

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Network governance among actors involved in the government's contracting out of foster care services: A case study in China

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Email: yanfeng@mailbox.sc.edu**Abstract**

The government's contracting out of foster care services in Guangzhou, China, introduced the possibility of partnerships between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government-led human services. To understand network governance among actors involved in contracting out foster care services, service funders, service providers, and service users were interviewed. A thematic analysis of interviews combined with a critical review of archival data was conducted. Drawing from the policy network governance analytic framework, we found that network governance conditions in contracting out foster care services were characterized by close interdependence among actors, moderate standardization in work duties, but nonreciprocal patterns of interactions, and low to modest levels of autonomy, along with strong power in the government but limited self-governance among NGOs and foster families. Our findings indicate that network governance was not fully achieved among actors involved in the contracting out of foster care services. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

autonomy, foster care, interdependence, government contracting out services, network governance, standardization

INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of welfare pluralism has informed reforms of child welfare services, which ultimately aim to create a government-led child welfare system with the involvement of multiple actors, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civilians (Carey & Crammond, 2015). One example of child welfare socialization is foster care. Characterized as deinstitutionalized caregiving in a family-style environment with a flexible term under contracts, foster care was imported from Western countries to China in the late 1990s (Zeng, 2002). The implementation of this new foster care program was a significant milestone for child welfare socialization in China. Children in institutional care are matched by child welfare institutions to appropriate foster families, with

consideration of the child's age, gender, health status, and intelligence and the foster caregiver's employment, housing conditions, and commitment to caregiving (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2019). Foster families provide daily care to these foster children with subsidies provided by the local government to cover the costs of daily expenses, health care, and education (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2019). However, the government retains state custody over the child, and the foster child's household registration remains with the child welfare institution.

New contracting out social services policy

With the development of NGOs in China in recent decades, contracting out social services has become a new trend

(Wen, 2017). The government's contracting out of services refers to the government funding and contracting with NGOs to provide social services (Wen, 2017). Ideally, NGOs deliver services and make decisions independently to fulfill duties based on these contracts, whereas the government monitors service provision according to the contract and evaluates the NGOs' performance.

Guangzhou was the initial site of contracted social services in 2008 and has continued to increase its contracting out of social services every year (China Association of Social Workers, 2019). In 2012, Guangdong province published the first administrative policy on this topic, titled *The Catalog of Social Organization Services Purchased by the Provincial Government (First Batch)*, and updated it in 2015 (Guangdong Provincial Department of Finance, 2015). Undoubtedly, Guangdong has been a national leader with the highest investment in contracting out of social services and the largest number of registered social service organizations (China Association of Social Workers, 2019).

This new collaborative model between government entities and NGOs through the contracting out of social services has also affected foster care services. Pioneer cities with well-established NGOs have launched new child protection programs through government contracts to provide child welfare services (Lei et al., 2019). These new child protection programs aim to establish a mandatory reporting system of child abuse and neglect and to expand the current foster care program to maltreated children.

Evolution of foster care services in Guangzhou

Guangzhou's child welfare institutions started foster care services in 2005 when Guangzhou's Bureau of Civil Affairs launched a pilot scheme with children in the Child Welfare Institution (CWI) in Guangzhou (Bureau of Civil Affairs of Guangzhou, 2004). Influenced by the contracting out of social services and the implementation of *The Regulations of Foster Care in Guangzhou*, foster care services in Guangzhou have continued to evolve.

Phase I: Foster homes in rural villages run by the CWI only. From 2005 to 2006, disabled children and orphans from child welfare institutions were matched with foster families in rural villages for a 1-year trial period, followed by a 3-year long-term placement. In this phase, foster homes were located in rural villages where all foster families lived close to one another.

Phase II: Simulated group foster homes in urban public housing run by the CWI only. Starting in 2006, the CWI introduced a new type of foster care called simulated group foster homes, which were different from the foster homes in Phase I. Each simulated group foster home took care of four

or five disabled children, and these semigroup foster homes were located in urban public housing. Selected foster parents moved into the public housing to take care of foster children, rather than placing children into foster parents' homes. For the children's safety and well-being, all selected parents had a government guarantor, and the CWI hired a program manager to oversee all administrative work and deliver in-home services to foster children and families.

