

We Can Only Change Ourselves: Psychology and Mental Health in China

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted 2018/19 with psychological counsellors, their clients, psychology hobbyists 心理爱好者 and their wider social milieu, in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. These people are participants in the "psy-boom"––the dramatic rise of interest in psychology and adoption of psychological services—that has been a significant social development in the late reform period. First, this thesis shows that the psy-boom is taking place in multiple kinds of venues throughout society, for instance, in workshops, reading groups, workplaces, families and online. The second contribution is to show the diversity of ideas within the psy-boom as it existed in Chengdu at the time of the ethnography, and how it intersected with other social phenomena. These include gender, class, economic precarity, and the rise of digital technologies. The third contribution is to explore the affective dimension and subjective shifts that constitute the psy-boom and how these inform people's perception of agency. Building on the observation of how the psy-boom intersects with other phenomenon, the thesis shows how people interpret the structural and social causes of personal trauma and how they shape their responses to these. The psy-boom helps people cultivate a particular understanding of agency, that is found in the way they apply psychological tools to better understand themselves, to feel validated in their distress, and to rearticulate themselves in their social worlds. For Ms. Liu, a key figure in this ethnography, to say, "we can't change others, we can only change ourselves," represents an understanding of healing that is not passive. However, this notion of there being *something* that can be done, must come from *somewhere*. The psy-boom is a social phenomenon *constituted by* and *constitutive of* the society in which it has developed.

INTRODUCTION

Qualifying the Psy-boom

At the start of Ms. Liu's psychology reading group, we'd meditate. There were usually around 15 of us. We would meet every Tuesday evening in a dilapidated building that stood just on the outside of the 2nd ring road in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan province, in South West China. We would sit quietly and check in with our bodies—we'd scan up from our feet, feel their firm place on the parquet floor, and then continue up through our knees, our chest. Finally, we'd concentrate on the breath dancing along the top of our lips. Ms. Liu would ring a bell and we'd come back into the room. We met in the evenings and sometimes I'd open my eyes and the dusky sky would still have a pretty pink glow. In summer, when the sun set later, I'd open my eyes and on days of heavy pollution I could watch the red orb disappear behind a skyscraper. For a year we read Judith Beck's 1964 *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond.* Once, during a session, a participant in the group asked Ms. Liu how she should deal with a problem she was having with her father. "We can't change others," Ms. Liu said, "we can only change ourselves."

I met Ms. Liu in the spring of 2018, when I moved to Chengdu to conduct ethnographic fieldwork into mental health. She was a woman in her mid-50s, with a sharp fringe and the start of wrinkles. She dressed appropriately for the seasons; parkers in winter, t-shirts in summer, in no-nonsense fashions she bought cheaply online. By the time we met she was an organising member of the *Sichuan Province Science and Technology Association's Psychology Group*, had a steady counselling practice and ran a reading group aimed at improving the quality of local counsellors and at raising awareness of the benefits of psychology to lay practitioners. Her professional ascendence since she had embarked on her therapeutic journey 15 years ago was part of a more general rise in the interest in psychology and uptake in psychological services across society. This development, known

locally as *xinli re* or psy-fever, is also sometimes referred to as the 'psy-boom[1]' (Bram 2020, Huang 2014, 2015, 2018, Kuan 2019, Jie Yang 2015, 2017 and Li Zhang 2018).

A key factor that drove the psy-boom was the decision by the Chinese government to release vocational qualifications in the early 2000s, managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security[2] 中国劳动和社会保障部 (MOLSS), which enabled anyone with a university degree to qualify to become a psychological counsellor within the space of a few months by taking part-time courses, often online (Huang 2014: 215). It is estimated that, in less than twenty years, the MOLSS granted anywhere between 600,000 to over a million vocational qualifications for psychological counsellors (Zhang 2020: 170, Huang 2018: 319, Bram 2020). This does not mean that there are a million practicing psychological counsellors in China today. On average only 15% of counsellors went on to practice full time (Zhang 2020: 34). The rest returned to their original jobs, re-embedding in society armed with a new qualification that refashioned them as a psychological 'expert'. This expertise was wielded in workplaces, government entities, friendships, kinship groups and in families, helping to spread psy-fever throughout society. As Li Zhang (2020: 34), a medical anthropologist who is a leading scholar of psychotherapy in China, has argued "the broad application beyond the clinical setting is a distinct feature of how psychological training is embraced by Chinese people."

This was borne out by the make-up of Ms. Liu's reading group. The group was a diverse cross-section of Chengdu's middle class. There was a prison guard, a person who worked on the

[1] As I have argued elsewhere (Bram 2020), my choice to use psy-boom rather than psycho-boom is a personal one. I grew up in London where the word 'psycho' was heavily pejorative and thus to write psycho-boom sounds stigmatising. Psy-boom as a term has been used by Li Zhang (2014) and also aligns more closely with work by British scholars such as Nikolas Rose (1999) who speak of "psy-disiciplines" and "psy-services"

[2] This ministry merged with the Ministry of Personnel in 2008 to become the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security 中华人民共和国人力资源和社会保障部. I choose in this thesis to refer to the MOLSS qualification as this was the adjudicating body at the time of the conception of the qualification regime.

Chengdu metro, a former TV presenter, three full-time professional psychological counsellors, some college students and an engineer. The group was overwhelmingly female; there were only two men who regularly attended (the gendered aspect of the psy-boom is dealt with in chapter 4). Most of the attendees had either completed the MOLSS vocational qualification to become a psychological counsellor already or had vague intentions to do so once the exam was reinstated. The exam was stopped in 2017, which I will explore in more detail in chapter 2, though the training courses and the psychologically engaged milieu that had developed in its wake were still extremely active and, if anything, increasing in popularity. Many self-identified themselves as hobbyists 爱好者 who were interested in using psychology to learn about themselves and others. Three of the regular attendees were former clients of Ms. Liu's. Ms. Liu explicitly marketed the group on Wechat by stating that learning psychology "can help your family, can help your personal relationships, and help you understand yourself."

What the MOLSS qualification did, in essence, was to fashion psychology training into a commodity that could be consumed by China's burgeoning middle class. This training 培训 was put to a diverse range of uses in a variety of settings throughout Chinese society. Groups like Ms. Liu's were precisely the kind of social formation that arose in the wake of the MOLSS qualification. That it contained practitioners, qualified counsellors who did not practice and hobbyists shows the broad sweep of people caught up in the desire to pursue psychological training. It also shows the vibrant marketplace for psychological training that emerged in the years following the arrival of the MOLSS qualification. While the year I spent with the group focused on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, in previous years they had studied Irvin Yalom's *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy vol. 5,* Raymond Miltenberger's *Behavioural Modification: Principles and Procedures vol. 3,* and Frank Datillio's *The Family Therapy Treatment Planner,* among others. Ms. Liu intended the readings as a way to help patch over the areas that the MOLSS qualification did not cover in sufficient depth or that she felt might be useful for the group at large.

She said that the group was not designed to make her money. She charged 30rmb a session, which she donated back to the psychological association she was a member of. 30rmb is reasonable when one considers that a single hour of therapy in Chengdu could range anywhere from 200rmb an hour from an inexperienced counsellor, right up to 3000rmb or more an hour for a famous therapist with a large following on social media[3]. This is part of why psychological training in China has become such a prominent feature of the popular response to mental health. Instead of paying for long-term therapy, many intuited that it would be cost-effective instead to attend psychological training programmes and then use the tools that they gained on themselves and those around them (Zhang 2020: 120). As Li Zhang (2020: 120) noted during her fieldwork in Kunming in the 2000s, it was 2000-4000rmb to qualify to become a counsellor via the MOLSS qualification, which was about two months' worth of salary for an average worker at the time. At the same time, it was roughly 300-400rmb an hour on average to see a therapist. Practically speaking therefore, qualifying to becoming a counsellor amounted to less expense than 10 hours of therapy.

