

Chapter 10

The Rise of the Therapeutic in Contemporary China



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Abstract This chapter examines the notion of therapy and its growing significance in the social, political, and affective life in China during the last four decades. Specifically, it explores the ways in which the languages, ideas, and practices of psychology have been applied to various domains for different purposes and imperatives including addressing the current mental health epidemic. This therapeutic ethos acts as both a mode of thinking and imagination. Since therapy suggests an illness or disease and it encompasses a dual process that both diagnoses (identifies an issue) and prescribes (offers solutions), this understanding can thus be easily appended to governance, problematizing (pathologizing, thus individualizing) social issues, and then proposing solutions. This mode of therapeutic governing involves a unique mode of psychologization in China, in which psychological expertise can be dispensed by non-experts with real consequences. It centers on the management of subjectivity. This mode of therapeutic governing accesses people's subjectivity through "care" and "permissive empathy" that renews the government's role as the "guardian of the people". This chapter contends that the ways this therapeutic ethos involved in Chinese society manifest the implicit complicity among therapy, the state, and market.

Keywords China · Therapy · Subjectivity · Therapeutic governance · Therapeutic economy · Therapeutic lifestyle

In recent decades, a therapeutic ethos has come to permeate social and political life in China. The emergence of this ethos has been concurrent with China's post-socialist transition to a market economy, which has brought socioeconomic dislocation and widespread mental distress, reportedly affecting over 100 million people (Chen 2010). One way to think about ubiquitous mental distress is through the

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concept of *ya jiankang* (亚健康 “subhealth”), an ambiguous state between health and illness (Yang 2018a). This condition now reportedly affects about 80 percent of the Chinese population (Liu 2008), due to epidemic levels of confusion, insecurity, and anxiety. This helps explain the current high demand for psychological answers and psychological services. The Chinese government has responded to this demand in part through therapeutic paradigms: addressing public life by fostering the psychoboom (Kleinman 2010; Huang 2014), tackling changes in family dynamics and responsibilities through highly gendered marriage counseling and the professionalization of parenting skills (Kuan 2015), and managing the devastating effects of economic restructuring, from persistent unemployment to drug addiction, through psychotherapeutic interventions (Yang 2015; Bartlett 2018).

Indeed, the rise of a therapeutic ethos seems to, at once, flow from and help constitute the psychoboom in which psychotherapy, psychological training, and psychometrics have blossomed (Kleinman 2010). The process of globalization serves as the backdrop for this dialectic. Since the early 2000s, as part of the outflow of Western psychological practices to the rest of the world (Watters 2011), China has been exposed to Western psychotherapy and psychiatry, with attendant treatment methods, techniques, and psychopharmaceuticals. Importantly, the languages, ideas, and practices of Western psychotherapeutic expertise have also infiltrated Chinese society. Unlike previous, discrete moments in which psychology in China was used to improve narrowly defined social domains and functions—for example, in the treatment of political dissidents in Mao’s era (Munro 2002)—psychology today suffuses a wide range of institutions, practices, and discourses. Now Western psychology has achieved the status of cultural authority in China. This trend has also stimulated a turn to and revitalization of Chinese cultural tradition among psychologists as well as its incorporation into practice of local and indigenous healing resources especially since 2013 when the first Chinese Mental Health Law took effect; this law focuses on psychiatric hospital care predominantly based on Western biomedicine as *the* legitimate mental health treatment model.

While absence of and underdiagnosis of mental illness has long been a serious issue in China, owing to limited mental healthcare resources, more recently, the situation is reversed: people have been subject to overdiagnosis or misdiagnosis, or even mislabeled as mentally ill. This is true, for example, in the case of rising suicides among Chinese officials, who are often posthumously labelled “depressed” by non-medical investigators (see Yang 2018b). Overdiagnosis can also extend to those who oppose the government including petitioners and dissidents, which highlights the power of psychological discourse and its possible misuse as a governance tool.