Phase III: Foster care centers with contracted social services. Along with the rapid increase in contracting out of social services in Guangzhou, the CWI, as a government entity, started to contract for foster care services from the growth dynamics center (GDC) for Social Work Professional Development and Resources, a local NGO. The first government contract for foster care services in Guangzhou was in 2009 and involved a collaboration between the CWI and GDC. The CWI took charge of financial and administrative supervision and paid the foster care center's social workers' salaries, indirect administrative expenses, and direct service costs. Initially, social workers from the GDC provided professional services to two community-based foster centers, including five foster homes in urban residential districts. Starting in 2015, a similar services program was offered to families in two foster centers in rural villages.

This phase of foster care services in Guangzhou marked the first time that NGOs participated in providing foster care services. Three actors—the CWI, GDC, and foster parents—developed a new foster care services network under the new policy model of the government contracting out foster services. The CWI, as a government entity, was a funder of foster care services. The CWI, under the direct supervision of the Guangzhou Bureau of Civil Affairs, received funds from the municipal government of Guangzhou. The GDC was a service provider in the network, whereas foster care families, including group foster homes in urban communities and rural villages, were service users.

Those implementing this new government-contracted foster care program faced multiple structural challenges. The only national administrative measure on foster care is the *Measures for the Administration of Foster Care*, which has been in effect since 2014 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2014). Although the 2014 foster care measure set strict criteria for being foster parents and detailed procedures in providing foster care services to decrease potential risks, it did not respond to emerging issues, such as having multiple actors involved in foster care services in the context of contracting out social services. This led to some challenges in practice, such as how to define each actor's duties and in what way to provide professional services to foster families. When implementing the new policy of contracting out social services, the government had to switch from having hierarchical control to developing a more business-like relationship with NGOs, and with foster

families to some extent. Therefore, a new working relationship emerged in Phase III of foster care services.

Analytic framework: Policy network governance

Network governance refers to organic and informal social systems between actors, rather than bureaucratic and contractual relationships (Jones et al., 1997). Actors in this policy network may dilute their boundaries, engage in equal dialogues, coordinate actions, share responsibilities, and work collectively to achieve policy goals (Jones et al., 1997). Forms of exchange in the network become more dependent on mutual interests and reputation and less subject to formal structures of authority (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). An ideal condition of network governance meets three criteria in interactions: interdependence, standardization, and autonomy (Carey & Crammond, 2015; Daniell & Kay, 2017; Forrer et al., 2014; O'Flynn et al., 2013). Interdependence refers to actors developing interdependent patterns of exchanges that are facilitated by the network, and in turn, create and recreate the network structure by working interdependently over time (Forrer et al., 2014). Actors include the government, society, market, community, individuals, and other diverse parties, all of which are required to be independent (Ferlie et al., 2011; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Interdependence involves a stable supply of resources for diverse demands and frequent interactions between actors (Muhammad, 2014). Standardization ensures a structured network, and such a network has clear goals and patterns of interactions that represent a clear division of responsibilities and rights (Carey & Crammond, 2015). Having a reciprocal standardized pattern of interaction is an important indicator to distinguish well-functioning network governance from ill-functioning network governance. In other words, all actors should frequently exchange resources and power in the pursuit of the same goal in a standardized way, while remaining autonomous. Autonomy refers to having systematic self-governance among actors involved in the network, which requires independent control of assignments, obligations, and responsibilities (Daniell & Kay, 2017; O'Flynn et al., 2013).

