Development of Social Work Supervision in China: Mapping the Key Issues and Four Future Trajectories

Hou Ming[1]*, Mohammad Reevany Bustami[1]
[1]Dcentre for Policy Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: Hou Ming (houming@student.usm.my)

ABSTRACT

This study aims to review the problems and challenges faced in the development of social work supervision in Mainland China. A literature review was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines, utilizing four databases (PubMed, CNKI, SCOPUS, and WOS), and included 46 articles. Using thematic analysis, key themes were extracted from the research findings, focusing on the problems and challenges of an underdeveloped supervision system, role confusion, professional constraints, and cultural sensitivity in China's social work supervision system. This literature review emphasizes the necessity for the development of social work supervision in China, summarizes the problems and challenges faced, and proposes localized solutions. It also suggests future research directions for supervision in Mainland China.

Keywords: China, Social work, Supervision, Literature review

1. Introduction

Social work supervision is an indispensable important part of the development of professional social work and a core element in the construction of the social work talent team (Ioakimidis et al., 2022; Kaszynski, 2024). According to data released by the Central Society Work Department, by the end of 2023, a total of 1.161 million people had obtained the professional qualification certificate for social workers in China, and the number of people who registered for the national social worker professional qualification examination in 2024 reached 1.889 million, an increase of 26% over 2023 (Feng, 2024). However, the development of social work supervision, which provides professional growth and support services for social workers, is facing huge challenges, and the effectiveness of social work supervision has seriously constrained the high-quality development of the social work industry (X. Li et al., 2015; Zhao & Zhang, 2021). Therefore, exploring the problems and challenges of social work supervision development in China and accelerating the in-depth development of social work supervision practice and research is of great significance for promoting the development of the social work industry.

The guidelines for social work supervision have clarified and expanded the roles and responsibilities of social work supervisors, providing a basis for them to promote the development of the profession. This literature review aims to systematically explore the practice of social work supervision in China from the following aspects: (a) investigating the localization and contextualization of the social work supervision system in Mainland China; (b) summarizing the issues and intervention strategies in the process of social work supervision; and (c) identifying the research gaps that future studies on social work supervision in China can address.

The Central Organization Department and 18 other departments jointly issued the *Medium- and Long-term Plan for the Development of Social Work Professional Talent (2011-2020)*, which emphasized the goal of cultivating a group of social work supervisors who are proficient in professional supervision methods and techniques, possess extensive practical experience, are skilled at solving complex professional problems, and can foster the growth of social work service talents while advancing professional practice. These social work supervisors are expected to promote the growth of social work service talents and drive the development of professional practices. However, the concept of social work supervision remained just a theoretical notion.

It was not until 2021 that social work supervision was clearly defined as a process in which senior social workers supervise, train, and guide social work practitioners to carry out professional services scientifically, effectively fulfill their responsibilities, safeguard the rights and interests of service recipients, achieve professional growth, and promote the development of the industry. The content of supervision encompasses administrative supervision, educational supervision, and supportive supervision, including but not limited to guidance on work responsibilities, reinforcement of professional values, teaching of professional theories, stress relief, and emotional support (MCA, 2021).

Nevertheless, there are still gaps or blank spots in the standardization that is suitable for different regions. Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategies that local governments or industry associations should take to improve the social work supervision system, the ways to resolve the difficulties in the development of social work supervision, and the areas that need further research in the development of social work supervision.

2.Methods

2.1. Search strategy

This literature review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for literature reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). We reviewed the literature from January 1, 2009 to September 15, 2024 to evaluate the effectiveness of social work supervision development in promoting the industry's progress in China. The studies we included provide insights into the development of social work supervision across different regions in China and examine issues related to supervisory development.

We used specific keywords, such as China OR Mainland OR Chinese AND social work AND supervision OR supervisor to search for relevant articles on social work supervision in Mainland China in four databases: PubMed, CNKI, SCOPUS, and WOS. Additionally, to examine social work supervision policies across China, we searched websites of organizations such as local civil affairs departments and regional social work associations involved in the development of social work.