Indeed, by popularizing psychological knowledge, the government and the public may invest it with ideological and ethical content, turning psychological knowledge and techniques into modes of control. In this process, imbuing diverse social domains with a therapeutic ethos shifts the focus from practices informed by Marxist materialism and social reality to psychology or “heart”-based practices, the heart being a key concept in Chinese culture. Heart-based practices rely on narratives and interpretive stances rather than on “objective” reality (Illouz 2008). Thus, in today’s

context, the heart (or interiority) takes on multiple roles: as a locus of agency, a venue for knowledge production, a nexus of cultural expression, a mode of self-management, and a target of power. The mode of therapeutic governing that emerges with this new heart-based scene wields a more hegemonic form of power; the state/therapist approaches its people/clients by opening up and moving their hearts for various purposes through “care” and “permissive empathy” (Parsons 1965) or through psychological discourses that shape the public’s psychological imagination.

Therapy then becomes more than a method for healing psychological and mental distress. It is a strategy for solving social issues in a distressed, ill-ordered, and increasingly stratified society. Therapy putatively narrows the gap between social stratification/distress and alleged social harmony. That is, therapy not only addresses the psychological and emotional consequences of the widespread socioeconomic dislocation, but is also used to meet political, economic, and social needs, for example, the need to renew socialist ideals truncated by the ongoing post-socialist transformation and the desire for advancing economy by creating new jobs related to psychotherapy and developing the mental health industry. For the government, it is a ready means of engaging people, showing “care,” and renewing socialist ethics.

The Notion of Therapy

In this chapter, I view the notion of therapy as multivalent and polysemic. Therapy encompasses languages, ideologies, practices, and expertise, but it is also a metaphor to represent, discuss, and deliver solutions for social issues. Thus, therapy exceeds medical domains to exert influence in other arenas of social life. For example, therapy can be associated with *renqing* or *ganqing* (人情, 感情 “human feelings” or “compassion”) in the Chinese context, which is viewed as having healing effects (Kipnis 1997); thus, a friendly, compassionate visit to someone who is sick or in difficulty can be “therapeutic.”

While therapy does not seem to be a core principle of traditional Chinese medicine, it has even become attached to its practices. The ideal medical principle proposed in *Huangdi Neijing*, “the Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor,” is *bu zhi yi bing zhi wei bing* (不治已病治未病 “not treating diseases but preventing diseases”). The holistic approach to illness in traditional Chinese medicine is thus not typically based on a disease model and does not foreground treatment or therapies, focusing instead on everyday practices of self-cultivation and nurturing life.

However, the concept of therapy seems to have gained new traction and has assumed new social and political significance in China especially since the 1990s with unfolding economic restructuring. It is used to fill the gap created by the contradictory processes caused by China’s integration into the globalization process. As Bourdieu observes, the globalization process is “a kind of *historical acceleration* which caused two forms of economic organization, normally separated by a gap of several centuries and making contradictory demands on their participants, to co-exist . . .” (2000:18, emphasis in original). More specifically, therapy is deployed

to patch up the vacuum created by the releasing of market force and the decline of belief in communism by ordinary people. To some extent, therapy connects both of China's goals of economic development through market expansion and sociopolitical stability through the party's continued claims to renew socialist ethics of "caring" for the people as their "guardian."

At the same time, in the context of globalization and economic restructuring in China, therapy has become enmeshed with and helps reformulate traditional concepts of self-care and life-nurturing. The rollback of state support for health care has compelled people to pay increasing attention to their own health and well-being. Thus, economic necessity has dovetailed with individual nurture of life. Traditional practitioners now seem to take a more positive view of therapeutics.

Therapeutic Governance

The Chinese government's current emphasis on *yi ren wei ben* (以人为本 "the people as the basis of governing) and *min xin shi zui da de zhengzhi* (民心是最大的政治 "the attention to the hearts of the people is the biggest politics"), combined with a greater emphasis in the post-Mao era on people's private and internal lives, has foregrounded the role of the heart and psychology in the art of governing. Such an emphasis implies that the great challenge for the Chinese communist party in maintaining its legitimacy is how to open up and move people's hearts in order to align them with the party's ideologies and rules amidst rapid change. Thus, *xinli hua* (心理化 roughly "psychologization"), the attention to and through the heart or treating social and cultural issues in personal and psychological terms, or through biomedical rationalities, becomes integral to governing (Yang 2018a).

