

# Psy Fever/Psycho-Boom: The Mental Picture of a Transforming China

## “心理热”：转型中国的心灵图景

An Mengzhu  
Yunnan University, China

### Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there is a boom of popular participation in psychotherapy and training in urban China, which has attracted the attention of anthropologists who called this phenomenon a “psycho-boom” or “psy fever.” This article is a review of anthropological studies on this issue and discusses how psychotherapeutic knowledge and practice with western origin has been indigenized by Chinese psychotherapists as well as the emergence of a new form of self in this psycho-boom. Critical anthropologists tend to emphasize the connection between this psy fever and governmentality. This article shows the insights and blind spots of this perspective, calling for attention to the heterogeneity and agency of participants in this psy fever as well as the potentiality of psychotherapy as both expression and intervention for sufferings in the context of drastic social transformation.

**Keywords:** psycho-boom/psy fever, psychotherapy, agency, governmentality, self

### 摘要

进入21世纪以来，在中国的城市居民中间出现了一股参与心理治疗和心理培训的热潮。这一现象引起了人类学家的关注，后者将这一现象称为“心理热”（psycho-boom/psy fever）。本文回顾了人类学对这一问题的研究，探讨了中国的心理治疗师如何将源自西方的心理治疗知识和实践“本土化”，以及一种新型的自我在这场“心理热”之中的浮现。批判取向的人类学家倾向于强调这种心理热与治理术之间的关系。本文展示了这一观点的洞见与盲点所在，呼吁关注“心理热”参与者的异质性和能动性，以及在社会急剧转型的背景下，心理治疗作为表达和干预痛苦的潜力。

**关键词:** 心理热, 心理治疗, 能动性, 治理术, 自我

In 2004, CCTV launched a TV program called “Psychological Interview.” As regular guests of this program, psychologists Zixun Li and Fengchi Yang drew on their professional knowledge to listen to and analyze the help-seekers’ troubles and struggles in the workplace, on campus, and within the domestic space. Today, the show seems to be a bit old-fashioned, yet back then, it garnered extremely high ratings in its premiering year. At that time, “psychological counselor” (*xinli zixunshi*) had just been recognized as

<sup>1</sup> Later renamed as the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security in the year 2008.

a new form of occupation by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security<sup>1</sup> (Huang, 2014). It was a title that sounded a little unfamiliar to the general public in these years, but is now widely known to ordinary people. Even a so-called psycho-boom or psy fever<sup>2</sup> has emerged in the urban area not only in terms of the blooming of private practice counseling and therapeutic institutions,<sup>3</sup> but also for the proliferation of the psychology practitioners as well as enthusiasts of various psychological or therapeutic training who have contributed to a thriving industry (see Huang, 2014; Zhang, 2014, 2018). This “psycho-boom” (or psy fever) that swept in Chinese cities in the latest decade has become a phenomenon of concern among anthropologists doing research in mainland China.

It is worth noting that the so-called psycho-boom does not refer to the strong position of psychology in the academic world, but rather to the vigorous development of the psychotherapy industry in Chinese cities in the past 20 years and the penetration of psychological knowledge and practice into the daily life of the ordinary Chinese people. When Arthur Kleinman, an American anthropologist visited Xiangya Hospital in the 1980s, he found that the body had become the site where Chinese people feel and express their distress due to particular political environment right after the Cultural Revolution (Kleinman, 1986); however, in this psy fever of the new century, people turned to their “mind” (*xin ling*) to speak about, experience, and respond to sufferings in everyday life.