2.2. Selection criteria

2.2.1. Inclusion criteria

To ensure the validity of the research data, the inclusion criteria were set as follows: the study content must focus on the issues and challenges in the development of social work supervision in Mainland China. Given that the research question specifically targets Mainland China, research papers published in Chinese on CNKI were also included in the scope of this study.

2.2.2 Exclusion criteria

To ensure the authority of the research results, studies were excluded if their content did not directly focus on the development issues of social work supervision in Mainland China, if they were non-research articles published in domestic journals or newspapers, or if they were master's theses. Articles that conducted literature reviews of the literature were also excluded. It is important to note that no literature reviews on social work supervision in Mainland China were found in this search.

3. Results

Our initial literature search yielded 297 papers. Of these, 145 were excluded because they were unrelated to social work supervision in China. For example, some articles discussed the development of organizational management scales, mentioning social work management but not addressing issues and challenges related to social work supervision. Additionally, some papers studied the development and challenges of social work supervision, and although their findings were widely recognized, they focused on regions outside Mainland China, such as other countries or Hong Kong, and thus were also excluded. We excluded 33 articles because although they discussed the development issues and challenges of social work supervision in China, they were mostly based on the personal subjective opinions of the researchers and lacked relevant empirical evidence. For example, the five-dimensional model of cultivating indigenous social work supervisors published in the journal China Social Work is a simple summary of the experience of cultivating indigenous social work supervisors. In order to ensure the accuracy of the data, the maturity and originality of the perspectives, we also excluded 53 master's theses on the development of social work supervision in China. Ultimately, 46 articles met our inclusion criteria (Figure 1). In highlighting the findings, these are the key conceptual issues uncovered from the data:

Figure 1. Review process of articles for inclusion in systematic review (PRISMA flowchart).
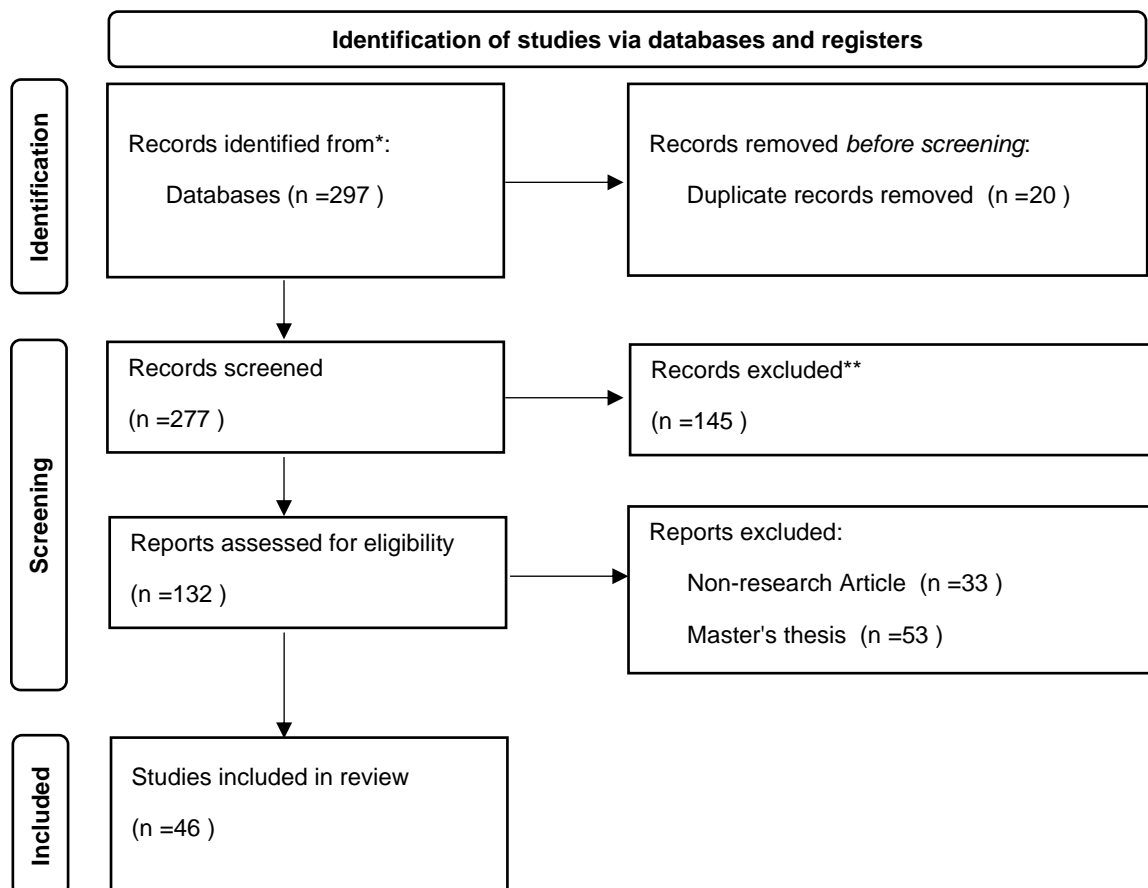
3.1. Conceptual Issue #1: Unbalance policy