This is why the early 2000s and 2010s saw an explosion in the number of Chinese people qualifying to become psychological counsellors. Once qualified, despite not becoming psychological counsellors full-time, their interest was now piqued. Experts in the field, those who had trained with famous western psychotherapists or who had distinguished themselves by building large social media followings, started to offer psychological training workshops as an additional revenue stream. The 2010s also saw the rise of online psychological service provision, which I look at in detail in chapters 3 and 5. These platforms migrated to Wechat[4], the largest social media platform in the country, where they ended up extremely popular. As

[3] The average salary in Chengdu at the time I was there completing my fieldwork was 6000rmb/month

[4] A social media application founded by the Chinese tech company Tencent in the early 2000s which is one of the most widely used smart-phone applications in China. It combines media, payment and messaging functions

> I argue in chapter 3 a unique feature of Wechat is that its technology is extremely adaptable, which meant that not only did these platforms use the service to promote psychological concepts and connect people to therapists, they also created a vibrant library of online courses, personality tests, meditation apps and podcasts (Bram 2019, Huang 2017). These accounts are extremely popular; the largest of them in terms of audience, *Know Yourself*[5], has a following of over twelve million people and has received millions of dollars in venture capital funding (Qian Zhuang 2019, interview).

Therefore, while one may question the validity of a qualification regime that could qualify a psychological counsellor in a matter of months, it is fair to say that it had an enormous impact on fashioning a popular response to the anxieties created by China's reform period. Crucially the MOLSS qualification helped create a coterie of 'psy-experts' (Zhang 2016: 120, Rose 1991), a dynamic marketplace for psy-services and the conditions for refashioning the self in the light of these psychological tools. Importantly the MOLSS qualification also enforced a vision of psychological training which was accessible to the masses as it did not require excessive prior qualification and that implied that psychological knowledge could be qualified through exams. It thus embedded an idea that psychological training had objective goals and quantifiable targets, even if the ultimate aims of such training (i.e. knowing oneself and improving relationships) were necessarily abstract. It is a significant development in contemporary China through which many of the key themes of the reform period can be understood.

This thesis is about the social implications of the MOLSS qualification and the wider psy-boom of which it is a part. I see it as an example of "butterfly politics," i.e., a seemingly inconsequential decision made in the past whose ramifications into the future are more complex and larger than

anyone could have foreseen (MacKinnon 2017, adapted from Huang 2018). As Arthur Kleinman (2010) has noted, one of the key social theories for health is Robert Merton's idea of the "unintended consequences of purposive (or social) action." I argue that the MOLSS qualification helped to spur the growth of a popular response to distress in contemporary China that sits outside of the medicalised realm of severe mental illness and within an affective repertoire that depoliticises critique. I argue that a key consequence of the MOLSS qualification and the concomitant expansion of psychological training available in person and online has also been to produce a discourse through which people explore the reform period, giving space to speak through the subjective experience of living through the intense social change that has characterized modern China.

There are, as Li Zhang (2014: 291) has identified, three broad 'camps' of psychological counsellors in China. The first, the *xueyuan pai* 学院派, are university based academic psychologists, who while potentially could be practicing counsellors, are typically more interested in the theory of counselling and contributing to academic psychology more generally. The second are hospital-based psychiatrists, the *yiyuan pai* 医院派*,* who while qualified to also administer talk therapy are far more inclined, both by training and the market conditions of China's medical system, to medicate their patients. The third are the society-based camp, *shehui pai* 社会派, who do not typically have medical backgrounds, are legally unable to prescribe medications, and who have qualified through the short-term certification programmes put out by the MOLSS. I focus on the society-based camp in this thesis.

In the 14 months that I spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Chengdu I attended the reading group that Ms. Liu ran every Tuesday from her office in the West Moon tower just within the 2nd ring road of the city. From there I met a number of professional counsellors and hobbyists,

and I conducted interviews with them and socialised in their milieu, hanging out when they did, going for dinners and attending lectures. I also managed to get access to a local counselling service, *look after* 观心, and became close friends with one of their therapists, Ms. Wen[6]. I attended the consciousness raising events that they hosted, including lectures and workshops, and interviewed some of their counsellors and management team. I go into more detail about this process in the methodology section of this thesis. As I noted above, an emerging phenomenon in the psy-boom is the use of digital platforms by psychological service providers to both expand therapeutic consciousness in society and also to market and distribute services. With this in mind I also interviewed writers, counsellors and the CEO of one of the largest online psychological service providers, called *Know Yourself*[7].

By focusing on counsellors and hobbyists and engaging with them within both the physical and digital spaces of the psy-boom, I seek to show the diverse uses of psychological training as a popular response to the anxieties of contemporary life. I hope to show, through the stories of how people came to be interested in psychology and what they gained through their psychological training, the ways in which this phenomenon is helping to refashion social relations, reframe suffering and recalibrate understandings of the normative good life 美好生活. Beyond what this study says about contemporary China, I hope it will speak to a broader audience of scholars who are interested in mental health and the ways in which people seek healing. In China the MOLSS qualification created a significant population of 'qualified' healers who were somewhat empowered to tackle the vicissitudes of contemporary life. How should societies empower members of their community to help others to cope with distress? In particular, what is the role of psychology and

[6] I focus more on her in chapter 2

[7] This is the focus of chapter 3, but constant reference to the output of these online psychological service providers is made throughout the thesis

therapy in authoritarian regimes? From an anthropological perspective, how does this form of healing recast personal subjectivity and understandings of agency?

At the core of this thesis is Ms. Liu's invective that "we can't change others; we can only change ourselves." In this thesis I explore the ways in which the psy-boom opens up discussions about negative sentiments and emotions. The psy-boom is a space in which people discuss personal suffering, trauma, distress and the many ways in which life does not meet expectations. In turn, through offering psychological services and educating participants about the use of psychological concepts, it provides them with a tool-kit to try and address these issues in their life and the lives of those around them. The psy-boom represents a shift in personal subjectivity as people come to utilise these tools to introspect and then rearticulate themselves within their social worlds. It therefore is a phenomenon that binds affect to subjectivity and in doing so reframes understandings of agency, terms which I go into significantly more detail below. In saying that "we can't change others," Ms. Liu is trying to draw a boundary between the things that we can control and those that we can't. The turn inwards that the psy-boom offers participants operates on a subjective terrain in which the answers to life's troubles are understood to be within. This thesis takes seriously this claim, and problematises it in contexts in which distress and suffering is so often the result of social interactions and systemic problems.

The rest of this introduction is organised as follows. First, contextual details about China's economic reforms and the specifics of Chinese modernity are explored to explain the social context of China's psy-boom. Particularly I explore how economic reforms created the conditions for hundreds of millions to lift themselves out of poverty, but simultaneously created stark inequalities, corruption and strongly held feelings of anxiety. These reforms created a brutally competitive society and a very limited value system that narrowly defines success and the good life. People therefore turn to psychological concepts and services to try and navigate these conditions.

I then look at how these anxieties should be understood in the context of subjectivity and self-making and the function of the psy-boom in these processes. Finally, the closing sections of this introduction explore the ideas of affect and agency, exploring the ways in which emotions are understood in the psy-boom and how this changes participants belief in what they can and can't control in their lives.

A Modern Solution to Modern Problems

On March 5th, 2019, while I was doing my fieldwork, China's prime minister, Li Keqiang, gave his annual work report on the state of the nation's economy. He spoke in front of the National People's Congress in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, a large auditorium of red seats and red banners and red curtains. Premier Li, in his annual report, used the word "risk" 24 times (the Economist 2019). It was the most times the word risk had been heard in the Great Hall of the People in over a decade, since the 2008 global financial crash.

My time in Chengdu was marked by the government's decision to double-down on harshly policing civil society and control its citizenry, which reflected the fact that they viewed China's economy and social moment as increasingly precarious. As scholars of China have long argued, the continued legitimacy of the CCP has been linked to their ability to guarantee a better material life for their subjects. Feng Chen (1997: 422) calls this "eudaemonic legitimacy," noting that it is incorrect to assume that just because China is an authoritarian single-party state that it does not need to constantly shore up its legitimacy with the people. One such way to ensure the continued legitimacy of the party is to guarantee a better material life for the people. The fruits of this had been clear to see when I arrived in China in 2014 to start learning Mandarin. China's economic growth over the decade that Hu Jintao had been in office had averaged over 10% (WSJ 2012). The material gains of this rapid economic expansion were obvious; I arrived into Shanghai on a magnet

train, having transferred in Beijing in a Norman Foster designed airport. The subways glistened. Pudong twinkled at night with a lightshow co-ordinated across its skyscrapers.

This impressive economic expansion however did not touch everyone equally; in 2019, China's Gini co-efficient stood at 46.5 (statista 2020). A gini co-efficient of over 0.40 is the warning level for potential social unrest set by the UN (statista 2020). It was well over 0.40 each year for the decade leading to 2019. This deep inequality meant that the class structure was already deeply entrenched by the time I arrived in China, and continued year on year. The economy also started to cool off—dropping from over 10% growth throughout the Hu Jintao era through to a more level 5-6% in the years that I was in Chengdu 2018/19.