In line with the “human potential movement” in the United States in the 1960s, anthropologists attempted to explore and interpret the rise of psy fever since early 2000s in the context of the drastic social transformation in the post-reform era (Yang, 2013a, 2015; Zhang, 2017). Facing the increasingly fierce market competition and the overthrow traditional interpersonal relationships and values, the inner world of the urban middle class has begun to be wrapped in confusion and uneasiness. It is in this context that a therapeutic language of managing personal emotions, self-fulfillment, and self-control was introduced into Chinese society. It can be said that psy fever is both a byproduct and a cure of the turbulent social transformation. Since “mental crisis intervention” became a part of the assistant project of Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, overseas psychotherapy practitioners have come to the mainland Chinese open markets (Huang, 2014). In addition to the mushrooming of counseling and therapeutic institutions and training activities, psychological knowledge is now playing a critical part in various book clubs, speech clubs, and communication-skill training camps with the goal of “self-improvement” (cf. Hampel, 2017, 2021; Hizi, 2021a,b) and is immersed in the daily thinking and speech of ordinary people through popular books and mass media (Yang, 2013b, 2018). Anthropologists working on this issue see this psycho-boom not only as an urban landscape in contemporary China, but also as a way to approach

<sup>2</sup> Scholars used different terms to describe the prosperity of counselling psychology and psychotherapy in urban China, where Zhang (2014) put up the keyword of “psy fever” to depict increasing numbers of urban residents pursuing self-help psychology, while Huang (2014) used “psycho-boom” to refer to the explosive increase of counseling institutions, practitioners, and related training industry.

<sup>3</sup> In China, psychological counseling (*xinlizixun*) and psychotherapy (*xinlizhiliao*) are often used interchangeably in practice until the enactment of the Mental Health Law in 2013.

the lived experience of the middle class. They try to ask: What are the people eager to join this boom really pursuing? What kind of psychic picture of a rapidly changing society is emerging in this boom?

### **“Bentuhua” and Translation of Therapy**

Psychology is an exotic discipline that entered China during the cultural encounter between China and the West. During the Republic of China period, the wind of psychoanalysis had blown across to the modern Chinese literary circles (Huang, 2017). Overseas students returned from abroad, from countries such as Germany or the United States and began to establish psychology departments in local universities (Zhang, 2018). Nevertheless, before 1949, the influence of psychology was never extended beyond the intellectuals until the reform and opening up period when the international exchanges resumed, at that time, the wind of psychology blew over the wall of college, from texts and laboratories to clinical counseling and mass communication. The “Sino-German Psychotherapy Symposium” (*zhong de ban*), which began in the late 1980s, was the pioneering institution to bring practice and knowledge of psychotherapy to China by international therapists. It was first held in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, in 1988 when psychotherapy was still deemed as “foreign.” Since then, this training program has been held regularly, focusing on the psychotherapies with American and European origins, such as family therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychodynamic therapy (see Zhang, 2014, 2020). A number of psycho-practitioners graduated participated in this program have become leading figures in promoting psycho-counseling techniques in China.

The global circulation of psychotherapy across geographic borders has also led to cultural tension. Zhang (2020) found in her research on the early 2000s’ psychotherapy industry in China that the major challenge faced by local Chinese therapists is how to respond to the norms, values, and expectations of Chinese people with those international therapeutic models. She calls the therapist’s practice of “culturing” treatment tailored to local conditions “bentuhua”: bentuhua, basically translated as localization or indigenization in Chinese involves not only adopting methods and approaches relevant to the local cultural soil, but also to patch, to reinvent and to speak to the existing therapies (Zhang, 2020, p. 47). At her field-site Kunming, cognitive behavioral therapy, which is highly compatible with the revolutionary legacy of “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo*), is widely adopted (see also Zhang, 2014). Therapists fascinated by art therapy and sand-play derived from Carl Jung’s thoughts also use cultural corpus from such sources as Zen Buddhism and Taoism to reinterpret the rationality of the treatment. Besides which, in order to address some contextualized difficulties, for instance, the clients’ functionalist imagination on therapies, the obstacles of long-term engagement, and the use of families as proxies, local therapists had to adjust the client’s expectations and treatment operations according to the actual situation.