This is mainly reflected in the fact that in most provinces and municipalities, policies have only been formulated in certain regions, but there are internal incompleteness and insufficient implementation problems, which makes the implementation of supervision and guidance services arbitrary (Liu, 2020). Meanwhile the government's overall support for this issue is weak (Liu & Xiao, 2017). Secondly, the flexibility and adaptability of some supervision and guidance systems are weak. For example, in 2007, Shenzhen formed the initial framework of China's social work supervision and guidance system by purchasing Hong Kong supervision services. However, due to limited flexibility and adaptability, this model has not been widely adopted in other cities, highlighting regional policy differences(X. Li et al., 2015).

At the same time, the supervision and guidance system lacks comprehensiveness. This mainly reflects in the lack of quality standards for supervision and guidance services, and the lack of an incentive mechanism for the construction of supervision and guidance talent teams (Jiang & Pu, 2024; X. Li et al., 2015; Liu, 2020).

3.2. Conceptual Issue #2：Role confusion

The role positioning is fuzzy, and the problems of administration and bureaucracy weaken the professional role (Chung, 2022; X. Li & Zhang, 2018; F. Wang & Wang, 2019; Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Although the *Guidelines for Social Work Supervision* have been released, the role of social work supervision in China is still vague and lacks a unified definition and standard. As a result, different institutions and fields have different expectations and requirements for supervision, which makes the role positioning of supervision in actual operation ambiguous and easy to cause confusion. For example, sometimes supervisors are seen as administrators, and sometimes as mentors or consultants (Yang & Yang, 2019). In social work organizations, supervisors often assume the responsibilities of managers, but they walk between consultants and administrative managers, and their roles are ambiguous, which affects their professionalism(Mo et al., 2019). The role of college teacher supervision is also ambiguous in teaching and practical education. They are not only theoretical teachers, but also take on practical guidance, which leads to unclear role positioning and affects the practical effect of supervision(Sun, 2016; Y. Wang & Zhu, 2021). Especially when the supervisory role is played by government officials, the problem of role conflict is more obvious. In the current study, this phenomenon is not uncommon.

3.3. Conceptual Issue #3：Professional development

From the analysis of research papers, external supervisors, college teachers' supervisors, local supervisors, and government officials all face the problem of lame in the process of carrying out professional services. External supervisors mainly face the use of tools and ethical problems in the supervision process. Since many supervision projects are far away, supervisors often need to spend a lot of time on the journey, so many external supervisors choose to use network tools such as Wechat and QQ to carry out supervision work, and the process of data transmission involves ethical problems such as privacy and confidentiality of service objects(Mo & O' Donoghue, 2020; Y. Wang & Zhu, 2021). At the same time, due to the lack of practical participation of external supervisors, they do not have a deep understanding of the operation and details of the project, which further leads to their professional guidance is difficult to meet the actual needs, and the effect is limited(X. Li et al., 2015).