As David Goodman (2014: 5) has shown in his work on class in China, "class as socio-economic structure, class as performance (the rehearsal of identity), and class as ideological formulation are all involved in the development of China's political economy." In other words, the development of the Chinese economy has been predicated on the creation of a class structure and deep inequality. This should come as no surprise when Deng Xiaoping (quoted in Hilton 2012) entered the reform era by saying that it was imperative to let "some people get rich first." As the author Yu Hua (2014) has noted, the irony of this development is that this represented a movement from a society under Mao which was constantly driven to "never forget class struggle" despite being effectively classless because everyone was so poor, to one that became deeply unequal and class-based in the reform period. People were told to forget class struggle to make money (Yu 2014). As class re-emerged as a significant feature of contemporary Chinese life, so too did class anxiety. Given the government's need to provide for its people to secure "eudaemonic legitimacy" (Chen 1997: 422), spiralling inequality and slowing economic growth creates an increasingly risky political environment for the party and a society increasingly characterized by stark competition and anxiety.

I argue that the government's decision to pursue the MOLSS qualification and to acknowledge the mental health burden in society at large is due to the particular moment in Chinese modernity in which these decisions were made. Risk has been seen as a key facet of second-order or 'reflexive' modernity (Beck 1992, see also Giddens 1991). For Beck, a risk society is "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself" (Beck 1992:21). Beck (1992: 50) sees modernisation as "surges of technological rationalization and changes in work and organization, but beyond that includes much more: the change in societal characteristics and normal biographies, changes in lifestyle and forms of love, change in the structures of power and influence, in the forms of political repression and participation, in views of reality and in the norms of knowledge." These seismic social shifts create fault lines and tremors throughout societies which are forced to become reactionary; in an unstable world flexibility and nimbleness are the keys to continued balance. This is what constitutes second order or 'reflexive' modernity and gives birth to new subjectivities, as risks are individually felt and managed (Beck 1992, see also Giddens 1991).

For Zygmunt Baumann (2000, 2005), building on the work of Beck and Giddens, modernity is 'liquid'. Where 'solid' modernity was oriented towards 'eternity'—i.e. saw value in progress and believed in the comparative permanence of social structures and thus constructed subjects who moved as 'pilgrims' towards greater meaning—'liquid' modernity saw social structures effervesce and move from a state of permanence to one of transience. From pilgrims in search of meaning we become tourists in search of experiences (Bauman 2005: 18). In this sense, "liquid life is consuming life" (Bauman, 2005: 9) as society "judges and evaluates its members mostly by their consumption-related capacities and conduct" (Bauman, 2005: 82). Modernity here is relevant because of the way it has fashioned anxieties about progress in society and how it has precipitated huge social changes in such a relatively short space of time. Moreover, it is relevant because it represents a shift in China from the sovereign exercise of power to a more governmental approach

interested in guaranteeing at least an "adequate life" for its citizens (Zhang, Kleinman, Tu 2011). In China this transition on the individual level has been summed up no better than in the work of Lisa Rofel (2007: 6), who notes that the Mao-era, with its revolutionary socialist politics, was one that operated on the "terrain of 'consciousness'" while post-socialist power operates on the site of "desire".

Desiring selves operate in a context in China in which what "makes one's life meaningful has changed from a collective ethics to an individual centred ethics" (Yan 2010: xxxv). This shift, from socialist consciousness to capitalist desire has precipitated the individualization of Chinese society (Yan 2010, Rofel 2007). This individualisation is not the same as western individualism, as many scholars have pointed out (Kipnis 2012: 201, Hansen 2015), and Chinese individual freedoms are heavily curtailed by the Chinese Communist Party. This has led, arguably, to the creation of "divided selves" (Kleinman et al 2011), as people construct personal transcripts that "enable ordinary people to negotiate China's social reality in such a way as to open or protect the individual's space while getting on with life lived in an authoritarian society" (Kleinman 2011: 286). These selves do not just fragment over time; they are cultivated from a young age. Hansen, in her ethnographic work in a rural boarding school, noted how the students ended up learning to cultivate an "authoritarian individualism" that prepared them for a life of curtailed freedoms (Hansen 2015).

What I hope to show in this thesis is how the psy-boom becomes a venue through which to witness how the social changes brought by China's rapid economic reforms and modernity are understood and figured through by psychological counsellors, their customers and the hobbyists who buy-in to the movement. These social forces shape the use of psychology and in turn the participants of the psy-boom themselves. To better understand how these social forces come to shape the life of a participant in the psy-boom, let us start from the window of the West Moon tower, where we

would meet for Ms. Liu's reading group. For much of the year that I attended, the 2nd ring road, which snaked along beneath us, was being dug-up to make room for a new subway line extension. This meant that Ms. Liu, who only lived a stone's throw away on the other side of the multi-lane highway, now had to trudge circuitously until there was a break in the works. The city was always under construction, she would sometimes complain.

Ms. Liu lived in the same building that she had been in for over 30 years. It was originally housing provided to her as part of her *danwei* 单位 (the socialist production team that defined the Mao-era and would have provided the core markers of one's identity in the planned economy, including arranging housing). She joined the *danwei* out of college, but at a time in which the economy was opening up and reforming under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. By the early 2000s she 'went to sea' 下海 the euphemism for leaving the iron-rice bowl of the state sector and forging a path on her own. She qualified as a psychological counsellor in 2004 and became a key member of the Sichuan Province Science and Technology Association's Psychology Group. She had married in her mid-20s and then divorced by her early 30s and did not remarry. In this way, many of the 'solid' social structures that would have defined her life had she been born a generation before became liquid in her lifetime. She was of the generation that had replaced "self-sacrifice" with "self-striving" (Hizi 2018: 300, see also Yan 2013).

In this personal history we can see a liquification of social structures that provides the conditions for the kind of reflexive modernity that scholars see as typical of late-stage capitalism (Beck 1992, see also Giddens 1991), but this would be too simple a reading. As Andrew Kipnis (2016) has argued, we should understand Chinese development as a recombinant process, in which elements of the past are still heavily present in the future. Ms. Liu still lived in the building of her *danwei* and many of her friends there chose not to go to sea, but rather to wait until retirement to draw a state pension (in China for women this can be as early as at 50 years old). In other words, many of the

people around her still required the strong institutions of the state to provide for them. When I went to visit her one afternoon, her *danwei* was covered in posters heralding Xi Jinping's 'new era' and 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people'. If liquid modernity is defined by the compression of eternity towards short-term consumerist aims (Baumann 2000), then a goal like the 'great rejuvenation' seems overly solid. But perhaps this is because, as Yan Yunxiang has noted, China demonstrates "a number of features of individualization in the age of second modernity at the same time as it bore other features of social change that belong to the modern and even pre-modern eras in the West" (Yan 2010: xvii).

Chinese modernity, argues Yan, is oriented towards three goals: a strong state, a wealthy nation, and a prosperous individual (Yan 2010). The China dream that defines Xi Jinping's premiership is simultaneously a state level meta-narrative that is attempting to muster the state apparatus towards China reclaiming a powerful status in the world, while also providing individuals with a narrative that contextualises the 'self-striving' and 'desiring selves' that have arisen in the reform-era. This is why scholars have noted that China evinces many of the same themes of liquid or reflexive modernity that you see in neo-liberal regimes, without actually being a neo-liberal regime itself. This context, of neo-liberal tendencies appearing in authoritarian regimes has been explored by Aihwa Ong (2006) in her work on 'neoliberalism as exception'. For Ong, neo-liberalism is a malleable governing technology that can be slotted into wider governing assemblages (Ong 2006).

In the context of China, this specific governing modality has come to be termed 'socialism from afar' (Zhang and Ong 2011: 3). Allowing the economy and consumer culture to massively expand has created a unique configuration that has allowed the state to engage in "perestroika without glasnost, market reforms without political liberalism" (Zhang and Ong 2011: 8). The socialist regime is still firmly in place, as is its grip on the populace, though it does so at a remove that creates the conditions for the appearance of limited freedoms.