Given the global context of neoliberal approaches to care and the global rise of therapeutic governance, China is not alone in turning to therapeutic governance. Yet its case involves different and even unique practices. In the Western literature on this trend, we see psy experts playing a key role in governmentality (Miller and Rose 1994) and the therapeutic state (Szasz 2001; Polsky 1991; Nolan 1998). In China, conversely, psy experts are dispensable; non-medical agencies and institutions (including governments), and even the public, participate in this mode of control, for example, through informal diagnosis (Chen 2010; Yang 2017). This non-medical approach is partly a lingering effect of Maoist perceptions of mental illness as social or ideological pathology, and partly a product of the capricious, sovereign power of the Chinese state. For instance, in the aforementioned case of suicides among Chinese officials, the government accepts informal diagnoses by media and employers that blame the deaths on biomedical depression. This move serves the government's own need for expediency and limited scrutiny of the problematic bureaucracy. Informal diagnosis may also flow from the traditional practices of self-cultivation in nurturing life. With enough exposure to the media and government-sponsored training, anyone can become a mental health "expert." But low expert responsibility leaves psy power open to abuse and ignorance.

Therapeutic governing in China is also implemented when psychological techniques are wedded with welfare networks, especially targeting vulnerable groups. Unlike the Western therapeutic (welfare) state, which tends to normalize and integrate marginalized people (to the mainstream) to minimize the role of the state in the lives of individuals (Polsky 1991) and usually promote freedom, China's welfare programs including poverty relief and re-employment programs emphasize care and the *nurture* of disgruntled members of disadvantaged groups (for example, unemployed men) to appease them and sustain stability. These processes highlight the "benevolence" of the state, transforming the poor from subjects with rights to objects of care (Yang 2015). By embracing therapeutic practices and ideologies in this way, power can operate at a distance. Therapeutic governance is not a repressive force; it is, rather, akin to a new style of thought, "endowing individuals with new competencies, aptitudes and qualities" (Miller and Rose 1994: 36). Indeed, while Western therapeutic governing posits the self as fragile, requiring continuous therapeutic guidance (Furedi 2004), therapeutic governing in China promotes a positive vision of realizing human potential. At the individual level, this may not even be perceived as the exertion of power but instead as personal growth and development. One's potential is realized with the help of positive psychology, *zheng nengliang* (正能量 "positive energy"), and the positive values of Chinese cultural tradition (Yang 2018a). That is, people approach therapeutics as individuals, not perceiving the role of government in the actualization of their "potential." While people focus on self-growth, the government seeks order and control. Chinese therapeutic governance is thus subtle, operating at the most intimate levels.

Therapy and Subjectivity

This intimacy means that Chinese therapeutic governance centers on the management of subjectivity. Psychology has provided people with new concepts through which to conceive themselves and the world, as well as with techniques of care, healing, and self-fashioning. As individuals are "made up" (Hacking 1986) through particular forms of psychology (often those endorsed by the government in China), their subjectivity can ally with and reproduce state interests. People are too obsessed with themselves to notice much of anything else. Their attention is kept focused on themselves through the socialization into hegemonic instantiations of what Teo (2018) calls "neoliberal forms of subjectivity" (hereafter NLFS). NLFS "colonizes all forms of subjectivity" (2018:583), and its approach to problem solving is to work on one's own feelings as "individualized, psychologized and privatized products" (2018:590). These forms of subjectivity foreclose any feelings of solidarity or collectivity. They highlight the fundamental individuation at the heart of neoliberal forms of subjectivity, leading to an incapacity of individuals to feel connected beyond their immediate circle (Yang 2018a). In general, therapeutic practice represents "the contemporary mood of individualization" (Furedi 2004:21).

