explanation of the party’s policies, cultivation and practice of socialism and mainstream values, enriching and activating cultural life, and continuously and deeply changing customs (O<sub>1</sub>, 2023).

It is evident that the New-Era Civilization Practice Centers combine political education, the cultivation of core socialist values and the construction of a volunteer service system to better serve grassroots governance and promote rural revitalization. In 2023, Society Work Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee was established. Social work has been regarded as a normative tool for national political identity, which is reflected in the construction of professional values and has become its core essence.

*The Government's Governance Relies on Serving with Heart to Win the Hearts of the People*

In response to the characteristics and needs of special groups, governments at all levels in China have mobilized civil society to carry out diversified helping practices based on mainstream values and local customs and sentiments, accumulating a lot of valuable experience and becoming an important resource for the construction of professional values. The “Fengqiao Experience,” a representative of grassroots governance with Chinese characteristics, inherits and develops the traditional Chinese governance concept of putting people first, convincing people with reason and valuing harmony, as well as the purpose of the Communist Party of China to serve the people (Yu & Dai, 2023). Nowadays, carrying out grassroots governance with “heart” is the most typical expression of local grassroots professional ethics, which aligns with the recognition of human value and dignity in professional relations in social work. A region in Yunnan implements the “Five-Heart Service” to improve the effectiveness of rural governance.

Five-heart service improves the effectiveness of rural governance: (1) Heart-to-heart Collaboration, refining the grid structure to achieve unified grassroots governance; (2) Heart-to-heart Building, strengthening the governance carrier and improving the support of the guarantee mechanism; (3) Heart-to-heart Providing Services, carrying out the investigation and resolution of contradictions and disputes in a down-to-earth manner to stabilize the foundation; (4) Heart-to-heart Legal Education, deepening the publicity of the rule of law and promoting moral education to nourish the people’s hearts; (5) Heart-to-heart Leadership, forming a clear orientation to achieve demonstration and drive quality and efficiency improvement (Chen, 2021).

The Five-Heart-Service represents the local service values and moral resources of governance formed by the government, which are adapted to China’s administrative system and operating laws. Grassroots workers are portrayed as “people’s servants” and government governance is shaped into “people’s work.” In the current design of the national governance system, grassroots social work exists as a party committee department, holding a political identity. Through the government purchasing services or positions, it becomes a professional role in the governance community. Thus, social workers shuttle between political identities, administrative roles and professional roles. Professional value practices such as respect, equality, non-criticism, and empathy are integrated with the “people-centered” value orientation of the party and government to achieve governance effectiveness. However, this also presents practical dilemmas in specific situations. How can professional social work with individualistic value preferences be coordinated with the pursuit of collectivist values? While adhering to the standardization of national governance, how can the liberating value of governance be realized, and the development and well-being of individuals or localities be promoted? Consequently, contextuality has become an important dimension of social work value construction, encompassing nationality and localism. The value practice of social workers aims to achieve specific governance goals and is characterized by action instrumental rationality based on the specific context.

*Recognition of the Ethical and Moral Values of Ethnic Minorities*

Yunnan is home to 25 ethnic minorities, including 15 unique ethnic minorities and 16 cross-border ethnic minorities. Bi (2004) asserts that social justice is the fundamental value concept in the social welfare field. Different ethnic welfare fields are relatively independent and have unique welfare habits. Social work professional intervention should be carried out based on an understanding of the differences in the ethnic composition of specific communities. It should not only embody the general value of social work but also include the concept of understanding inter-ethnic differences and pluralistic harmony to achieve effective governance.

The ethics of ethnic minorities in Yunnan are rich and diverse. Although they have experienced various levels of dissolution and alienation under the impact of modernization and marketization, they remain an important part of national psychology and the source of ethical order construction. The most representative value contents include the ethics of good and evil of ethnic minorities, the values of equality and mutual assistance, the ideals of family friendship and harmony, the concept of filial piety and respect for the elderly, the ecological ethics of protecting forests and water sources, the mutual benefit of nature and human, and

the value orientation of multi-ethnic harmony and unity (Shi & Zhu, 2024; Hua et al., 2021). These are all worthy of exploration and innovation by social workers, which will benefit rural governance in ethnic areas.