It is in this context that one should understand the MOLSS qualification and the subsequent creation of a vibrant marketplace for psychological services. As Huang Hsuan-Ying (2014: 192) has noted, the MOLSS vocational qualification "is the convergence of two seemingly irrelevant trajectories: the attempt to create new vocations amid China's labour reform and the efforts of academic psychology to revive a once supressed field." During the Mao-era psychology had been deemed a bourgeoisie 'pseudo-science' and many academic departments focusing on the discipline had been shuttered and their professors struggled against. In the early years of the reform era these departments started to rebuild themselves. The university based counsellors 学院派 and hospital based counsellors 医院派 are considered to be within 'the system' 体制内 whereas the society-based counsellors that I focus on in this thesis are considered to be outside 体制外. This distinction is important because it shows that early on in the reform period there was an acknowledgment that psychological counselling outside of the medical and academic 'system' had enough potential as a future vocation that the government sought to create a standardising regime that would help to shape its development. This is due to the success that academic departments had in staking their claim to the importance of therapy and psychological understandings of distress as ways to help improve people's mental health, but also a reflection that neither these departments nor the medical system itself would be enough to meet the burden of mental health issues that existed within society.

As I will explore in more detail in chapter 1 of this thesis, the MOLSS qualification could not have come into being without significant changes in the understanding of mental illness in China and an acknowledgment by the government that this was a significant problem that would need to be tackled. During the Mao era mental illness was understood as a political failing—'who needs the psychologist when you have the party?' Mao is said to have quipped. Even during the early years

of reform as academic psychology was attempting to re-assert itself, there was still political and social unwillingness to acknowledge mental illness. However, in 1993, the WHO issued it's "global disease burden" report (WHO 1993) which reframed the impact of diseases away from simple mortality and rather to the relative burden of disease morbidity. In this framing mental illness and substance abuse disorders were acknowledged as causing outsized social problems. This had global impact, as nations across the world came to understand the size of the issues that they were dealing with. By 1999, China hosted the WHO for a joint conference to raise awareness of the importance of mental health issues within the country, marking a sea-change in attitudes towards mental illness, designating it a serious public health issue and committing to reform the mental healthcare system (Huang 2014: 188).

However, while a general acknowledgement of the importance of mental health was happening in society at the time it is certainly not axiomatic that the solution to this should have been dealt with outside of the medical establishment or no longer as a public security issue (as I argue in chapter 1, serious mental illness had traditionally been seen as a security issue rather than a medicalised public health issue). At the same time that psychological counsellor became an officially recognized vocation, other occupations that came to be listed included mushroom gardener and tea sampler (Huang 2014: 192). "Most of these efforts failed," Huang (2014: 192) notes, "as the state had lost much of its command over employment."

This attempt by the state reflects the complicated and sometimes arbitrary nature of the reform period. As the author Yu Hua (2014) has put it, "considering the CCP is a communist party following market economics, and all the ambiguity that exists in this, then you can expect a lot of ambiguity in the popular response." The MOLSS qualification arose because the government saw the need to address mental distress throughout the population without overburdening the already overstretched medical system. However, they believed the means to do so was not to completely

cede care to a competitive marketplace, but rather to still try and maintain some order over the development by creating a qualification regime. The context of China practicing 'socialism from afar' (Zhang and Ong 2011) and as evincing tendencies of reflexive modernity is relevant here. The distress of the Chinese population came to be seen as a risk, and the state grasped for a way to manage this while still allowing them to maintain control despite the reality of how complex the issue (and society) had become. As I argue in later chapters, particularly chapter 2, while this theoretically amounted to "letting a hundred flowers bloom" in terms of creating a dynamic market of psychological services (Chang et al 2015), in reality because getting qualified was relatively easy, and the uses to which the qualification could be used so poorly defined, it created a wild-west situation. Counsellors were able to spin off a diverse range of therapeutic modalities that localized 本土化 western psychological concepts (Zhang 214), sell a dizzying array of psychological training programmes and at times massively overstep the bounds of what they were actually qualified to do. In the wake of the Wenquan earthquake, in 2008, when poorly trained psychological counsellors poured into the rubble to try and save the local population from their trauma, a popular saying in the city was "beware of fire, beware of thieves and beware of psychologists" (Huang 2014: 197).

By 2013, the government issued the National Mental Health law 国家精神卫生,法, after decades of deliberations (for discussion see Huang 2018). It enshrined a separation between psychiatry and clinical psychotherapy on the one hand, to be conducted within hospitals for patients suffering from severe mental distress, and on the other, private psychological counselling (Hizi 2017: 106, Huang 2014: 203). This law created a clear divide between psychological counsellors 心理咨询师, psychotherapists 临床心理咨询师 and psychiatrists 心理治疗师 (the latter two could also be referred to as 心理医生, due to their position within the medical system 体制内).

According to the law, anyone who is suffering from severe mental health issues who is seen by a psychological counsellor must be referred to professional psychotherapists or psychiatrists, who have medical backgrounds and the ability to prescribe medications. "Psychotherapy can't be… practiced in settings other than hospitals," according to Buxin Han, PhD, president-elect of the Chinese Psychological Society (CPS) (quoted in Clay 2019). Commentators have underlined the ambiguity inherent in this claim because the law does not stipulate exactly what psychotherapy is or what would qualify someone to be able to provide psychotherapeutic services (Clay 2019). The law does however stipulate penalties for those who practice illegally, and this caused a large debate amongst therapists with the MOLSS qualification who feared that they would now be unable to practice (see Huang 2018). In reality, the law simply enforced a cleavage between the medicalized realm of mental illness and the social world of everyday distress, the former to be dealt with in clinical settings and the latter to be dealt with by psychological counsellors and online services. This mapped onto cultural tendencies to separate between these two realms already. As Li Zhang (2020: 77) has noted, clients will often ask of their counsellors, "'is the problem mental or psychological?'" Chinese clients tend to differentiate what they call 'mental problems' from 'psychological problems' by which they mean the former is a more serious, psychiatric disorder and thus harder to treat, while the latter is socially induced and more reliable." As I show below, the rise in psychological counselling tracks along these lines, maintaining and reinforcing this distinction.

Psychological Problems, Psychological Solutions

As the previous section illuminated, the MOLSS qualification was both a result of and a response to the ambiguity of the reform period. As this thesis argues, the massive interest in the psychological services that subsequently became available represents a popular response to the anxieties created by the precarity and inequity of economic reforms, and the massive social changes

that have been experienced over this period. I see the the psy-boom as a popular response to everyday distress. It arose to provide a space within which to discuss the many ways that life sometimes does not meet expectations and to try to offer solutions. Importantly, these services were offered outside of the medical establishment 体制外 and from a camp of psychological counsellors who emically defined themselves as being 'society based.' These counsellors therefore have had to carve a space for themselves within the dynamic Chinese marketplace, which means that they not only have to promote their own services, but have to justify the value of a psychological service in and of itself. One of the unique aspects of the psy-boom is that the varied nature of the psychological services and trainings on offer means that participants in the psy-boom pick and choose from a chaotic field that doesn't tend to focus on particular psychological schools, but rather illuminates the "virtues of psychology in general" (Hizi 2016: 73).

This was echoed by Luna, a counsellor in her mid-40s that I met at a workshop on family therapy, when she noted that, "this field is so chaotic 乱 that I often attend trainings and don't know what school the trainer is espousing. So, I just go to many trainings and try to take away from that what I can." Many of the people I interviewed espoused a "what works, works" attitude to their engagement with psychology. It is important therefore to understand exactly what people meant when they would refer to 'psychology' 心理学, as this has significant implications for how we should understand people who operated as psychological counsellors or self-proclaimed as 'psychology hobbyists' 心理爱好者.

As I detail in chapter 1, there are numerous terms for the mind in Chinese. *Xin* 心 is actually the character for heart, but can be used to speak for the heart/mind as a holistic reflection of the embodied understanding of the mind in Chinese culture, which I discuss in chapter 1. The translation of psychology as *Xinli* 心理 comes from the early c20th, as European works came to

be translated into Chinese. In 1907, Wang Guowei translated the Danish writer Harold Hodding's *Outline of Psychology* into Chinese as *Xinlixue Gailun* 心理学概论 (Zhang 2020: 24). This choice moved beyond Yan Yongjing's term *xinling xue* 心灵学, which he had coined in an 1889 translation of Joseph Haven's *mental philosophy: including the intellect, sensibilities, and will.* In emphasizing *li* 理 'diples', Wang Guowei was choosing to define psychology as a means of understanding the mind through principles. This also implies a scientific understanding of the mind, as *li* 理 is a common character used to translate scientific terms (物理学 is physics, for example).