Although college teacher supervision has profound accumulation in theory, it often lacks sufficient practical experience. For example, in Xiamen, social workers have reported that their supervisors are

mostly college professors, who provide guidance in theory but often lack practical guidance on specific case scenarios(Mo, 2019). Second, there are issues of task orientation and ethics. Many university faculty supervisors require students to complete specified tasks, however, these tasks may not be consistent with the actual work requirements of the social work internship, increase the pressure of the intern, and may not be ethically consistent with the core principles of social work(An et al., 2017; Zheng & Zhou, 2020).

Local supervision is the main force of social work supervision in China, but it faces more problems, such as: the lack of attention to the professional role of supervision within social work organizations, especially in terms of resource allocation and professional support. For example, organizations may not provide sufficient time and resources for supervisors to focus on providing professional guidance, making it difficult to provide high-quality professional guidance(Chen et al., 2018). Many supervisors do not receive adequate professional training before taking on supervisory roles, especially when faced with complex cases and cross-cultural situations. For example, In the Shenzhen pilot project, inadequate training of supervisors led to inadequate response to some emerging problems in the actual supervision process(Mo, 2016). In Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province, due to the lack of experienced internal supervision, young social workers mainly rely on external support, but the frequency and depth of such support is often insufficient(Mo, 2019). It can be seen that local supervisors must find a balance between satisfying the requirements of the government and the unit they work for and adhering to the professional principles of social work, which leads to possible conflicts in the professional guidance process.

Government officials acting as professional supervisors mainly comply with the authority and monopoly of their units. According to the "Guide to Social Work Supervision", in terms of professional practice, professional background and theoretical knowledge reserve, they do not meet the requirements of supervision. Only through limited short-term training to quickly supplement, it is difficult to make them truly understand the core concept and practice of social work(Chung, 2022).

3.4. Conceptual Issue #4：Cultural sensitivity

An external consultant (such as a Hong Kong consultant or an American consultant) may possess a higher level of professional expertise, but they may face difficulties in adapting to China's specific social and cultural contexts. For example, some Hong Kong consultants may lack understanding of the administrative procedures and cultural habits in cities such as Shenzhen, which may result in unrealistic recommendations when guiding local social workers(X. Li et al., 2015; Zhao & Zhang, 2021). Inadequate cultural adaptation may lead to language misunderstandings or misinterpretations of local customs, ultimately affecting the effectiveness of the supervision. Due to the significant cultural and social customs differences across China, supervisors face challenges in cross-cultural communication and adaptation when conducting supervision across regions. For example, there are differences in language use and communication styles between Hong Kong consultants and mainland social workers, which may lead to misinterpretations of certain specific expressions or local customs during remote supervision(Mo, 2021). Early Chinese on-site supervisors also encountered poor supervisory effects due to cultural sensitivity issues when participating in cross-provincial project supervision.

Chinese local supervisors are deeply influenced by traditional cultural background in the application of professional technology, and are conservative or not direct enough in providing constructive feedback, which affects the effectiveness of technology. For example, supervisors may be reluctant to openly criticize the mistakes of some social workers because of the *Mian zi* culture or *Guan xi*, which will affect social workers' deep understanding and improvement of their own problems(F.

Wang & Wang, 2019). College supervisors are reluctant to expose their weaknesses because of "face", or they are too modest and conservative in group discussions, thus limiting the equality of supervisors(Chung, 2022).