In the broad field of welfare state policy, NGOs or other nonstate actors, such as think tanks or interest lobbies, might act as partners of the state and have input in the process of designing government policies (Rhodes, 1997). Recently, network governance has been widely applied to the provision of social services by building partnerships between the government and NGOs (Bonomi et al., 2020). In the policy of contracting out social services, well-functioning networks require effective and efficient collaboration between governments (i.e., service funders) and NGOs (i.e., service providers;

Renz & Andersson, 2014). Furthermore, the contracting-out process follows mixed logic between a market and a traditional hierarchy administration system. Because of NGOs' interdependence regarding unique resources, such as knowledge and information, they increasingly assume prominent positions in the public policy network (Granovetter, 1994; Pugh, 2016). However, power asymmetries are reflected in tight state control of the governance network's agenda, membership, and opportunities that may influence policies (Aasland et al., 2016). While maintaining government control, policy governance needs clear and feasible regulations to ensure that governance activities are carried out in a formal and institutionalized manner (Manna, 2010; Streck, 2002). The government's openness to change and knowledge sharing are necessary and important in all phases of service delivery (Bonomi et al., 2020).

Network governance varies by context. Institutional and sociopolitical contexts and social problems both have impacts on network governance functioning (Røiseland, 2011). Contracting out social services and the involvement of social forces in governance in China have been used tactically as a policy tool; however, it is not collaborative governance as typically implemented in western countries to achieve policy goals (Mok et al., 2020). In the context of child welfare system reforms under a top-down governmental structure in China (Zhao et al., 2017), this new policy network should be examined to understand how network governance works in providing social services and whether it is possible for local NGOs and service users to contribute to governance from the bottom up.

Study purpose

The government's contracting out of social services is a new public policy and practice model in human services in China, and it involves multiple actors such as service funders, service providers, and service users. Therefore, it is necessary to understand these multiple actors' interactions in this network using the policy network governance framework. NGOs have participated in this new foster care services program and collaborated with the government-led child welfare system. However, much is unknown about relationships among the three actors (i.e., government, NGOs, and foster care families) involved in new government-contracted foster care services and if network governance among these three actors emerged during the policy implementation process. The current study analyzed a case of government contracts of foster care services in Guangzhou to understand network governance among the local government, the local NGO, and foster care families. Specifically, this study explored three conditions of network governance—interdependence, standardization, and

autonomy—and examined if these conditions have been reached in this foster care policy network.

METHODS

This study used the government's contracting out of foster care services in Guangzhou as a case study. Guangzhou was chosen because it was a pilot city for this new policy initiative. As reviewed, foster care services in Guangzhou underwent a transition from Phase I and Phase II, with only a government entity running foster care programs, to Phase III, wherein foster care services were contracted out under the new foster care services policy. Guangzhou faced multiple challenges during this pilot program but ultimately gained a wealth of experience in running foster care programs. Therefore, Guangzhou as a case study is well suited to explicating the network governance among actors involved in foster care services under the new policy of contracting out social services.

Data collection

The qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and archival collections by the first author in 2010, 2015, and 2018 to understand network governance in the evolution of foster care services. Nineteen semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted in 2010 and 2015. Participants included seven staff members from the foster care service funder, seven foster care workers from a foster care service provider, and five foster mothers who primarily took care of foster children from four foster centers (see participants' information in Table 1). Foster children were not included as participants because of their vulnerability and the principles of child protection. Interview topics for foster care services funders and providers included their backgrounds, the process of contracting out social services, collaborative processes among the three actors, expectations for each actor during service provision, and challenges and problems they encountered. Questions about foster parents' experiences in the government's contracting out of foster care services and foster care services they received were asked.

In addition to the data collected from in-depth interviews in 2010 and 2015, archival data, including CWI and GDC service contracts, official staff reports, and foster parents' diaries in 2018, were also reviewed. Data collected in 2018 were used to validate findings from interviews. For confidentiality reasons, we do not include a list of documents we reviewed in this study. The archival data were highly restricted. The first author shadowed social workers for a year to build trust to obtain these data. Access to these materials was permitted by the CWI, GDC, and foster parents for this research purpose.

TABLE 1 Participants information

Role in the government contracting out social services	Position	
Service funder	CWI assistant dean	
	CWI foster care office chief	
	CWI foster care office deputy chief	
	CWI foster care office supervisor 1	
	CWI foster care office supervisor 2	
	CWI foster care office supervisor 3	
	CWI foster care office supervisor 4	
	Service provider	GDC social worker 1
		GDC social worker 2
		GDC social worker 3
GDC social work intern 4		
GDC social work service office chief		
GDC social work service office deputy chief		
GDC district consultant		
Service user	Foster mother 1	
	Foster mother 2	
	Foster mother 3	
	Foster mother 4	
	Foster mother 5	

Abbreviations: CWI, child welfare institution; GDC, growth dynamics center.