The popularity of science as a governing technology in China should not be overstated. As Greenhalgh and Zhang argue in their edited volume *Can Science and Technology Save China?* (2020: 1), "since its embrace of modernity a century ago, China has been animated by official dreams of national revival and global ascent. Central to every dream has been the promise of modern science." The fact that the state chose to create a vocational qualification for psychological counselling can also be understood in light of this. Here was a scientifically grounded modality that could be leveraged to help tackle the mental health burden that the state was coming to understand was a significant risk but that it did not have commensurate resources to tackle alone. By creating the MOLSS qualification this burden was spread throughout society as psychological counsellors were enfranchised to operate in the marketplace. On an individual level, this context can also help explain the rise of popular psychology in society, because psychology from its very linguistic construction implies the existence of principles of the mind that can be understood and thus turned to a person's benefit.

It is towards these principles of the mind that people in the psy-boom turned. As I argue in this thesis, through engagement with psychological services and through their various training activities my interviewees took as tacit a psychodynamic vision of the psyche. By this I mean that they

believed that mental states were not fixed and immoveable, but that there were techniques that would help them to better understand their interior selves. Through this understanding, it was hoped, they could then better control themselves and optimize their lives and relations with others. Crucially, engaging in psychological counselling and training helped people give voice to their subjective feelings of contemporary life, through the discourses that circulated in the digital and in-person venues of the psy-boom. Therefore, when people would say that they benefitted from psychology, or that they were a psychological hobbyist, or that psychology had changed them, this was emic shorthand for stating that an introspective turn, guided by the tools they cultivated in the psy-boom, had now become a defining feature of their life. This is why throughout this thesis I refer to psychology, broadly defined, unless speaking about a specific psychological school or therapeutic modality (like CBT as taught in Ms. Liu's reading group).

I also use this emic description as a way to write about the psy-boom without trying to shoehorn my own value judgements about particular therapeutic modalities or trends within academic psychology. There are many issues with western psychology, such as the replication crisis (see Maxwell et al 2015) or the fact that most studies are drawn from Western Educated Industrialised Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) participants, and thus presents results as universal across cultures rather than as specific to a particular subset of the investigated populations in the West. This means that a lot of the material that participants in the psy-boom were referring to and engaging with was probably not as applicable to their lives as they thought (Heinrich et al 2010). However, these issues were hardly discussed amongst participants and even when I brought them up, my arguments were often dismissed. Therapists were not slavish in their adoption of terms, and there is of course a lot of localisation in the way that psychological concepts are engaged with in China (Zhang 2014). Unless it is relevant to the ethnographic vignette I am drawing, I shy away from critiquing participants' use of particular psychological concepts or therapeutic forms.

There is no stable definition of psychology nor unified understanding of precisely what the aims and outcomes of psychological interventions should be that the participants I engaged with in the psy-boom were drawing from. As Li Zhang (2014, 2020) has rightly pointed out, participants of the psy-boom do not merely parrot western psychological concepts, but rather localize them 本土化. In her ethnographic work, she showed "that it is through constant dialogue, translation, and re-articulation between multiple regimes of knowledge, cultural values, and social practices that a new form of talk therapy with "Chinese characteristics" is emerging" (Li Zhang 2014: 283). As I argue in chapter 2 of this thesis, not only is there a process of localization that shapes the understanding of psychology for participants, but the way they come to engage with these concepts through various forms of training and the wider context of the stage of economic development within which they entered the field have significant observable differences in the way that they come to embody their psychological practice. To speak of 'psychology' and the impact that it has had on people's lives therefore needs qualification. One of the key contributions of this thesis is to show the heterogeneity of the psy-boom and the way that it intersects with other social phenomenon. Throughout this thesis I refer to the emic definition of psychology as an introspective tool that had tangible benefits in participants lives. This was how people understood psychology in the broadest possible sense when they identified themselves as psychological counsellors or hobbyists. They were people who were engaging with psychological concepts to plumb their depths and re-engage with the world in light of their discoveries.

This shift has been called the "inner revolution" by Li Zhang (2020), and as she argues the rise of the psy-boom represents a change in subjectivity in China through the cultivation of "therapeutic selves" (Zhang 2018, 2020). A therapeutic self, for Zhang (2018, 2020: 16) is "a mode of self created with the aid of psychotherapeutic engagements." Crucially what this self is engaging in is a constant "articulation and rearticulation between the self and the social" (Zhang 2020: 18). The psy-boom, as I argue in this thesis, provides a space to figure through the vicissitudes of life and

arms participants with a language to speak out their distress. It is through this space that Zhang's (2020: 18) articulation and rearticulation takes place. As I argue, this constitutes a shift in personal subjectivity. Subjectivity is a key theme throughout this thesis.

To take a broad definition of subjectivity it is "the sense of one's self and one's place in the world" (Biehl 2007: 129). Subjectivity is the historical and contextualised sensibility through which the self is understood and mediated. Crucially, I view subjectivity as a frame through which people view the world and themselves, which can be cultivated. Subjectivities therefore are not fixed but are the product of embodied practices, as I explore more fully in chapter 2. The importance of subjectivity for the study of China has been noted by a number of scholars in recent years. Most notably this can be seen in the work of Arthur Kleinman and his collaborators, who demonstrate that the subjective realm—what they refer to as "deep China"—is now the most dynamic and critical site for social change in the contemporary PRC (Kleinman et al 2011).

However, I am conscious that the literature on Chinese subjectivity often falls into tropes (see Bregnbæk's critique of this 2016: 423). As Bregnbæk (2016: 423) points out, China-focused literature often develops catchphrases that are supposed to capture broad swathes of subjective experience in the reform period. There are, to cherry-pick a few examples, Zhang and Ong's (2011) 'entrepreneurial selves', Zhang's (2018) 'therapeutic selves', Kleinman et al's (2011) 'divided selves' and Rofel's (2007) 'desiring selves.' There were times when I toyed with coining my own trope; the psy-boom as cultivating 'uncertain selves' or as an attempt at creating 'untangling selves'. But this would be to ignore the vast diversity of experiences that I witnessed within the psy-boom and the many ways that people derived meaning from their engagement with therapy and psychology. When does a desiring self become entrepreneurial? Can a therapeutic self also be said to be divided?

I also believe that these tropes end up drawing too close a connection between the self and a particular aspect of Chinese modernity. For example, therapeutic selves (Zhang 2018) are drawn in too rigid a relation to the rise of psychotherapy. It is not axiomatic to me that the qualities that Li Zhang is describing were really being "cultivated" (Zhang 2018: 45) in the therapeutic encounter rather than having existed prior to it and were now finally being spotlighted. "Desiring selves" (Rofel 2007) are drawn too tightly in relation to the expanding market economy, despite the fact that the time that Rofel conducted her research in the late 90s, there were still many overhangs from the Maoist planned economy that had preceded it (as I showed above in the case of Ms. Liu). Kleinman et al's (2011) "divided selves" put stark emphasis on the relation between the individual and the party state. It is easy to do so in China, when the state is such a powerful entity, but it risks drawing portraits of individuals who are in constant battle with the regime, caught between resistance and accommodation.

To avoid this tendency in the literature, I seek rather to show how the psy-boom plays out as a subjective force in the light of huge social upheavals in China as a result of economic reforms. Considering one of my key contentions is that the psy-boom creates space within society to discuss the subjective experience of rapid social change in reform-era China, it would be too simplistic to try to attribute clear causality to the psy-boom such that it could be said to be constructing any particular 'self'. Rather I view it as a venue where all of the competing forces that come to define the self are worked through by the participant. This also allows subjectivity in the context of this thesis to not merely be located in the murky interior of the self, as a modern western view might hold it, but rather to keep space for an idea of subjectivity as existing in the "dynamic between influence and response so central to indigenous Chinese thought" (Kuan 2015: 49). As I show in this thesis the form of subjectivity that is cultivated in the psy-boom is directly related to the way that negative affects are discussed by participants and how this shapes their understandings of their capacity to heal, and thus the amount of agency that they have over key facets of their lives.

The Affected

Following from this observation that the psy-boom is the venue through which participants define themselves in light of their psychological training and rearticulate themselves to their social world and that this is a powerful subjective shift, it is important to understand the role that language plays in the psy-boom. Another theme that runs throughout this thesis is that of affect. I argue that the psy-boom provides its participants with a psychological toolkit to navigate their lives, but it should be noted that this toolkit, by nature, is a linguistic one. It is conveyed by teachers like Ms. Liu discursively, and it becomes a language that participants use to speak about the world and themselves.