Bentuhua not only refers to the therapist’s conscious choices and reshaping of the therapy, but also relates to the interaction of the therapeutic practice and the cultural environment. Although psychotherapy is not based on the pathological label of

psychiatry, the enactment of treatment, while helping people seek relief from suffering, can also be seen as an exposure of individual “defects”—clients entering the counseling room also symbolize a “failed” modern subject who has lost self-control. Hizi (2016) points out that this stigmatized imagination constitutes an obstacle to the “culturing” of psychotherapy in China. In fact, in this psy fever, compared to the one-to-one in-depth self-exploration, most people are more inclined to participate in self-help psycho-training in salons, workshops, growth camps, etc. In these activities, therapists often emerge as “mentors” and promote specific therapies in a “teaching” manner. Pritzker (2016) did her fieldwork at a series of group salons in Beijing directed to explore the clients’ childhood experiences and intimate relationships under the guidance of “mentors” with the purpose to help people manage their emotions and acquire mental growth. Pritzker found that one’s sense and discernment of emotions is of centrality to this therapeutic activity. This is usually achieved with the assistance of the therapist’s “cultural translation” work, which not only involves elucidating the psychological terms and concepts of emotions with plain words, but also includes a type of physical work that allows emotions to be manifested, perceived, spoken, and released: they would create various interactive scenarios that allow emotions to be concretely performed, leading students to recognize their inner experience through physical perception and learn to capture and reflectively express it in specific language. While opening up a semiotic moment for the psychotherapeutic understanding of “emotions,” such practice also translates a specific version of “self.”

### **Reinvention of the Self**

The psy fever is by no means simply a product of globalization. Anthropologists have noticed that the expanding thirst for psychological knowledge and practice is closely related to the anxiety and reorientation of identity, relationship, and status among the public in a drastically changing society (Zhang, 2020). As the individual’s connection to family and society becomes more and more fragile, people’s inquiry into the “self” becomes increasingly urgent. In psychological counseling and training activities, sharing of life stories and the expression of one’s subjective feelings occupy a critical position, and psychological interventions of that often bring about the “enlightened moments” in the narratives, which also makes psychological counseling and training activities a “self-making” experiment for participants. However, Zhang (2018, 2020) pointed out that although psychotherapy encourages people to “disentangle” themselves from the social relationship that constrained them, and to conduct reflexive thinking, its ultimate goal is to create a new “self” that is better at managing emotions and handling relationships, so that it can be “re-embedded” into their original social nexus, such as their kinship, intimacy, and working environments.

This relationship-oriented psycho-practice is particularly obvious in the realm of “family therapy,” which views individual psychological problems as an outcome of familial structures and dynamics. Chen (2018) stated that the vision of family therapy has rediscovered an “expansive I” in Chinese society, that is, a person’s self is always enveloping or enveloped by his intimate others; thus, he is accustomed to

get self-realization by being responsible for his families. Yet this can bring emotional burdens to individuals. For example, the control imposed by anxious parents out of the concern of being responsible for their children's lives has become a source of their children's psychological problems. To keep parents from getting too deeply involved in their children's lives and to unload too much expectation from the children's shoulders, who are encouraged to make their own choices, the therapist's task is to reinterpret family members enveloped by each other as independent individuals by introducing the notion of "interpersonal boundaries" into Chinese families.