Data analysis

Guided by the policy network governance framework, we conducted a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews to understand the relationships among three actors in the new government-contracted foster care services policy. Open coding was conducted first followed by developing major themes informed by the policy network governance framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, archival data were combined and coded to supplement major themes to understand the network governance among the three actors. The trustworthiness of results was enhanced by the authors' prolonged research engagement, triangulation, reflexivity, and peer debriefing (Padgett, 2016). The first author made reflective notes and discussed research findings with the research team regularly.

To understand the first condition of network governance, interdependence was examined by analyzing interviews with chief officers and directors of the CWI and GDC and foster parents, along with archival data such as CWI and GDC

service contracts and official staff reports. To examine the standardization in duties, each actor's duties outlined in written contracts were examined. Furthermore, duties written in the contracts and tasks in practice were compared to identify discrepancies. Additionally, we analyzed interviews with CWI and GDC staff members and foster parents to understand their interaction patterns. To understand whether these written tasks were executed, interviews with staff members and foster parents included questions about their experiences with other actors in delivering or receiving foster care services. To examine the actors' autonomy in this policy network, we analyzed interviews with administrators at the CWI and GDC and archival data about funding distribution, authority allocation, and supervision.

RESULTS

The network governance conditions in the government's contracting of foster care services were characterized by (a) close interdependence among actors, (b) moderate standardization in governance but nonreciprocal patterns of interactions, and (c) low to modest levels of autonomy, with strong power in the CWI but limited self-governance among the GDC and foster families, which is presented in Figure 1.

Close interdependence among actors

Interdependence based on self-interest

The GDC, CWI, and foster families relied on one another under the new policy. Their interdependence was formed at the beginning of the contracting out of foster care services. The CWI's implementation of foster care programs in Phase I and Phase II was challenging because the CWI

had a limited number of qualified staff members to run the program. However, the CWI overcame many obstacles to recruit foster families in rural areas and build group foster homes in urban areas. One challenge the CWI found was that providing qualified services for foster families required the participation of more professionals. Therefore, the CWI was eager to find professional partners who had more capacity to improve the quality of services for foster families. At the same time, the GDC, which had the capacity to provide foster care services, also wanted to collaborate with the local government to receive more financial support and grow its professional networks. Because of the mutual opportunity presented, the CWI and the GDC developed close interdependence. A deputy chief of the GDC social work service office said: *We have to participate in the government's contracting out of projects to establish connections with local resources, particularly with the local government.*

Foster parents, as service users, also needed more instrumental support, such as household items and caregiving services, and noninstrumental support, such as counseling services, particularly for foster children with disabilities. Foster parents wanted to be more integrated in the local community, which could improve their societal standing and ensure love and respect for their foster children. Their need for support and services revealed the underlying interdependence on the CWI and GDC.

In addition, foster parents were also required to report each foster child's physical, mental, and social development regularly to the CWI, as required by the employment contract. Foster parents usually communicated with the CWI staff directly, but they also expressed their challenges in raising foster children with GDC social workers during home visits. This also suggested that the foster parents, CWI, and GDC developed interdependence driven by independent self-interests.