This can be seen through a vignette drawn from a live CCTV news broadcast on National Day in 2012 that became a popular meme that people would sometimes reference during my fieldwork (also quoted in Chen 2019: 20). The reporter walks up to a day labourer and asks him, are you happy? *Ni Xingfu ma?* He looks at her blankly and responds, *bu, wo xing zeng.* The word for happiness here, *xing* 幸福 is a homophone also for surname, so he believes she is asking him, is your surname Fu 姓副? He responds, No, I'm called Zeng. The story immediately went viral on the Chinese internet as educated urbanites laughed at the mistake.

Happiness, as explored in the work of Becky Hsu (2019) and others, is far more enmeshed in social relationships and wider social and political structures in China than elsewhere. The idea that there is not a universal conception of happiness can be taken further. If happiness is not stable throughout cultures and times, then what about the phenomenological experience of happiness? While it could be argued that it implied that no-one had ever before asked Mr. Zeng if he was happy, that surely does not imply that he had never felt joy or pleasure. What created the

misunderstanding between them was the language that the television interviewer used to speak out this subjective experience. This thesis, dealing as it does with mental health, personal development and psychotherapy, spends a lot of time discussing emotions. It is important therefore to first consider how emotions are understood, and what their social function might be.

Typologies of emotions have existed for millennia. The Confucian text *Liji* 礼记 lists seven feelings thought to be innate: joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, hate, and desire (Dahl 2020). In the renaissance period, some fifteen hundred years later, in France, Renee Descartes put forth his own theory of emotions, listing wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness as the six "primitive passions" (Dahl 2020). More recently, Paul Ekman (2007), a professor at UCSF, has written about there being seven 'universal emotions'——anger, contempt, disgust, enjoyment, fear, sadness, and surprise. Working across cultures he argues that these emotions are universal or 'basic' because of the way they are visible in micro-facial expressions (Ekman 2004). This conception of the existence of clearly distinguishable emotions that exist globally and thus prior to culture, perhaps finds its most obvious pop-cultural expression in the Pixar movie *Inside-Out*, which shows the inner workings of a person controlled by actual emotional levers in their brain. Ekman was a consultant for that movie.

The idea of there being a 'universal' psyche that would see globally consistent emotional expressions however has been widely critiqued in recent years. The most prominent such critique is the argument that psychological studies generalize across populations despite the research focusing on a small set of people—which as mentioned previously, one group of scholars call WEIRD for being derived from a western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic background (Heinrich et al 2010). This is because so many studies are conducted in academic institutions in the West and draw their research participants from the student bodies of those institutions, which skews the results. The results are presented as universal and exported, like a

commodity. This process has been called "the globalization of the American psyche" by one critic (Watters 2010).

Moving beyond the biases in the psychological literature, recent scholarship attempts to show the cultural construction of emotions. In her book *How Emotions are Made,* Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) a neuroscientist at North Eastern University, argues that while there are sensations which might be deemed universal, i.e. arousal or valence, the way that our mind makes sense of these sensations is cultural. In other words, emotions are the interpretations of sensations as determined by our personal histories, cultural context, expectations and language (Barrett 2017). The constructionist understanding of emotions therefore functions akin to the way that other stimuli have cultural expressions. Russians are able to distinguish between more shades of blue than Americans, because the Russian language has separate words for dark blue (siniy) and light blue (goluboy), making them more culturally attuned to their differences (Dahl 2020). North Americans and Europeans when presented with the odour of almonds will say it is sweet, because of the prevalence of foods such as marzipan in these cultures, whereas Japanese associate the smell of almonds with the salty taste of pickled condiments, and so define the odour as savoury (Spence 2013). In other words, while our brains may have universal capacities for stimulation, their interpretative capacities are cultured.

This observation in the context of the rise of psychotherapy and psychotherapeutic concepts in China means that this phenomenon can be understood as a process of refinement happening in the interpretation of sensations that come to be experienced as emotions. I deal with this in more detail in chapters 3 and 5 of this thesis, but my broad argument here is that a function of the psy-boom is to create a shared language of emotions, particularly to discuss anxiety, trauma and distress. This language can be understood as an affective register which has the potential to connect people to each other and to wider social phenomena. In refining the way that people experience the many

sensations of their life by providing a more nuanced language to communicate those experiences, the psy-boom in China can be said to be a significant development in subjective experience.

There has been an "affective turn" in the social sciences in recent years, which I explore in more depth in chapters 3 and 5 (Mussel 2017: 26, Clough 2007). Broadly, this literature sees the affective realm as an important site for investigation that has traditionally been overlooked by the more dominant materialist and positivist schools of social theory. There is some division within the literature on affect. There is one school, led by scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002) and Simon Mussel (2017: 26) which looks at "affect" and describes it "in terms of its autonomy from conscious perception and language, as well as emotion" (Massumi 2002: 25) or as the "supra-rational, bodily, material and visceral layers that prefigure experience, those features that register their effects on us before and even beyond our conscious engagement" (Mussel 2017: 26). In other words, affect for these scholars is theorised as existing prior to emotions. While there is certainly value to this scholarship, it can end up tracking back towards the problematic realm of theorising about universal experiences that can occur across cultures. I therefore largely elide this literature in the course of this thesis.

Other affect scholars, such as Eva Illouz (2014, 2019) or Sarah Ahmed (2013), choose not to theorize "affect". Rather they speak of affect*s* more broadly as synonymous with emotions. These latter scholars focus on the role of emotions in broader social formations like the market (Illouz 2014) or in their potential for connecting subjects into social justice causes (Ahmed 2013). This latter scholarship is more relevant to this thesis because work on affects underscores the cultured formation of emotion and its social potential. Antecedents to this work go back as far as Durkheim in western scholarship (see Barnwell 2018 for discussion). In China these ideas go back even further; the Confucian typology of emotions required that they be kept in check through rites 礼 and that only through careful attention paid to their regulation could harmony be achieved. In the

Zhuangzi emotions are seen as the enemy—as Chris Fraser (2010: 98) notes it "advocates a life unperturbed by emotions, including even pleasurable, positive emotions such as joy or delight." In the Zhuangzi the idea is not to regulate emotions as Confucian thinking dictates but rather to transcend them entirely to exist in a state of serene calm.

In the psy-boom, participants were not trying to check their emotions through rites nor to transcend them altogether. As I argue in chapter 5, they were attempting to develop techniques and a language that would ensure the 'free flowing of emotions.' A lot of this work involved the creation of 'emotional ontologies' a term I borrow from Eva Illouz (2019: 204). An emotional ontology is a shared register of emotions that is mutually intelligible amongst persons. Illouz argues in the context of the rise of psychotherapeutic culture in the West that emotional ontologies form "the ground for raising claims, for displaying a specific form of competence in formulating expectations and provid[e] social scripts for interactions" (Illouz 2019: 214). She is trying to underscore the way that discourses from the realm of psychotherapy have become pervasive markers of emotionality throughout society. In China, where these discourses are more nascent it is easier to identify the process at work. Building on the work of Illouz, who studies cultures which are, since Freud, steeped in therapeutic discourse, by looking at China I seek to show how emotional expression is a cultured object formed through dynamic processes and in dialogue with social forces like gender, class and politics.

This thesis argues that the affective discourses of the psy-boom interplay to form new subjectivities. One such example was when Ms. Wen—who we will meet in more detail in chapter 2 of this thesis——a qualified psychological counsellor working for a practice called *look after*, took me to a local government office, in the Jinsha area of Qingyang district, in Chengdu 青羊区金沙街道便民服务中心. She was there as a representative of *look after* to give a talk about 'stress' 压力. The talk was split into four sections; '1) how stressed are you? 2) what are the sources of stress? 3)

Stress and your emotions 4) how to manage stress'. She stood at the front of a small shabby room with desks arranged in neat rows like a classroom. At one point she wrote the word *stress* on the white board in large characters; 压力. "What do these two characters mean?" Someone read them out loud. "Good," she said, "the best way to live is to avoid these characters."