This psychological challenge to the long-standing Chinese patterns of selfhood and personhood by setting interpersonal boundaries within the family also appears in training activities based on "self-help psychology." Self-help psychology started to thrive in the United States in the early 20th century to respond to the anxiety of self-identification caused by urbanization and marketization at that time. However, in the context of the moral transformation in contemporary China, the tension between the mobilized personal desires and demands of social relations also opened up a new space for self-help psychology. Hampel (2017, 2021) did his research on public speaking clubs in Beijing, focusing on how self-help psychology reorient young people to move away from the "differential mode of association" and learn to build new types of relationships with others on an equal footing (Hampel, 2017). Advocates of self-help psychology believed that, learning to scrutinize oneself from the perspective of others is not only a prerequisite for success in job markets, and intimacies, but also a necessary step to "become a modern person." Hampel (2021) noticed that in the speech club, this reflexive self-awakening was achieved by sharing life stories about one's "shameful experiences" and by evoking mutual criticism among practitioners. Technology that activates and channels shame allows young people from small towns outside Beijing to learn to transform and settle themselves in a cosmopolis of strangers. However, in the participants' speeches about their "selves," the anxiety caused by social values is often confused with the exploration of one's inner world; thus, the so-called personal growth is more like getting rid of the "backward" values and ways of life and embracing the imaginary requirements of modernization. Given this, Hampel concluded that such psychological training is not so much as a promotion of an individualist version of the self as a new form of social belonging for contemporary young people.

In contrast, Hizi's (2021a,b) informants show a clearer and more urgent demand for "self-development" with the help of psychological techniques, which is inextricably linked to the retreat of the state from the welfare supply for the citizens: The advent of an era of "self-reliance" (*kaoziji*) (Ong, 2008) not only entrusts the responsibility of dealing with troubles and sufferings to individuals but also motivates people to adapt to the requirements of market competition by improving their own *su zhi* ("quality") (Anagnost, 2004). Hizi (2021a) found that humanistic psychology and positive psychology have been integrated into the training classes promised to arm participants with "soft skills." In various "individual growth camps" and entrepreneurial trainings focused on improving interpersonal and communication skills, self-actualization slogans, mutual praise exercises, imitations of successful people's styles and gestures, and the speech stage itself provide participants with a temporary and fleeting device

of self-realization and a kind of affective affordance that split an imaginative space of self-transformation in reality (Hizi, 2021a).

As a product of the expanding market of consumption, psy fever in urban China also provides new resources for self-transformation. Zhang (2018, 2020) believes that a new kind of “therapeutic self” is emerging from this weave. Whether in the psychotherapeutic workshops she participated in a decade ago or in today’s various self-help groups, there are personal troubles being addressed from domestic conflicts to one’s struggle to survive in the urban place, within this process, identifying, fashioning and developing the “self” have become an increasingly active project and conscious pursuits for participants of this psy fever. However, it is undeniable that psychotherapy and training often bypass the structural roots of social suffering, and they seek to help people pursue a better life by developing technical methods of self-control, emotional management, and interpersonal communication. Thus, from a more critical perspective, this “inner revolution” (Zhang, 2020) ignited by the popularization of psychological knowledge and practices that avoids turbulence at the social level reflects a kind of governmentality as in terms of Foucault (1991).

### **“Psychologization” and Governmentality**

Critical anthropologists are dedicated to construct the intrinsic relevance between “psychology” and “governance” (Zhang, 2017). They draw on the ideas about how “psychology” is applied in the context of post-socialist transformation (see Matza, 2018), such as the study of “psychological education” provided by Russian psychologists to children from the elite class, and attend to the way psychological discourse and technology create a new type of subjectivity that conforms to national ideals through cultivating one’s concern of the inner experiential life, which is what Foucault (1997) called “self-care.” Yang (2013a, 2015) sees the psychological discourse that increasingly penetrates into ordinary Chinese people’s lives as a depoliticized rhetoric that appeals to inner feelings, through which people are encouraged to turn to and reinterpret their social encounters through the prism of inner feelings, and as a result, reducing socioeconomic problems to personal psychological ones to be intervened individually. In her view, behind the psy fever is the transformation of governance paradigm. Essentially speaking, the truth of this psy fever is the “psychologization” (Yang, 2018) of social problems.