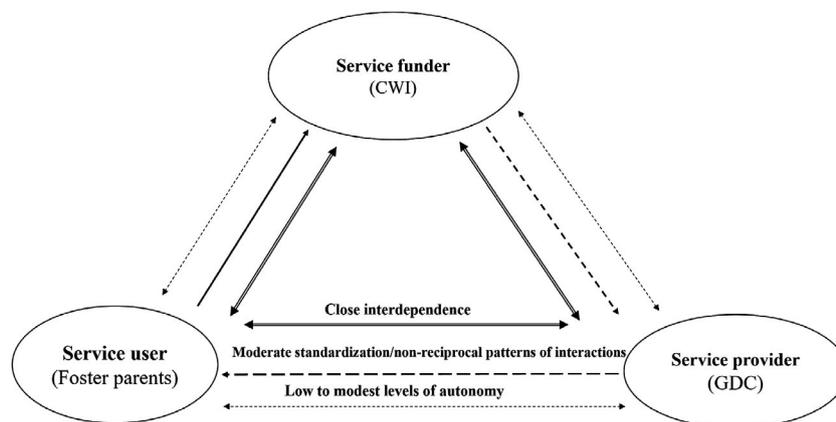


FIGURE 1 Network governance in the government for contracting out foster care services in Guangzhou, China. Arrows indicate the interaction directions between actors; the more solid and darker line indicates stronger relationships between actors. CWI, child welfare institution; GDC, growth dynamics center

Frequent exchanges of tangible and intangible resources

The other aspect of interdependence among actors was frequent exchanges of tangible and intangible resources to achieve common goals. A common goal for providers and funders was to provide professional services to foster families. Resources at the family, community, and societal levels were integrated to support foster families and meet various needs of foster children.

In the 1-year contract signed by the GDC and CWI, the GDC outlined the frequency of its services. For instance, the contract stipulated the minimum number of supervision and training services: 100 child psychological and parenting skills training sessions, 96 family visits or one-on-one sessions with foster families, 48 group supervision sessions for foster centers, 100 development training sessions for foster children, and 192 mentoring and advisory meetings for foster children. The GDC also provided social work professional development trainings for the CWI's administrative staff every 2 months to improve its workforce capacity.

As part of these resource exchanges, the CWI was expected to conduct assessments for each foster child once a month and evaluate the GDC's work regarding service delivery and outcomes, finances, and planning every 6 months. The GDC was required to submit an annual proposal and provide quarterly self-assessment reports for the CWI's approval. In addition to these formal contacts, the staffs at the CWI and GDC sought help from each other, especially when organizing activities for foster children.

These exchanges suggest that the CWI, GDC, and foster families needed one another at the beginning of the policy implementation process and gradually exchanged their resources, formally and informally, and developed close interdependence over time. This close interdependence was a fundamental prerequisite among actors in the new government policy of contracting out foster care services.

Moderate standardization in governance among actors

We identified moderate standardization in governance among actors, which included two subthemes: a moderate level of standardization in work duties and nonreciprocal patterns of interactions.

Moderate standardization in work duties

As stipulated in their contract, the CWI, GDC, and foster parents had different roles. The CWI, as the government entity that contracted out foster care services, was expected to

conduct program evaluations, supervise foster care services, coordinate community partners, and oversee the provision of quarterly funds for social workers' salaries, utilities, office space, and furniture. Compared to the contract, interviews with GDC staff members suggested that the CWI did well in administration and coordination of services but fell short in supervision and evaluation. A supervisor at CWI also expressed challenges in supervising foster care services:

Supervising foster care services is very different, and we have no idea what to follow without any guidance or working papers; we should put this part in the contract with GDC next year if we decide to continue the collaboration.

The GDC, as the services provider, was required to establish foster care services centers in selected communities and ensure the placement of at least one professional social worker in each center. These GDC social workers were expected to promote foster children's education and mental health, provide mentorship and recreational activities to foster children, and keep administrative records of their work. Interviews with GDC social workers indicated that professionalism was considered a priority because they believed that professional services ensured the quality of foster care. In summary, the GDC met its professional expectations written in the contract.

Nonreciprocal patterns of interactions

Staff members at the GDC were required to provide feedback to the CWI to inform the CWI's decision- and policy-making process. However, the interaction between the CWI and GDC was not transparent due to a lack of standardized healthy interaction patterns. Because the CWI had more authority, it did not engage GDC social workers in the professional decision-making process. In addition, GDC social workers only attended policy meetings when required by the CWI. Similarly, although the GDC was expected to report information to the CWI regularly, it typically shared only what the CWI wanted to know. As a result, many problems, such as resistance among foster parents or children to professional services and GDC social workers, were undisclosed to the CWI. Similarly, the GDC ultimately did not balk against the CWI's decisions regarding the scope and direction of the GDC's practice. When opinions differed, the CWI made the final decision because it was at the top of the hierarchy. The structural inequities in power between agents limited the sharing of knowledge and resultant problem-solving approaches.