Regarding elderly care in ethnic minority areas, the concept of filial piety is relatively strong among ethnic minorities in Yunnan. The Bai people have a distinct Confucian filial piety culture tradition and still advocate two, three or even four generations living together in the family structure (Xu, 2021). Family-based elderly care has become the primary elderly care model in ethnic areas. As described by the two social workers:

No matter how old they are, the elderly believe that “even when they are old, they must be self-reliant and hardworking”, and they must live at home for birth, aging, illness and death (W<sub>1</sub>, 2023). “An old man in the family is like a treasure” is a concept recognized by the villagers, and it is a common phenomenon that the children and grandchildren in the family respect and are filial to the elderly (W<sub>2</sub>, 2023).

In addition to home-based elderly care, the elderly also have the tradition of integrating into the “warm community” of relatives and the elderly association in the village. Elderly women around 60 years old will join the “Old Mother Club” to carry out local folk cultural activities. This not only enriches the spiritual and cultural life of elderly women, but also establishes a relationship of mutual assistance and support between them. Based on the insight, exploration and resource integration of national ethical values, professional social work can carry out work in a more appropriate way and achieve governance goals.

However, the situation faced by ethnic social work is undoubtedly more complicated, and the process of ethnic social work specialization is longer. An important experience of China’s ethnic governance comes from the philosophical wisdom of the Book of I Ching, namely “Judging from astronomy to detect when the change, judging from the humanities into the world to (Huang & Zhang, 2016, 245).” In other words, the soul of the nation is transformed by culture and cast by culture. Therefore, “the consciousness of the Chinese nation community” is used as the cultural symbol and unified cultural concept of Chinese order. Social workers not only respect and promote the excellent traditions of ethnic minority cultures, but also enhance the consciousness of the Chinese nation community and its cohesion. A value-filled social worker becomes an artistic professional practitioner who not only practices professional ideals but also organically links the governance goals of ethnic identity and national identity.

#### *Confucian Ethical Concern Characterized by “Association” in Rural Society*

China's traditional grassroots governance is shaped by distinctive regional and local ethnic characteristics, which influence the implementation of social work values and practices. The professional value of social work is inherently tied to the logic of these local features. Three key elements define the ethical framework in Chinese rural society. First, Confucian ethical values: Chinese rural society has a strong traditional culture where Confucian ethics and morals serve as essential criteria guiding villagers’ lives and pursuits. Second, ethical order of the differential mode of association: Rural society functions as a unique social field governed by an endogenous order rooted in networks of acquaintance relationships. The differential mode of association delineates a hierarchical framework for seeking and offering help, reflecting a progression from family-based welfare to broader relational networks. Help and welfare provision typically extend from kinship ties to neighbors, colleagues, and classmates, following a sequence from blood relations to geographical proximity and professional affiliations. Moreover, people often prioritize informal trust-based relationships over institutionalized systems of support. Third, village rules and folk conventions: These rules are collaboratively developed by local villagers and serve a customary system for maintaining order and upholding the folk spirit of the village community. They represent a synthesis of modern state governance mechanisms and traditional cultural norms. As one social work organization manager observed:

Social workers should integrate into the local society, follow local customs, often chat with villagers, and be invited to “drink wedding wine” and family banquets. Only in this way can social workers understand the community and the target audience served, and establish professional relationships (M<sub>2</sub>).

Consequently, social workers must embed themselves in the daily life-world of community residents,

translating universal ethical principles into localized moral practices. Only in this way can social workers effectively serve the community and achieve governance outcomes.