Yang’s (2015) focus on psychological training can be traced back to the mass layoffs at the turning point of 21th century, a “pre-industrialized” era of psychotherapy. In her study of the re-employment project of laid-off workers in a state-owned factory, she found that the anxiety and resentment of laid-off workers are often labeled as “unemployment complex syndrome,” and the core of grassroots governance work is to manage and guide the “gendered potentiality” of laid-off workers: the masculine, confrontational temperament of male workers is often regarded by officials as a negative potentiality that needs to be oppressed and controlled, while the feminine quality of care allows female laid-offs to enter a new profession called *peiliao*, i.e., informal psycho-counselors who basically serve as companion for chatting (Yang, 2015, p. 13).

Female workers are shaped as both object and subject of emotional care by the discourse of psychological counseling imbuing the re-employment trainings organized by the government. They are encouraged to invoke their own embodied sufferings during unemployment period to “unknot the hearts” of others. But this does not mean that women gain their initiatives in the tide of the market economy. As a kind of gendered caring labor, most of the *peiliao* are just a temporary form of employment bearing not only emotional but also sexual exploitation now and then (Yang, 2013b, 2015).

In fact, since the late 1990s, China’s publishing market has been filled with rough works about popular psychology, newspapers have opened up “counseling columns” that advise readers on their troubles, and some radio hotlines have become channels for people to express their distress and seek support (Huang, 2014). Although these pragmatic, didactic discourses explore the inner world far less deeply than one-to-one psychotherapy, they subtly discovered a new way for people to imagine the good life. Yang analyzed the discourse of “happiness” (*xing fu*) on the TV show in early 2000s, pointing out that the frequent emphasis on “adapting to the new economic environment by releasing one’s positive potentiality” is consistent with the political goal of building a harmonious society and maintaining social stability (Yang, 2013a). In another article, she argues that the popularity of autobiographical and “confessional” talk shows brought many psychological and psychiatric terms into ordinary people’s lives, creating new “idiom of distress” (Yang, 2018). In this context, radical social protests and officers’ suicides are easily attributed by to “mental illness” and “depression” by the mass media. Unlike the proliferation of clinical institutions and the dependence on the experts in the “psychologization” in the western society, in China, daily conversation has become a field for people to conduct mutual diagnose and create (pseudo)diseases. She concludes that the popularity of psychological discourse reflects nothing but lack of structural remedies for social sufferings (Yang, 2018).

The governmentality-oriented understanding of psy fever also involves paradoxes. As Yang (2018, p. 606) points out, instead of being the ones labeling the patients unjustly, in China, psychotherapists and psychiatric specialists often criticize the arbitrary use of diagnostic labels and the “stigmatization” as its consequence. In fact, the philosophy of certain therapy violates the goals of governance, for example, family therapy takes the modern personhood of self-autonomy as the ideal template, whereas its emphasis on “independent” individuals poses a threat to the value of “filial piety” promoted by the government (Chen, 2018). Aside from that, the “sense of shame” that is activated in the self-development industry’s psycho-practice is ironically not advocated by the self-help psychological texts. Critical scholarships tend to draw on the framework of “medicalization” to understand “psychologization,” they see it as a pathological process of reshaping social suffering into individual mental disorders, while other scholars attending to the thrive of psycho-industry intend to distinguish this psychological cultivation of happiness from the institutionalized and biological psychiatry that focuses on the chemical processes of the brain.<sup>4</sup> So how should we look at the tension between

---

<sup>4</sup> It is undeniable that some psychotherapeutic schools take a clear-cut stand against the biopsychiatry in epistemology, and the structural family therapy promoted by Salvador Minuchin (see Kuan, 2017).

“psychology” and “governance” and the divergence within the spectrum of this psy-fever scholarship? Beyond the framework of “governance,” are there other interpretive possibilities for the psychotherapeutic practices?

### ***Jianghu, Ritual, and Agency***

There is no way to understand what these psy practices means to the participants without a first-person perspective of practitioners. And the examination of this sociocultural phenomenon can only fall into an external cultural critique if we do not explore the specific processes of therapeutic practice and the subtle differences between different therapeutic schools.