As part of this pilot, foster parents were expected to report on children's physical, mental, and social development to the CWI regularly. However, they sometimes worked with GDC social workers only because the CWI stipulated in their

contract that this was required. Foster parents did not trust the GDC social workers throughout the program; thus, they did not reach out to them for help. Instead, foster parents viewed GDC social workers as overseers hired by the CWI to monitor them. For example, if children had difficulties in school or community, foster parents would not report these problems to the GDC social workers. However, foster parents sometimes would proactively reach out to the GDC in the hope of extending the time in foster care if their foster children were going to be adopted because they saw the GDC as an advocate for them. Overall, however, foster parents still preferred to reach out to the CWI because it had the power to make decisions.

In summary, the contract among the CWI, GDC, and foster parents clearly outlined each actor's duties, indicating that they had a moderate level of standardization in work duties, although more detailed guidelines for foster care programs are needed. However, interaction patterns among three actors were nonreciprocal. Hypothetically, the CWI and GDC should have an equal and transparent discourse and should engage each other in important decision-making. Foster parents should trust professional service providers (i.e., GDC social workers) and seek help from them proactively. However, because of the unbalanced power relationship between the CWI and GDC, and the GDC's uneven professional image, foster parents trusted the CWI more.

Standardizing written duties of each actor is not difficult; however, developing reciprocal interaction patterns among actors is more critical to network governance, which has not been achieved in this foster care services network.

Low to modest autonomy with limited self-governance

To determine the autonomy of the parties involved, their unique assets and areas of specialization were examined. To have autonomy, each actor needs to have a specific area of expertise (i.e., unique assets). These unique assets are the foundation of independence and autonomy between actors. Hypothetically, the three actors in this study had high levels of autonomy as independent units, but this was not entirely the case in practice.

CWI's strong power but limited capacity in providing professional services

The CWI, a government entity, limited the autonomy of other actors in the policy network because of its assigned power. However, the CWI itself was not fully autonomous. As a government entity in the policy network, the CWI was powerful enough to coordinate contracts with the GDC efficiently

and develop policies effectively. Yet the CWI was pushed by the local government to respond to its requests but often could not meet its expectations due to the CWI's limited capacity to provide foster care services. For example, the CWI was pushed by the local government to be a supervisor and take responsibility for the entire foster care process, including parent recruitment and foster children placement, despite the CWI's lack of capacity to handle these tasks.

Limited self-governance among the gdc and foster families

At the beginning of this study, GDC staff members declined to be interviewed by researchers and later said that they would only accept interviews with the CWI's permission and presence. This suggested that the GDC had less autonomy to make decisions, which again indicated that NGOs did not have the same autonomy and power as the government entity in this policy network. NGOs' opportunities to participate in public services are the result of the devolution of governmental responsibilities. In other words, the scope of the GDC's autonomy depended on the extent to which the CWI's responsibilities were transferred.

As the implementation of foster care services progressed, the CWI relinquished some of its power and authorized the GDC to design collaborative approaches and draft supplementary contracts, which could be an indication that the GDC's autonomy was developing. Additionally, the GDC trained staff members from the CWI to improve professional services and helped establish networks with schools and rehabilitation centers for foster families, whereas the CWI provided adequate funds and implemented policies effectively to help the GDC develop its self-governance capacity. Through these exchanges, the GDC's assets in professional skills increased the autonomy of the GDC. However, the bidding process in social services made service providers such as the GDC wary and fearful of the CWI's authority. The GDC district consultant said,

We are exhausted from attempting to meet the standards and criteria specified in the contract, and are in survival mode since we don't have more power to make effective changes. We are struggling in this relationship with the CWI.