4. Discussion

Supervision is an important part of the development of social work, and research on social work supervision in various countries around the world has become a common phenomenon. However, due to the political color and localization orientation of the definition of social work by the Chinese government, the development of the social work industry in China has been relatively slow, and the total number of scholars studying the development of social work supervision in China is relatively small. In this literature review, our goal is to critically examine the system of social work supervision in China, the construction of the talent team, and the difficulties in the supervision process. Although the social work supervision in China is influenced by politics and culture in a diversified way, our research has sorted out the common problems in the current development state.

4.1. Future Trajectory #1: The Authority and Applicability of Social Work Supervision System

Based on existing research, the industry standards established by the NASW and the AASW have significantly promoted the development of social work supervision, holding a high level of authority. However, the impact of the industry standard *Social Work Supervision Guide* issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, on the development of social work supervision in China remains debatable.

First, the guideline was officially released in 2021, 15 years after the inception of social work in China (2006), offering limited guidance for regions where social work is relatively mature, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which already have well-established social work supervision systems. However, due to geographical, political, and economic factors, the local supervision system's scalability is weak.

Second, the government's understanding of the social work varies considerably, leading to limited funding for professional development. Taking Shandong as an example, Mo (2021) mentioned in the paper that Shandong has established a relatively complete social work system and attaches great importance to supervision. However, it is also mentioned that the government does not pay enough attention to social work supervision and lacks clear policies and financial support, which leads to the reluctance of social work organizations to invest funds in training supervision (Mo, 2019).

Therefore, considering political system and cultural background, the government's perception of the social work profession determines the authority and applicability of local supervision systems. It is recommended that local governments establish unified standards and policies for social work supervision to ensure consistency and comparability across different regions, thereby enhancing professional standards and service quality. Additionally, increasing financial investment and providing resource support for social work supervision would promote the implementation and expansion of external supervision models.

4.2. Future Trajectory #2：Role clarification

Research literature indicates that only a few cities have established relatively standard social work supervision certification systems, but their adaptability is insufficient, limiting the system's replicability(D. Li, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to establish a more comprehensive local

certification system, specifying requirements for the professional background and practical experience of supervisors. By defining clear roles and responsibilities, we can ensure that supervisors can achieve a balance between administrative management and professional guidance. Clarifying the role of supervisors helps them better understand their professional values and role definition.

4.3. Future Trajectory #3：Systematic professional development training system

Therefore, it is particularly crucial to promote the localization process of social work supervision and construct a systematic supervision training system.

Firstly, a continuous training mechanism for supervisors should be established, offering customized training courses based on the specific needs of different regions and stages of development. Additionally, supervisors should be encouraged to engage in international exchanges and learning opportunities to absorb and draw on advanced supervision experiences from abroad.

Secondly, it is crucial to foster collaboration between universities and social work agencies to ensure that social work education is closely linked to the actual supervision system. In higher education, in particular, the design and implementation of practical courses should be strengthened. For example, a practice-mentor system could be introduced, where experienced supervisors collaborate with universities to jointly design and implement practical social work courses. This approach aims to cultivate supervisory talent with both a solid theoretical foundation and practical experience(Mo & O' Donoghue, 2020).

4.4. Future Trajectory #4：Culturally sensitive and localized services

As social work is still rapidly developing in mainland China, there are differences in working methods and values among social workers from different regions and cultural backgrounds. The cultural sensitivity in social work supervision involves two main aspects:
  i.   Sensitivity to China's Regional Cultural Diversity: Social workers must be aware of the diverse cultural contexts across China.
  ii.   Sensitivity to Traditional Chinese Cultural Contexts: Concepts like "guanxi" (relationships) and "mianzi" (face) are central in traditional Chinese culture and must be navigated carefully.

In initiatives like the "Double Hundred Plan," traditional social work supervision methods might not meet the actual needs of communities in regions like Guangdong's eastern, western, and northern areas. This requires developing culturally sensitive supervision models. To address this cultural challenge, supervisors should conduct field visits to the supervisees' communities to gain a deeper understanding of the local cultural context and needs. This would help develop social work supervision standards and methods that are locally tailored.