Furthermore, therapy penetrates individual subjectivity in ways that other forms of power cannot. Talcott Parsons (1965) pointed out that while other institutional interventions may leave individual subjectivity untouched, therapy brings with it the possibility of influencing people's internal lives. Rather than judge or moralize their suffering or behaviors, therapists empathize with individuals and establish a sense of "permissiveness" with them (Parsons 1965: 317). Through such permissive empathy, therapists can gain privileged access to the people's subjectivity. They are also able to grant compliance through providing individuals with a diagnosis. In embracing a therapeutic ethos, the Chinese government gains this special access. Further, psychological "care" for the people highlights the role of the state as people's "guardian," part of the party's "guardian discourse," contributing to its legitimacy (Shi and Lu 2010). In general, therapy can help the government forge new points of contact with the public while establishing a less antagonistic relationship between governors and governed in China.

Psychologization

One key mechanism of Chinese therapeutic governing is *xinli hua* (心理化 "psychologization"). Psychologization can be understood as a mimesis of the vital by the social. According to Georges Canguelham (1989), as far as health, disease, and healing are concerned, an organism and a society are very different things. The therapist knows in advance what normal state to establish in an individual organism, while in the case of society, she does not know (Canguelham 1989). Organisms are the norm for a doctor's restorative activity, while social norms are invented (Canguelham 1989). The norms of docility, legality, productivity, punctuality, civility and the like do not reflect a vital order, but rather, paradigms established by sociopolitical authorities seeking order and control. Social organization might copy vital organization, but these are never the same. In copying the vital, social norms presuppose an understanding of vital organization, allowing for its mimesis within the scope of social possibilities. By treating social situations as vital, therapists or governments can attribute the causes of trouble to individuals, blaming the vital organism (person) rather than the system.

For example, between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, the Chinese government, recognized the threat to order and stability posed by mass unemployment as a result of state enterprise restructuring. It thus undertook a national re-employment project. But instead of focusing on job supply, the project has adopted an individualized and psychologized approach. Techniques of counselling and positive psychology are built into programs with the aim of transforming the attitudes, emotions, and thought processes of the unemployed in order to help them adapt to the market economy. Class-based socioeconomic issues are thus transformed into a matter of individual emotion or psychology. As part of this process, former communist party officials have become trainers in various types of therapy, representing both a new (therapeutic) turn in the Chinese experience and an adaptation of Maoist methods.

Indeed, since the early days of Chinese communist rule, there has been a presumed dialectical relationship between ideology and mentality, including mental illness: correcting one's political ideology in Mao's era would allow one to recover from mental illness. The putative reason why people became mentally ill was that their heads were filled with an excess of selfish ideas and personal concerns, which could be eradicated through the traditional communist ideological orientation (thought work) and medication.

In this context, attention to genuine psychological disorders among unemployed workers is sparse. Instead, the state-sponsored re-employment programs are inundated with psychological knowledge, particular modes of judgement, and interventions. Complicity between the Chinese state and the market is discernible, as multiple forms of counselling are increasingly commercialized alongside the gradual collapse of work units as the basis of material, emotional, and psychological support for state workers. Instead of the "freedom" promised by Western psychotherapy, these Chinese forms of counselling or psychological training targeting redundant workers emphasize "care" by the government. Care renews socialist promises, not to mention the paternalistic relationship between governors and governed that marked the Maoist era.

Therapeutic Economy

Liaoyu jingji (疗愈经济 therapeutic economy) refers to economic development that banks on people's confusion, insecurity, loneliness, and distress (especially anxiety and depression in China today) as well as ill health with the purpose of healing. It is a business model based on vulnerability and suffering. Within China's psychoboom, the heart and ambiguous interiority have been tapped for developing a therapeutic economy, and both have become (new) sites and resources for value extraction and entrepreneurial capital. In China, there are two main ways the therapeutics is involved in the market economy: one is commercialized therapeutic practices including counseling and psychosocial or psychospiritual trainings, and the other is the therapeutic ethos infused in advertising, commodities, and services to promote consumption.

China's mental health woes have contributed to rapidly developing mental health and wellness industries. These include private mental hospitals, vast self-help genres (books, websites, TV shows, etc.), commercialized counseling, therapeutic pedagogies (on psychomoral and psychospiritual training), and the sale of psychopharmaceutical drugs. The Internet has enabled this market to grow rapidly. Counseling is mostly practiced online through the immensely popular Chinese phone app WeChat (微信). In search of profit, psychotherapists now focus on group training for white-collar workers in big corporations as part of their *tuanjian* (团建 "team building") or online group counseling, more than one-on-one private talk therapy. Psychotherapy has gradually become integral to China's new media and the market economy.