Regarding foster parents' autonomy, foster parents also initially declined to be interviewed until they received permission from the CWI. However, foster parents said they would have much more to contribute to the program because they knew more about their children's specific needs. As a result, they expressed their wish to have higher levels of autonomy in informal and formal meetings. They showed their interest in having

their own community leader in the local foster parents' groups. A foster mother said:

We would like to seek help from our neighbors instead of social workers if we can. We hope to have our own group and our own leader, similar to what we did in our community volunteer groups.

As a result, the CWI authorized some foster parents to manage a family foster care center in a rural village, but the initiative failed partially due to foster parents' limited management capacities. However, there was a consensus that it would be better if foster parents could have more self-governance coupled with social workers' professional support.

The autonomy of actors in this network was low to modest, and the GDC and foster parents had yet to achieve self-governance. However, the government entity, the CWI, realized the importance of the autonomy of the other actors and explored approaches to improve autonomy, though it was not ultimately effective.

DISCUSSION

This case study revealed that the network governance in the new government policy of contracting out foster care services was partially achieved in interdependence among the three actors. However, there was a moderate level of standardization, nonreciprocal patterns of interactions, and low to modest levels of autonomy, with limited self-governance among actors.

The moderate level of standardization and nonreciprocal patterns of interactions reflect typical features of China's centralized political structure. To develop collaborative governance, various actors should use their expertise to work together (Newman et al., 2004). However, the mix of market competition and administrative hierarchy in the government's contracting out of services is an obstacle. The local government's and foster parents' understanding of social work strongly affected the NGOs' service provision. Given this limited professional recognition, social workers had fewer chances to demonstrate their profession's goals and strengths, which contributed to distrustful relationships between foster parents and social workers. These structures and relationships led to the current nonreciprocal patterns of interactions among the three actors. For example, the CWI only measured service outcomes by setting strict indexes in service contracts without any professional service evaluation and supervision system building. On the other hand, foster parents resisted seeking help from GDC social workers because of the current low social recognition and professional identity of social work in mainland China (Ornellas et al., 2019).

The low to modest levels of autonomy in network governance in this study may also be due to the well-rooted centralized social welfare model in China. The government's contracting out of services is an example of decentralization, but there are still many problems associated with the transformation of the welfare system. The most important elements in social services, such as human resources and funding, are still controlled by all levels of government. The development of NGOs is constrained by their limited self-sufficiency and high reliance on the government's authority. Although the transformation of the government aims to create a decentralized welfare system with a higher level of societal involvement, perceptions of a strong and powerful government are rooted in Chinese society, including among service funders, providers, and users. The government is willing to share responsibilities but not redistribute power to society, which explains the limited self-governance among the GDC and foster families.

The unequal relationship may also be due to the Chinese government's capacity deficit in network governance. As China deinstitutionalizes its social welfare service delivery at the policy level, integrating professionals, NGOs, and social service users into the current sociopolitical network through the government's contracting out of services might not be easily achieved. Ideally, NGOs, families, and communities should jointly share the responsibility of implementing services in a broader network. The government, with a good capacity of governance, should be a regulator of welfare services, a funder of social services, and a facilitator of other sectors in the network. NGOs communicate and coordinate services with the government and other actors. For countries with a well-developed civil society and a small government, the improvement of governance capacity means that the government cooperates with different actors to supply public services and monitor services and organizations when needed. However, the Chinese local government and residents are unaware of and don't recognize NGOs' services, whereas NGOs are busy meeting the government's administrative requirements in fixed contracts without much freedom to collaborate with other actors in China (Ornellas et al., 2019). Thus, for governments under a centralized political system in China, it is essential to cultivate and enhance NGOs' capabilities and involve more capable actors into the network with clearly defined governance rules, which requires a higher capacity for network governance.

Limitations

This case study provided an in-depth understanding of network governance among actors involved in the government's contracting out of foster care services. However, this case study also has limitations. The first limitation is our limited

access to data because government-contracted services in Guangzhou are relatively restricted. To build trust, researchers spent months doing internships and volunteer work at the GDC, CWI, and Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau. When we received permission to contact primary actors, particularly foster parents in the policy network, we collected as much information as possible to enrich the data. However, more data are still needed to further explain the network governance among actors. Due to restrictive regulations, this study is also limited by delayed research dissemination. Furthermore, we relied on self-report data, which may introduce social desirability bias. Finally, results of this study are based on a foster care services case in Guangzhou with 19 participants and they may not be generalizable to other programs or populations across China.