There was scattered laughter in the room. Everyone there knew about stress and experienced intense pressure in their lives. They were low-level government officials in a suburb of Chengdu, with an insurmountable workload, caught between the sometimes-incompatible pressures from the public they served and the expectations of the bureaucratic regime they were a part of. They knew exactly what *stress* 压力 was. However, what they didn't necessarily know, and what *look after* was being paid a few thousand rmb to provide, was how to think through the experience of stress and create coping mechanisms. At the end of the session, when we left, I asked her if she really thought there was anyone there that didn't know what 'stress' meant. "No, of course, everyone knows that word. However, without us, do they really understand it in the context of their workplace? Can they bring up their feeling of stress to their superiors without us first coming and reinforcing this language? We are showing that this is an issue that needs to be focused on." I asked what a similar local government bureau might have done twenty years ago, before companies like *look after* were around to give such talks. "Nothing," she said.

It is probably not strictly true that these bureaus would have had no interest or mechanisms to address the woes of their employees in the past. As Li Zhang (2020: 54) has noted, she often encountered older psychological counsellors in her fieldwork who had previously worked as socialist 'thought workers' 思想工作 in the Mao Era. In fact, her father had also worked as a thought worker, to which she partially attributes her interest in the rise of the psy-boom (2020: 6). However, what I believe Ms. Wen was arguing for, and what I propose in this thesis, is that instead

of understanding the issues of these employees as political, and thus offering a political solution, today the understanding is affective. The interest here is not in whether or not a person is able to carry out their work in a socialist context, but how they are *feeling* about carrying out their work today. As I argue in chapter 5 stress around work is a key theme within the psy-boom and issues of burnout are rife in society.

Feelings of "involution" 内卷化 are often invoked in relation to the intense pressure and long hours expected of Chinese workers, and their growing sense of futility as they see diminishing returns for their labour. An involution is unlike a revolution. An involution is a process in which additional input does not produce greater output (Ji 2020). Like turning a wheel in mud. This term was first coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1963) in his work on Javanese agriculture to explain why this agrarian society had not developed. Despite the agricultural economy becoming more sophisticated this simply led to more labourers tilling the fields. In the end, they ate all the extra output they were creating. As Xiang Biao, an anthropologist, has said of the term, "involution is not just about fierce competition, it also expresses a sense of competing for nothing" (Xiang quoted in Ji 2020). That this somewhat obscure anthropological term in translation became a popular internet meme in China to explain contemporary life was a strange coincidence of my fieldwork. As I have already stated in this introduction anxieties over the normative good life and the intense competition in society give salience to the psy-boom. It is no wonder that the workplace, where many of these anxieties are exacerbated, therefore becomes a key venue both as an object of discussion in the psy-boom, but also as a site in which the psychological tools that are developed are then supposedly deployed. I was unable to continue fieldwork with the Jinsha government workers due to the coronavirus pandemic, but the hope would have been to witness how it was that they leveraged their affective language of stress, couched in the terms of psychology, to advocate for themselves.

Agents of change?

One of the regular attendees of Ms. Liu's reading group was a retired TV presenter who had lost her only son a few years ago. Unable to return to the high-pressure environment of TV broadcasting, she had ended up starting a small business teaching elocution lessons to small children. Her speaking voice was so beautiful that upon meeting her my first thought was that this woman would be perfect for TV, unaware as of yet about her personal history. One day she thought it would be fun to host a mock interview day for the children, who would perform as 'student journalists.' The reading group met for a one-off lunch on a Sunday and once we had eaten, we moved into an upstairs majiang[8] room. The child journalists trooped in. They declared, in unison, their interest to interview us about psychology. They all held tiny microphones with the name of her company on them.

Ms. Liu was nominated to go first. She took a single question from each of the children. When one of the student journalists asked what prompted her interest in psychology, she answered that no-one understood her. "I thought the problem was other people," she continued, "but after two years of studying, ultimately I realised the problem wasn't them, it was me." It was something I would often hear her say.

This is what had prompted Ms. Liu's therapeutic journey. In training to become a counsellor she had developed a psychological understanding of herself which helped her see herself as an agent capable of changing her life. Psychology allowed her to take responsibility for her subjective feelings, gave her an affective repertoire to discuss her emotions and ultimately gave her a sense

[8] A game popular in Sichuan province, where participants sit around large tables and play with tiles in a way broadly analogous to the Western card game Rummy

that she was in control of her own healing. It was in this sense that I came to understand her invocation that "we can't change others, we can only change ourselves."

Considering this thesis deals with subjectivity and affect and takes as its core topic mental health and wellbeing in the context of China's psy-boom, it is necessary to engage with the concept of agency. Ms. Liu felt that her engagement with psychology allowed her to have agency over herself and to fix the problems in her life (the problem, she came to understand, was herself). This was similar to the contention of Ms. Wen when she argued that the language of stress that she was teaching to the cadres in Jinsha was designed to provide them with agency to advocate for themselves in the workplace. During the lecture she had drawn on psychological studies about stress to show how it could cause significant problems in the workplace and for individual employees. The idea therefore was that because this lecture was given to all levels of cadre in the bureau—the leader of that particular branch had been sat in the front row and introduced Ms. Wen—that employees could then feel empowered to take these issues up with their bosses, who would no longer be able to say that they didn't understand the complaint that was being made. The affective register of stress, argued Ms. Wen, provided a commonly held discourse through which the employees and bosses could figure through the subjective experience of working in that particular branch of local government. As I show in chapter 5, the language of psychological troubles works in a similar fashion for participants of the psy-boom more generally.

This naturally opens questions around agency. Agency, as a core concept in anthropology, is the subject of intense debates. Some scholars have sought to distinguish between actors and agents, arguing that actors work within rule-oriented or rule-governed situations, where an 'agent' "refers to a person engaged in the exercise of power in the sense of the ability to bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world" (Karp 1986: 137). If we are to take this definition of agency, it is hard to say whether the cadres of the Jinsha bureau would be actors or agents should they choose to

employ the psychological concepts that have been offered to them by Ms. Wen. The risk of a conception of agency that draws its distinction with actors by reference to power implies that agency can only be understood in contexts of the exercise of free will to shift broader systems of governance and control. Agency is more complex than simply being a synonym for free will. Rather, as Laura Ahearn (2001: 112) argues, a more nuanced definition of agency would be "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act." As she notes, drawing on the practice theory of scholars like Bourdieu (1977) and Ortner (2006), agency should be understood not as a priori to systems but as constitutive of and constituting those systems (Ahearn 2001: 112).

As Ann Swidler (1986: 273) has argued, culture influences action by "shaping a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct." Her term "strategies of action" encapsulates the way that people utilised psychological concepts in the psy-boom to create a tool-kit that they could use in their daily lives. As I explore in chapter 3 the literature of the psy-boom that is popular online is saturated with articles explaining a vast array of psychological phenomenon and offering tools that people can put into practice in their daily lives. When we understand agency as a "socioculturally mediated capacity to act," (Ahearn 2001: 112) in the specific context of the psy-boom we can understand this as the way in which therapeutic cultures provide people with psychological tools that they use as "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986: 273) in their daily lives and to heal from traumas in their past.

As I explore in more detail in chapter 2, understandings of psychology become embodied and form practices that in turn shape the way that psychological concepts are applied and understood in society at large. I go into this debate at length in reference to the habitus in chapter 2. If we see agency as a mediated capacity to act, then we can see that the argument Ms. Wen is making about teaching the Jinsha bureau about stress implies that it helps to provide agency for those employees. Armed with this discourse, they are able to then advocate for themselves within the workplace. In

the case of Ms. Liu, armed with an understanding of her problems as being rooted in herself and therefore within her capacity to work on, she is invited to act upon herself as an agent of her own healing. In this sense the psy-boom becomes an invitation—by allowing people to step away from their lives temporarily, introspect and then rearticulate themselves to their social world (Zhang 2020: 18).

In the final chapter of this thesis I explore the way in which emotions are understood in the psy-boom. Ms. Liu argues that "emotions need to freely flow" but yet they are also supposed to be controlled and directed towards correct action. What engagement with psychology is supposed to provide for participants in the psy-boom is the ability to have their emotions flow in the right way, such that they neither become blocked nor spill over and cause greater problems. This kind of embodied control has links to traditional Chinese ideas about propensity 势 (Julien 1995) or Wang Yangming's concept of "the unity of inner knowledge and action" 知行合一. These ideas are complex and beyond the scope of this thesis. However, these ideas are mentioned in passing to explain the cultural antecedents that the psy-boom is building on, whether or not these concepts are explicitly tackled within the psy-boom itself (Wang Yangmingism is popular in some circles in the psy-boom, but is not dealt with in this thesis). The point is that the psy-boom did not develop in the context of a tabula rasa but ends up building on deeply held cultural norms. The psy-boom has at its core a desire to create "strategies of action" or psychological tool-kits that participants can draw on to ensure the right emotional responses in any given situation. Its popularity is partly down to the fact that this idea is not a new one, but rather one that has an incredibly long legacy in China that is merely being expressed through psychotherapeutic idioms.