In Chinese culture, significant emphasis is placed on collectivism, *Guan xi*, and *Mian zi* which can limit the effectiveness of supervision. For instance, many students feel that their supervisors are reluctant to answer questions or engage in in-depth discussions. This might be due to a desire among supervisors to maintain authority and avoid appearing ignorant or weak in front of students(An et al., 2017). Such cultural factors lead to one-way communication and barriers in the supervisory relationship. In the face of these challenges, social work supervisors often adopt a more indirect and gentle feedback style, necessitating strong communication skills, the ability to use appropriate techniques, and a deep understanding of cross-cultural contexts.

In the international social work literature, social work supervision is a crucial tool for professional development, providing educational, supportive, and administrative functions(Kaszynski, 2024). Supervision in social work is understood as a means to maintain ethical practice standards, support the professional growth of social workers, and ensure accountability to clients and organizations. The development of supervision in China, however, is unique in its contextual challenges, such as government influence and regional diversity, echoing themes of localization and cultural sensitivity.

China's evolving model of supervision aligns with the global movement towards culturally competent and contextually relevant supervision practices. This has implications for both policy and practice, suggesting that social work supervision in China will benefit from blending Western models with local adaptations that respect cultural values like *guan xi* and the hierarchical nature of Chinese social systems.

In summary, the study advocates for a structured, culturally sensitive approach to social work supervision in China, consistent with international calls for both standardized and localized supervision frameworks. The suggested future directions emphasize the importance of adapting global supervision theories to the Chinese context, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on culturally adaptive and effective social work practices.

Critical theory provides a lens for examining the influence of governmental power and control within supervision, particularly in contexts like China, where social work is intertwined with state goals. This theory encourages a critical examination of how power dynamics and institutional structures affect social work, allowing for a deeper understanding of the constraints and opportunities supervisors face. For instance, supervision may be used to align social work with governmental agendas, impacting the autonomy of practice and shaping professional values in ways that can constrain critical reflection and innovation.

5. Limitations

This review has certain limitations. Due to constraints on article length, it did not delve into the impact of the social work supervision talent structure in mainland China on current issues; future research could focus on this area. Additionally, since most of the included studies center around developed coastal cities or areas near the coast in China, future research should further examine the supervisory systems and development challenges in other regions of mainland China to better reflect the developmental disparities and unique characteristics of social work supervision across the entire country.

6. Conclusions

This literature review comprehensively examines the issues and challenges faced in the development of social work supervision in Mainland China, including the flexibility and adaptability of the supervisory system, role positioning in the supervision process, as well as professional skills and cultural sensitivity issues. A development model for supervision that integrates government-led participation, training incentives, and localized services is proposed. The study reveals the challenges in the interaction process between the government, social work agencies, supervisors, and social workers, emphasizing the necessity of focusing on social work supervision, institutional systems, systematic training, professional pathways, and cultural adaptation in promoting the development of supervision. It is recommended that the Central Society Work Department and the society work departments of various provincial and cities further clarify the role of social work supervision at the strategic level of social work development. Additionally, it is suggested to promote collaboration

between universities, industry associations, and social work agencies to cultivate a high-quality pool of social work supervisors, further advancing the professionalization and specialization of social work development.

References

An, Q., Wu, S., Chapman, M. V., & Wu, Q. (2017). Culture and context in Chinese field supervision: A case study from Shanghai. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 27(1), 13–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/02185385.2016.1275981

Chen, Q., Wu, L., & Peng, T. (2018). Exploring gaps between MSW students' experiences and expectations of field supervision in a Chinese setting. *Social Work Education*, 37(2), 265–276. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1395406

Chung, Y. K. P. (2022). An action research exploring how to promote supervisor-trainees' reflective competence in Guangdong, China. *China Journal of Social Work*, 15(1), 48–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/17525098.2020.1829792