We can see that anthropologists interested in this psy fever with different theoretical concerns are controversial on a number of key issues, one of which is the “role” of the psychotherapeutic practitioners. Although the job of a therapist is different from that of a “psychiatrist” in a medical unit, it is easy to be trapped in some kind of Foucauldian framework of “power-knowledge” and see them simply as the intermediary of social control. Yet according to Huang (2014), the practitioners and enthusiasts produced by the “speedy assembly line” counseling training are the main force of this boom. Those who are involved in it often see psychological counseling training as a dual means of “understanding themselves” and “accumulating occupational capital.” The therapists as training mentors believe that they are not only making profits, but also having the mission of knowledge dissemination and “helping others.” This short-term commercialized training has created a large number of “counselors” who are “adopting a new trade late in their lives” (*banlu chujia*), lack of practical experience, and have obtained qualifications through memorization, which has been dismissed by professionals with hardcore backgrounds as industry chaos. Therefore, the large number of “counselors” emerging from this psycho-boom are not so much an elite and homogeneous professional group, as what Huang (2018) called a “unruly *jianghu*.”

Even therapists with a strong academic background who have grown up in an “international” training system are actors with complex ethical considerations in the real treatment settings. Kuan (2017) examines the supervision of structural family therapy based on memoirs of the therapists, and she found that the therapist is often asked to play a strong interventional role, which is “ethically unfair but therapeutically correct,” in order to motivate the clients to make changes in their familial dynamics. Such treatment as well as the supervision is like moral experiments, where the therapist themselves could become vulnerable abusees, albeit their own radical intervention attempts.

In Kuan’s view, family therapy is like a modern form of magic, just as the Azandes entrusted the use of witchcraft to address tricky conflicts, and the family therapy that city residents decided to turn to for help was also like a ritual technology of “kinship,” helping people return to their daily lives and reach a new status in the domestic field (Kuan, 2020). In this ritual of healing, which was full of symbolic techniques. Besides the therapeutic knowledge and discourse applied in the ritual, the mediating methods, space, and devices are exuding the “healing power” as well. The therapist uses a variety



of audiovisual and sensory instruments to capture the client's fleeting performance, guide them to review the interpersonal dynamics within the family, and evoke their transformation of how they engage in the familial interactions. Such therapeutic ritual seems to have a highly scientific and professional appearance, but if we place it in the long history of human response to their life troubles, we may find that "we have never been modern" (Latour, 1991).

In addition to the complexity of the therapist and the therapeutic process, the moral consciousness and agency of psycho-boom participants should not be overlooked. In an era of the popularization of psychology, Chinese young people have long been immune to or resistant to many crude psychological lines. Hizi (2021b) found that young people in self-improvement camps, despite refusing to fall into nihilism and trying to seek the spiritual engine to meet the secular social demands, they found it difficult to be encouraged by the "chicken soup for the soul." Traveling between training activities and real life, they constantly experience emotional ups and downs. In other words, psychology, which permeates all kinds of training activities, does not create an overarching "norm" of action. Moreover, while "psychological distress" discourse focuses on the emotional experiences and rejects radical social transformation actions, it does develop a new space for urban Chinese, especially women in unprivileged social status, to speak about their sufferings. We can even say that such psychological practice leads one's "being" to a new "emotional" dimension. Barclay (2022) found that psychological discourse does not always reinforce the existing gender imaginations like how it functions in the re-employment training that produces *pei liao*. Sometimes, it helps women achieve many small triumphs in everyday life, which allows them to express and clarify their conflicting desires and rally a supportive community to help them cope with their emotional burdens in mainstream society. It is oversimplified to say that the participants of psy fever are blindly following a trend, as is said by Hampel (2021), in the cosmopolises riddled with hardship and vulnerability, those engaged in the psy fever are eager to find their own niche and craft a sense of certainty and control in the ever-changing circumstances.