With the rise of social mobility and the growing prevalence of social risks, the “warm community” traditionally grounded in ethical trust and relational networks is gradually eroding. However, recognizing and preserving its significance remains crucial. The maintenance and reconstruction of these traditional ethical communities have become a first step for social work’s participation in grassroots governance. Through their efforts, social workers can not only support individual growth and self-improvement but also mobilize community-based moral resources to facilitate the positive transformation of ethical communities.

In summary, the participation of social work in rural governance involves identifying and revitalizing the core values of traditional culture, transforming them to meet the needs of modern society. This process contributes to the integration of personal identity, the reconstruction of rural order, and the strengthening of national identity.

### *The Value Consensus of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind*

Yunnan borders Myanmar in the west and Laos and Vietnam in the south, spanning a border length of 4,060 kilometers. The province encompasses eight border states (cities), 25 border counties (cities), 110 border towns, and 374 border administrative villages (communities) (Zi , 2023). In 2021, the province issued the “Plan for the Construction of Modern Border Well-off Villages in Yunnan Province (2021-2025)” (Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of Yunnan Province, 2021). The longstanding goal of “prospering the border and enriching the people” has been a cornerstone of grassroots governance in Yunnan’s border regions. Today, with the deepening and implementation of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, the thriving development of the China-Laos Railway, and the growing integration of the China-Laos-Thailand Railway, Yunnan’s strategic importance has grown significantly. As a vital window for China’s opening to the outside world and a gateway to South and Southeast Asia, Yunnan’s rural governance has become closely aligned with border governance and international connectivity.

In the era of natural economy, risks faced by humanity were often regional and localized. However, in today’s globalized world, humanity has increasingly been brought into a community with a shared future. Global risks and challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, public health crises, food security, and international peace demand collective action and collaborative governance. For regions like Yunnan, issues involving cross-border economies, societies, and populations are central to its participation in international governance. Social work, as a professional force in grassroots governance, has established a model of professional service value in local governance practice. At the same time, due to Yunnan’s geographical advantages and historical origins, the cultural soil of “mountains and rivers connected, humanities close, and people’s hearts connected” supports professional social work in engaging with international communities, fostering dialogue with other civilizations, and enriching the ethical and professional values of international governance. In this way, social work contributes to the practice of collaborative governance on a global scale. Of course, this not only represents an important outcome of people-to-people exchanges, but also provide valuable insights for national governance and global governance.

## **Conclusion**

Yunnan, as one of the earliest regions in China to develop professional social work education and practices following the reform and opening-up period, boasts rich and distinct experiences in poverty alleviation and rural development. Characterized by its multi-ethnic composition, predominantly mountainous terrain, and dispersed rural settlements, Yunnan exemplifies the significance of rural governance professionalization to advance regional modernization. This process reflects the province’s unique developmental trajectory and its broader relevance.

The participation of social in rural governance, as a general guide for professional values and ethical

principles, also aligns with promotion of socialist values, the consolidation of through governance that earns public trust, the Confucian ethical care marked by associative relationships in rural society, and the pursuit of a value consensus for a community with a shared future for humankind. The complex connotation of social work value practice lies in the governance goal of integrating local, ethnic and personal identities with national identity. Social work, as a tool for service-oriented governance, can effectively participate in international cooperation issues concerning rural people's well-being. However, social workers often face ethical and practical dilemmas in specific situations. Therefore, the practice of professional social work, based on social contexts and cultural frameworks, is a dynamic and creative process. It requires navigating the fluid and nuanced dimensions of governance goals, thereby transforming social workers into pragmatic actors employing rational and adaptive logic. This underscores the complexity of collaborative governance processes in rural settings.

Given that the relevant academic research and international exchanges remain underdeveloped, this study provides a reference for future research and practical application. However, this work represents a static analysis of Yunnan Province, overlooking the dynamic aspects of value generation and evolution in social work practice. Addressing these limitations offers a promising direction for subsequent research.

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