Meanwhile, widespread anxiety, loneliness, and alienation have also spurred new businesses such as *peiban jingji* (陪伴经济 “the companion economy”). Websites and (online) shops have been set up to help clients cope with negative emotions including anger, loneliness, sadness, and shyness, by sending them congratulations, apologies, and empathy, offering anger management or bed-warming services, and finding marriage partners or surrogate girlfriends or boyfriends for holiday seasons to avoid parental nagging. New professions such as *peilian* (陪聊 “chatting companions” or “companionable counselors”) have also emerged to help people cope with distress and suffering. Companionable counseling is highly gendered, mainly carried out by laid-off women workers turned housemaids or by rural migrants turned domestic workers (Yang 2015). This dovetails with the government’s vague gendered re-employment strategy. These are typical women’s jobs; ambiguous job descriptions and lack of state regulation have intensified the exploitation of women’s psychological and affective labor (Yang 2015).

Therapeutic Consumption and Ecopsychology

With the advent of the psychoboom in China, therapeutic consumption has gone up drastically—that is, consumption of commodities or services for one’s happiness and fulfillment. Chinese advertising has now explicitly deployed psychological precepts and techniques to sell products and services, linking commodities with particular states of psychological or emotional being. Such advertising implies that through “consuming” certain commodities or services, the consumer’s identity will be transformed; by ingesting a drug or using a product, one expects to achieve health, lifestyle, happiness, or fulfillment. Commodities thus become transformational objects and consumption a transformative and therapeutic process. Therapeutic consumption tends to target people who suffer sub-health in China. Products or services advertised to relieve people’s distress and cure ills are often called *zhiyu xi* (治愈系 “therapy series”).

One such *zhiyu xi* is the natural health trend, including ecotourism, ecopsychology, and forest health cultivation or *senlin kangyang* (森林康养 “forest therapy”). *Senlin kangyang* is a new discipline adopted by Chinese universities, including Beijing Forestry University, that incorporates high-quality forest resources into traditional and modern medicine. According to the central government’s 5-year forest development plan, China aims to have 500 health service centers in forest zones nationwide by 2020. All of these approach nature as a basis of healing, health, enlightenment, and success. Ecotourism and ecopsychology are of special interest now due to concerns about the mental health effects of air pollution in China. Psychiatrists I have spoken to say they have seen a slight increase in psychological symptoms correlated with air pollution—mostly anxiety over the possibility of pollution-related illness. While the doctors are cognizant that anxiety is sensitive to climate change in general (i.e., seasonal affective disorder, SAD), the circumstances in China today are unique: atmospheric changes are human-driven, caused by

large-scale industrial activities, often unfettered by inadequate environmental regulation, sometimes increased by corruption. Thus, distress related to smog (“smog-blues”) might have both social and environmental significance.

In response, for example, in suburban Beijing such as in Changping, organic farms and mountainside “heart-soul oxygen bars” (心灵氧吧) have become popular tourist sites, and psychologists counsel tourists via de-stressing activities, such as shredding cornstalks and talking to animals. These forms of psychological relief combine nature-based healing with counselling based on traditional therapeutic modes that rarely look beyond the individual, family, or interpersonal dimensions for causes of stress, ignoring structural or political causes. This approach attempts to cultivate healthy subjects who can cope with the environmental and health effects of China’s modernization and socioeconomic transformation.

Ecopsychology dips into tradition to assist in its aims. While Confucianism has long been used to legitimize social hierarchy and sociopolitical stability, in China today, there is a backlash against it, while Daoism is on the rise—as both a healing resource and a (seemingly) depoliticized mechanism to cultivate harmony between human beings and the environment. The government recently invoked Wang Yangming, the neo-Confucian scholar of the Ming Dynasty who integrated Daoist and Buddhist precepts and doctrines into Confucianism, to promote its own take on “holism.” The government encourages citizens to holistically balance work and family as a means of addressing the “existential” crisis (including suicides) especially within Chinese officialdom. This invocation of Wang Yangming and the push for holism signal a more recent shift in governing from a focus on the interpersonal to the existential. Likewise, in ecotourism and ecopsychology, discursive practices of counseling and bodily and sensory modes of communication and healing are merged. Counselors draw upon both Chinese cultural traditions (i.e., Daoism) and Western psychology to create resources for self-cultivation and self-help.