### The Future in Evolution

In 2013, the Mental Health Law of the People's Republic of China came into effect, marking a brand new era of psy fever in China. The law makes a clear distinction between "therapy" with medical connotations and "counseling" as a non-medical service, stipulating that the former can only be carried out in medical institutions.<sup>5</sup> Although those who advocate for "professionalization" have been calling for the state regulation into this unregulated industry, the enactment of the law has also raised worries among many private therapists about their career prospects. Later in 2017, the National Counselor Qualification Examination was officially abolished; instead, new therapist certification systems began to appear in some cities, intending to further

---

<sup>5</sup> The release of the law raised a panic among counselors; nevertheless, it did not quite put into practice since then (Huang, 2018).

differentiate the therapists. However, this does not imply the psy fever has subsided; on the contrary, a batch of enterprises and network platforms promoting psychotherapy and psychological knowledge, such as “simple psychology” (*jiandanxinli*) and “know yourself,” have emerged in the latest round of technological entrepreneurship, pushing the popularization and commercialization of the psy industry to a new level. These platforms are regarded as a type of successful “infrastructure entrepreneurship” by Huang (2017, p. 35) who found during his field research that, by 2017, over 400 therapists had joined Jiandan Xinli, which had provided more than 10,000 sessions online. These platforms not only serve as the agency to help the clients select suitable therapists based on their personal standards, but also offer training programs for psychological counselors. Besides, they have been developing new functions such as referral system and therapists’ monitoring system and promoting mental health knowledge through popular articles. While making psychotherapeutic knowledge more accessible for ordinary people, these platforms are also expanding potential clients of psychotherapy from residents in metropolis to people living in smaller cities in China. As Barclay (2020) argues, China’s psycho-boom is not a linear, homogeneous phenomenon, but a haphazard and staggered historical process. With the generational shifts of psychotherapists, the pursuit of psycho-technology become increasingly vigorous, and the practitioners’ exploration of “psy” methods tends to be diversified.

In the post-pandemic era, there is an urgent desire for diversified healing methods, especially among Chinese urban residents who suffers a lot from the Covid-control policies. Within this evolving psy fever which could be seen as a self-help movement among the urban middle-class in China, a wider range of popular body-mind-spirit healing practices on the spectrum, including meditation, mindfulness, art therapy, are so far, yet to be explored. Along with this grass root self-healing movement, pathologization of suffering in psychiatry is becoming common at the same time. While the rise of psychotherapy and related training industry was once seen by anthropologists as ways in which ordinary people take their initiatives in dealing with their inner sufferings, is there any change of the relationship between mass psy practice and institutionalized psychiatric treatment today?

Critics of “psychologization” of western society have regarded psychology as a new religion of this era; nevertheless, the metaphor of the Foucauldian “confession booth” seems to be inadequate to depict the complex landscape of current Chinese psychotherapy: Discussions about how to confront LGBT clients or those with disabilities emerge among therapists, which instill elements of social justice into this profession; meanwhile, some group psychological activities begin to help the traumatized survivors of domestic and other violence to recognize their oppressive situations and encourage mutual care. Given this, it is necessary to scrutinize previous exploration of psy fever to see if it has underestimated the radical and even revolutionary dimension of these therapeutic practices. How to look at this psy fever that is still unfolding is, of course, related to how anthropology deals with classic questions about lived sufferings, constructed and practiced knowledge, subject making, and social transformation. In addition to that, it is also inseparable from how we understand the resilience and wisdom of ordinary people.