Implications for research

Future research about network governance in Guangzhou can be advanced from three perspectives. First, future studies could use quantitative methods to measure the network governance level among actors in foster care services and understand factors associated with a high or low level of network governance. Second, it would be interesting to use multiple network governance cases to understand what network governance patterns in which conditions could achieve well-functioning network governance and provide more generalizable recommendations for the government and NGOs. A third avenue of research would be to examine the relationship between this network governance model and foster children's outcomes and foster parents' experiences.

Implications for practice

The new policy of government-contracted foster care services continues to develop the network governance among various actors. Findings of low to modest levels of autonomy and low standardization and nonreciprocal patterns of interactions point to the issue of having a centralized government and underdeveloped NGOs and inform our recommendations for contracting out of social services. The first recommendation is that NGOs should improve their autonomy and self-sufficient capacity to take on the role of resource mobilization, service provision, society governance, and policy advocacy. When exploring new models of a public-private relationship, social work professionals in NGOs could develop a more effective collaboration model because they have the capacity to link their assets with resources from society. In addition to professional capacity building, the self-governance capacity of social organizations should receive more attention when contracting out social services. More

specifically, we recommend that NGOs and social workers who work in these NGOs improve their professional skills. With improved social service skills and recognized service effectiveness, NGOs are more likely to influence policymakers (i.e., the government) and gain more trust from foster parents to ensure reciprocal patterns of interactions.

For the government as a service funder, we stress the importance of strengthening its governance capacity by involving more capable actors to establish a comprehensive foster care service system in China. The government should improve its governance capacity by emphasizing the cultivation of social organizations; defining the functions, rights, and responsibilities of NGOs; and clearing boundaries, which will create more room for NGO development. When organizing contracting-out procedures, the local government as a service funder should promote the vitality and competitiveness of market factors, make more resources available, and allocate resources more reasonably. Because home-based foster care services are strongly connected with child services in schools and communities, these services in collaboration with the child welfare system should be implemented simultaneously. That is, NGOs should be encouraged to collaborate with more actors across systems.

In addition, service providers should engage foster parents and children in the decision-making process because the distrust of social workers is a longstanding issue in foster care services. However, the distrust of social workers in China is different than that in many Western countries. This distrust in China is due to a lack of understanding of the scope of social work because it is a new profession in China (Wu et al., 2016). In addition, many young social workers in child welfare do not have parenting experiences, so foster parents might not trust young social workers in terms of parenting or nurturing recommendations. Although parenting may come naturally to foster parents, positive parenting requires training and skills (Pickering & Sanders, 2016). If foster parents distrust social workers and decline assistance with building skills and improving their capacity for their work, the well-being of foster children would be affected directly. Thus, to obtain the trust of clients, we recommend that social work professionals improve the quality of their professional services and establish their professional authority.

Last, we recommend that foster parents have more patience and confidence in child welfare workers. Because providing services to foster care families by social workers is still at an early stage (Xu et al., 2020), foster parents should give more time to child welfare workers to grow their professional skills. Meanwhile, social work educators should integrate more child welfare education in the curriculum, and social work researchers should produce more evidence to support child welfare workers' practice. Once child welfare workers build their professional reputation, they can better contribute to governance in the foster care services policy network.

CONCLUSION

We examined how foster care social services are delivered in a new policy network through this case study. The contracting out of foster care services in China has been strongly encouraged by the government, but not all actors are collaborating efficiently. There are standardized work duties to be formed, reciprocal interaction patterns to be built, and actors' self-management to be encouraged. Specifically, the government's capacity in network governance at all levels should be improved in this centralized sociopolitical context. NGOs should have an opportunity to reach a high level of autonomy to mobilize resources, offer professional services, and advocate for changes to social policies. On this basis, developing a quasi-equal partnership is a sustainable way for actors such as NGOs and service users to collaborate with the government. This partnership should aim to form interdependent, standardized, and autonomous network governance in the contracting out of social services.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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