Counseling offered during ecotours seldom starts with identifying symptoms among participants. Rather, it begins with something happening on the trip—for example, a type of food, a scenic view, or an animal. This helps participants cultivate conscious and reflective attention through multisensory approaches—listening to the sounds of forest, feeling the wind, and smelling the grass. They are encouraged to experience authentic local culture (for example, the minority ethnic culture in West Hunan Province) as a means of distracting themselves from or even evading their troubles or difficulties at home.

Therapeutic Lifestyles: Self-Preservation and Self-Therapy

For some, a Western understanding of therapy involves experts identifying an emotional deficit in people/clients as the starting point for healing—a move that highlights vulnerability (Furedi 2004). But in China, the notion of therapy does not rest on an implication of victimhood. This is not only because of the non-reliance on expertise in China but also because ordinary people exercise self-therapy or self-healing voluntarily on a daily basis as the folk saying indicates that *ziyu shi zui*

zhongyao de yangsheng (自愈是最重要的养生 “Self-therapy/healing is the most important part of life-nurturing”). Currently, there is widespread grassroots fetishism of *yang sheng* (养生 “nurturing life”) in China. For example, in Chinese cities, the popular and highly commercialized *yangsheng guan* (养生馆 “life-nurturing center”) combines the Confucian practice of *xiushen* (修身 cultivating the self) with the life-nurturing tradition to promote the art of living—turning one’s life into a work of art—and then a form of governance of life (see also Farquhar and Zhang 2012). These centers also use neoliberal techniques of eliciting the desire of citizens to stay beautiful and healthy (and thus happy and productive) as a means of diminishing or shirking the effects of economic or political liabilities. This form of self-care and self-therapy constitutes an embodied, holistic (including psychological and aesthetic) solution to broader social and economic problems that may negatively affect people’s bodies and health.

Another example of daily self-therapy in China can be found in the emerging popularity, since 2017, of the trend of *foxi* (佛系 “Buddha-like”). The *foxi* lifestyle highlights detachment—a choice that appeals to many Chinese caught in sociopolitical struggles and distress. It aims to relieve distress and cure people of ills. *Foxi* resembles other forms of self-preservation, such as the Chinese art of *nande hutu* (难得糊涂 “It is hard to pretend muddleheadedness”) (Mattyssen 2015). *Nande hutu* originated in the thinking of Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765), a Qing Dynasty official, philosopher, and artist from Jiangsu Province, whose ideas have regained popularity in China since the 1990s and have given rise to the popular practice of *hutuxue* (糊涂学 “the study of muddleheadedness”). It means that while everyone wants smartness, real smartness, which is hard to do, is to be muddled. *Nande hutu* encompasses a kind of smartness that requires self-restraint (from getting angry) and emotional or cognitive reconstruction in order to rationalize what happened to them and move on with life. It is a kind of feigned muddledness, including methods of coping with feelings of helplessness and vulnerability and ignoring and refusing to judge anger triggers. The phrase *foxi* was originally Japanese, part of the Otaku subculture. In China, *foxi* is not related to Buddhism. It first appeared on WeChat in an article entitled “The first group of the post-90s generation has become monks” (December 11, 2017) (Xin Shi Xiang 2017). The article immediately went viral across Chinese social media because it resonated with millions of young people who adopt a casual and calm attitude in the face of mounting social pressures. The article described young people who foster a “Buddha-like” mindset and advocate a Zen way of living. They remain detached and resist ambition in all realms, from career to marriage to food. These Buddha-like youths believe they have seen through the illusions of the material world. They try to avoid conflict, refuse to get emotionally involved, and take a Zen-like perspective toward success and setbacks alike.