## About the Author

An Mengzhu, School of Ethnology and Sociology, Yunnan University, Yunnan, China;  
Email: emma\_an11@outlook.com

## References

- Anagnost, A. (2004). The corporeal politics of quality (suzhi). *Public Culture*, 16(2), 189–208. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-2-189>
- Barclay, B. (2020). Help-seekers, callers and clients: embodied history in China's psy-boom. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 34(2), 286–300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12578>
- Barclay, B. (2022). Strong women and ambivalent success: The gendered dynamics of China's psy-boom. *Ethos*, 50, 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12328>
- Chen, W. (2018). Enveloping mothers, enveloped sons: Positions in Chinese family therapy. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 42, 821–839. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-018-9588-5>
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In: G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, M. (1997). The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom. In: P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The essential works of Foucault, 1954–1984, vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and truth* (pp. 281–301). New York: New Press.
- Hampel, A. (2017). Equal temperament: Autonomy and identity in Chinese public speaking clubs. *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, 45(4), 441–461. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12182>
- Hampel, A. (2021). Shameless modernity: Reflexivity and social class in Chinese personal growth groups. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 11, 928–941. <https://doi.org/10.1086/717182>
- Hizi, G. (2016). Evading chronicity: Paradoxes in counseling psychology in contemporary China. *Asian Anthropology*, 15, 68–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2016.1164353>
- Hizi, G. (2021a). Becoming role models: Pedagogies of soft skills and affordances of person-making in contemporary China. *Ethos*, 49, 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12305>
- Hizi, G. (2021b). Fluctuating affect: Purpose and deflation in paths of self-development. *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 11(3), 942–957. <https://doi.org/10.1086/717568>
- Huang, H. Y. (2014). The emergence of the psycho-boom in contemporary urban China. In: H. Chiang (Ed.), *Psychiatry and Chinese history* (pp. 183–204). London: Pickering & Chatto.
- Huang, H.Y. (2017). Therapy made easy: E-Commerce and infrastructure in China's psycho-Boom. *China Perspectives* (2017/4), 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7468>
- Huang, H. Y. (2018). Untamed jianghu or emerging profession: Diagnosing the psycho-boom amid China's mental health legislation. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 42, 371–400. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-017-9553-8>
- Kleinman, A. (1986). *Social origins of distress and disease: Depression, neurasthenia, and pain in modern China*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kuan, T. (2017). At the edge of safety: Moral experimentation in the case of family therapy. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 41, 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-017-9520-4>
- Kuan, T. (2020). Feelings run in the family: Kin therapeutics and the configuration of cause in China. *Ethnos*, 85, 696–716. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1634614>
- Latour, B. (1991). *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Matza, T. A. (2018). *Shock therapy: Psychology, precarity, and well-being in postsocialist Russia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ong, A. (2008). Introduction. In L. Zhang & L. Zhang (Eds.), *Privatizing China: Powers of the Self, Socialism from Afar* (pp. 1–20). Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801461927-002>
- Pritzker, S. E. (2016). New age with Chinese characteristics? Translating inner child emotion pedagogies in contemporary China. *Ethos*, 44, 150–170. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12116>
- Yang, J. (2013a). Peiliao: Gender, psychologization, and psychological labor in China. *Social Analysis*, 57(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/sa.2013.570203>

- Yang, J. (2013b). "Fake happiness": Counseling, potentiality, and psycho-politics in China. *Ethos*, 41(3), 292–312. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12023>
- Yang, J. (2015). *Unknotting the heart: Unemployment and therapeutic governance in China*. Ithaca, NY/London: ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press.
- Yang, J. (2018). Officials' heartache: Depression, bureaucracy, and therapeutic governance in China. *Current Anthropology*, 59(5), 596–615. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699860>
- Zhang, L. (2014). Bentuhua: Culturing psychotherapy in post socialist China. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 38(2), 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-014-9366-y>
- Zhang, L. (2017). The rise of therapeutic governing in post socialist China. *Medical Anthropology*, 36(1), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1117079>
- Zhang, L. (2018). Cultivating the therapeutic self in China. *Medical Anthropology*, 37(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2017.1317769>
- Zhang, L. (2020). *Anxious China: Inner revolution and politics of psychotherapy*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.