Feng, J. (2024). *The number of applicants for the national vocational qualification Examination for Social workers in 2024 will reach 1.889 million.* https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6957562.htm

Ioakimidis, V., Maragkozakis, A., Mourati, F., Papadopoulou, E., Papazoglou, A., Psyrraki, M.-A., Rizopoulou, L., & Teloni, D.-D. (2022). Rethinking social work supervision: Is a 'radical supervision' model possible? *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 10(3), 405–421. https://doi.org/10.1332/204986021X16566760442407

Jiang, P., & Pu, G. (2024). Role practice of township social work station supervisor. *Journal of Huaihua University*, 1, 46–51.

Kaszynski, H. (2024). Social work supervision. Toward a mindfulness perspective on trauma. *Praca Socjalna*, 39(1), 29–44. https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0054.4906

Li, D. (2017). A Brief Analysis of the Role of Social Work Supervision: A Case Study of Shenzhen. *Exploration of Intellectual Resources*, 14, 43–44.

Li, X., Huang, Q., & Ma, R. (2015). The historical evolution and experience of social work supervision: A case study of the practice of social work supervision in the United States and Shenzhen, China. *Social Work and Management*, 15(6), 12–17.

Li, X., & Zhang, R. (2018). The existing problems of social work supervision in Chengdu and their solutions. *Society and Public Welfare*, 6, 77–80.

Liu, Y. (2020). Zhengzhou: Local practice and reflection of social work supervisors. *Regional Governance*, 2, 25–29.

Liu, Y., & Xiao, X. (2017). The localization analysis of Xiamen social work supervision talent team construction. *Journal of Taiyuan City Vocational and Technical College*, 11, 25–26.

MCA. (2021). *Guidelines for Social work supervision* (No. MZ/T 166-2021).

Mo, Y. H. (2016). In Search of a Professional Supervisory Practice: External Social Work Supervision in China. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 10(3), 349–357. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1111/aswp.12103

Mo, Y. H. (2019). An exploration of social work supervision in Mainland China. *China Journal of Social Work*, 12(1), 70–89. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1080/17525098.2019.1622192

Mo, Y. H. (2021). In Search of a Cyber Supervision Process: From the Perspective of Social Work Supervisees in Mainland China. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 18(1), 71–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2020.1805383

Mo, Y. H., Leung, T. L., & Tsui, M. S. (2019). Chaos in order: The evolution of social work supervision practice in the Chinese Mainland. *Clinical Supervisor*, 38(2), 345–365. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2019.1610681

Mo, Y. H., & O' Donoghue, K. (2020). A snapshot of cyber supervision in Mainland China. *Qualitative Social Work*, *19*(4), 612–629. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325019836714

Sun, Y. (2016). *Co-construction and sharing: Discussion on the win-win supervision mode of social work professional internship*. 305–313.

Wang, F., & Wang, M. (2019). Goal deviation and functional regression of local social work supervision practice: Based on the empirical study of S City. *Study and Practice*, *9*, 91–99.

Wang, Y., & Zhu, Y. (2021). Research on the Development Path of Social Work Supervision in the Pearl River Delta Region: Based on the Data Analysis of CSWLS (2019). *Social Welfare (Theoretical Version)*, *11*, 52–58.

Yang, H., & Yang, S. (2019). Institutionalization and Non-institutionalization: A comparative study of Social Work supervision modes in our country. *Journal of Minzu University of China (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, *46*(3), 41–49.

Zhang, J., & Zhang, X. (2021). *Study on social work supervision mechanism towards quality collaboration*. *24*, 110–113.

Zhao, W., & Zhang, H. (2021). Typical experience and paradigm differences of social work supervision in China. *Qinghai Social Sciences*, *5*, 106–112.

Zheng, G., & Zhou, Y. (2020). Specialization and administration: The transformation of internship supervision relationship from cooperation to conflict. *Journal of Social Work*, *3*, 61–72.