According to the original WeChat article on *foxi*, their philosophy is “It’s okay to have, and it’s okay not to have; no competition, no fight, no winning or losing.” *Foxi*, then, can be seen as a form of passive resistance rather than pessimism. Urban young Chinese born after the 1990s are akin to America’s Generation X. They are unlikely to be better off than their parents, as economic opportunities dwindle and

the easy big money is gone. For them, success is increasingly hard. Thus, the optimism and positive psychology of “chicken soup for the soul”-type self-help, which was hugely popular with a slightly older generation (born in the 1980s) and which meshed easily with the inspirational propaganda of the Chinese government, clashes with their reality. These young people face skyrocketing housing prices, relationship difficulties caused by a widening gender imbalance, and narrow paths to success. The common theme in many of their Buddha-like stories is that effort is futile. For example, “Buddha-like childrearing” proposes a laidback approach to parenthood, in stark contrast to the intense tiger-mom parenting that is currently popular in China. “There are not that many kids who will really amount to much, so why give them an exhausting childhood?” The difficulties faced by this generation also lead them to describe themselves in mocking tones as “prematurely balding,” “monks or nuns,” or the “middle-aged obese.” While they are nowhere near these things, they certainly feel like they are. Their motto is “Life itself is hard enough, and we just can’t afford to make it harder on our own.”

Thus, a *foxi* youth wants nothing because she or he expects nothing. Unsurprisingly, there has been a backlash against the mindset, particularly among the older generation. This older generation argues that *foxi* is based in pessimism, indolence, and sloth, leading to a reduced work ethic, lack of self-motivation, and an apathetic demeanor. The trend has even caught the attention of the *People’s Daily*, the official paper of the Communist Party, which published two articles on Buddha-like Youth (Shi 2017). The *Daily* wrote, “This may just be a way for young people to explore their position in society,” acknowledging that the identity was a reaction to “life’s quick rhythms.” The assessment is positive compared to the government’s reaction to *sang wenhua* (丧文化 “the funeral culture”), another Chinese millennial attitude that has cropped up since mid-2016. *Foxi* parallels and constitutes *sang wenhua*, a subculture that encouraged people to openly embrace and even competitively perform despair, burnout, misfortune, and everyday failures, representing people without desires, ambitions, or aims. While cynicism and humor are both fundamental to these stories, the “Buddha-like” protocols take the pessimism and futility suggested by the funeral culture as a baseline and gently suggest a way forward—preserving oneself and adapting to changes rather than being too hard on oneself to destroy oneself (Liang 2017).

In general, the *sang* “funeral” lifestyle is characterized by unrelenting, sardonic despondency, an approach the *People’s Daily* called “pessimistic and hopeless.” Indeed, years of a strict one-child policy and a rapidly developing economy have placed great pressure on young people to succeed academically as one narrow path to professional success. Now, some are happily resigned to being ordinary. The two subcultures share origins in the cutthroat competition in Chinese. Although *People’s Daily* is now worried about these aspiring Buddha-like people who take nothing seriously, these youngsters do not find their lifestyle depressing. In general, the *foxi* lifestyle appears to be a less stressful, more self-centered, and relatively healthy one. In contrast with Western therapy, the self-therapizing *foxi* lifestyle does not imply vulnerability or lack, and it is self-driven and, arguably, strategic.

Conclusion

The chapter explores the articulation and practice of the therapeutic ethos in the affective, social, and political life in China. The notion of therapy suggests an illness or problem that can be used to pathologize both individual and public issues. Therapy itself encompasses a dual process that both diagnoses (identifies an issue) and prescribes (offers solutions). This understanding of therapy can thus be easily appended to governance, constituting an amenable way of problematizing (pathologizing or individualizing) social issues and then proposing solutions, a hegemonic form of governing. It is a unity of opposites—both control and care, thus highlighting the complicity between therapy, market, and the state. This therapeutic governing involves a unique mode of psychologization in China, in which psy expertise is dispensed by non-experts with real consequences. This analysis also foregrounds the fact that more than a conduit of power, therapy has now been integrated into China's economic and social life, affecting people's everyday discourses and practices/lifestyles. As a mode of both thinking and imagination, therapy has also become a modality for social critique and contestation.

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