As I argue in this thesis, the psy-boom can in many senses be seen as a Foucauldian technology of the self. As Foucault (1988: 18) defined them, these technologies "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies

and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality." In the case of psychological service provision on Wechat, which I look at in chapter 3, I argue that the platform operates as a literal technology of the self, in the way it markets digital interventions to improve mental wellbeing. If we understand agency as a mediated capacity to act, then the expansion of psychologically influenced technologies of the self can be understood as increasing agency because they increase the possible realms of action for a person. As I argue in chapter 5 this does not necessarily mean that it creates conditions for people to radically change their social world or to alter the external forces that govern much of their life. However, it does provide a capacity to act on themselves to better accommodate these forces and make subtle adjustments, as I explore in relation to gender and patriarchy in chapter 4.

It is important, as scholars such as Sabha Mahmood (2005: 9) have argued, to push beyond a reductive understanding of agency that implies resistance to prevailing forms of power, especially when our understanding of resistance in the western tradition tends to "imply progressive politics on the analytics of power." For Mahmood (2005: 14), agency "must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity." Working on the Islamic revival movement in Egypt, she is sceptical of understandings of agency which do not account for the decision of the women she engaged with to practice Islam and adopt forms of religious practice such as veiling. As she notes, these actions are often dismissed as passive acquiescence to dominant patriarchal structures or self-sabotaging from a western understanding of agency as an exercise of free will in a liberatory sense. Rather, she sees agency in the decision to embrace Islam because of how it alters the way that these women live and how they understand their duties and obligations.

Similarly, though the psy-boom in China could be seen as limiting agency by turning people inwards and away from the extant social causes of their distress (a similar critique is also made of therapy and mindfulness in the West by writers such as Purser 2015 and Hari 2017), this critique does not account for the powerful exercise in agency that turning inwards represents. Importantly, as this thesis argues, China is both a brutal marketplace defined by stark competition and a totalitarian regime. In this context it can be easy to frame any action there as either a way to accommodate the regime or to build a resilient self capable of surviving being buffered by the market. In the face of prevailing market forces and the power of the CCP, it can be easy to fall into an anthropological tendency that casts agency solely within the rubric of resistance (Kuan 2015: 21). Instead, I argue that the psy-boom does not represent either complicity or confrontation with the market or the political system. Rather, I argue that, through the psychological tool-kit it offers its adherents, it helps foster considered action. By allowing people to disentangle and rearticulate themselves in their social worlds (Zhang 2020: 151), building communities of fellow suffers and affective registers through which to discuss what is affecting them, the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001: 112) in the psy-boom is a considered one.

This considered action can be understood along similar lines to the type of agency that scholars have observed amongst *yangsheng* practitioners. Writing about the phenomenon Zhang and Farquhar (2005: 309) they argued that "however apolitical they may appear, people obscurely realize the distribution of powers in their environment, and they routinely craft responses to power—and forms of personal power—that go beyond collaboration, co-optation, or any narrow understanding of resistance." In *yangsheng* they noted a "non-confrontational" but highly political form of life (Zhang and Farquhar 2005: 309). Similarly, the psy-boom is a phenomenon that has deeply political dimensions. In presenting the notion of considered action I seek to show the way that the psy-boom helps people to puzzle through the difficulties of navigating contemporary life. The psychological tools on offer allow people to both reflect on actions in the past and to shape

future responses to situations. Considered action is understood as both the ability to introspect and step away from present trauma, and the ability to change the self so that future trauma might be mitigated. In the conclusion to this thesis I will explore how this relates to understandings of healing.

The psy-boom, as an introspective space, helps users to think through what it means to live in a dynamic society that is often unfair and that frequently forces people to make choices between their often contradictory desires, as I explore in chapter 4. It would be unfair to dismiss Ms. Liu's belief that the cause of many of her problems was internal, and that her engagement with psychology and therapeutic technologies had helped her to heal. When she tells us that "we can't change others," she is choosing to focus her energy upon the realm that she believes she has most control, which is herself. That this self is socially embedded and buffered by external forces means we should take seriously her claim but should also ask the ways in which this subjective understanding of personal healing complicates our understanding of agency. Just as Mahmood showed in her study, what I see in the psy-boom is that agency is expressed in the way that psychological techniques come to be used in and amongst persons, and that these certainly enable "specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity" (Mahmood 2005: 14). It is to these modes of being that this thesis is dedicated.

ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS:

Methodology:

Here I explain the context in which this fieldwork was undertaken, the process of gaining ethical approval and the role of serendipity in conducting ethnographic fieldwork in China. I also explain how Covid-19 heavily impacted this work by foreclosing the opportunity for a second year of fieldwork in Shanghai affiliated with Fudan University. I detail therefore how this project came to be shaped during the pandemic and the decisions that were made for it to take the form that it has.

Chapter 1: *Look at My Mental Illness! A History*

This chapter explores the shifting definitions of mental health in China historically, starting from early traditional medical texts like the *Huangdi Neijing* through to contemporary understandings as informed by the psy-boom. This thesis is focused on the society-based camp of psychological counsellors, therefore the purpose of this chapter is to provide context for how mental health is framed in society and the discursive shifts this has entailed, so as to inform the ethnographic materials that come in later chapters. Emic descriptions of mental health are also drawn into discussion with some of the key debates in the literature on Global Mental Health

Chapter 2: *Three Generations of Care*

The heterogenous quality of the psy-boom is explored through the life stories of three counsellors in Chengdu who are taken to represent three different generations of the psy-boom. Building on the observations of scholars focused on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) who have shown the influence that the method of transmission has on the practice of TCM (Hsu 1999), this chapter shows a similar phenomenon. It is argued that the social context and the form of training that people came to be considered "qualified" as a psychological counsellor created clearly observable differences in how these three counsellors understood their practice of psychological counselling. This is argued to be an example of embodied history.

An earlier version of this chapter is published in the journal *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* under the title Bram, Barclay. 2020. "Help-seekers, Callers and Clients: Embodied History in China's psy-boom." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 34(2):286-300.

Chapter 3: *Building the Skill of Happiness*

A key site of the most dramatic advances in how mental healthcare is understood and psychological services are consumed is online. This chapter looks at psychological service provision on Wechat, through the examples of the three largest psychological service providers on the platform. This chapter combines primary source material with ethnographic interviews conducted with key stakeholders and writers for these platforms, to explore how psychological concepts are disseminated for a popular audience and the way this shapes personal subjectivity. It is argued that the affordances of Wechat shape the way that psychological services are promoted and consumed. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the technology functions to get a true sense of how psychological services are engaged with by people in China today. This chapter also shows how the Wechat model of psychological service provision ends up mirroring many of the key anxieties that exist in wider Chinese society, as it is an incredibly competitive marketplace that

is heavily saturated, and this has wider impacts for counsellors as they try to differentiate themselves in this field.

Chapter 4: *The Spectre of the Strong Woman*

The psy-boom is an intersectional phenomenon. This chapter explores the role that gender plays in the psy-boom through the lives of three women. Each of these women engages with the psy-boom as a way of navigating a patriarchal society. This chapter argues that the psy-boom provides a sense of agency for these women by allowing them to feel a sense of control in situations in which their autonomy has been otherwise circumscribed by their gender. As this chapter argues, in each of these women's lives the spectre of the "strong woman" 女强人 has caused them to turn to the psy-boom as a way of mitigating often conflicting desires in the face of deeply gendered expectations. This chapter seeks to expand concepts of agency to help us to understand why psychology and psychological services are so popular amongst educated urban women in China.

Chapter 5: *Freely Flowing Emotions*

Ms. Liu argues that emotions should freely flow. Drawing on the work of affect scholars such as Sarah Ahmed and Eva Illouz, and building on the observations of the previous chapter that explored the psy-boom's role in meeting the gendered expectations of Chinese society, this chapter seeks to ask how the psy-boom functions in the context of injustice. Here it is argued that due to the nature of harsh clampdowns on civil society under Xi Jinping coupled with increasing censorship and surveillance, the negative affects that circulate in the psy-boom are unable to "stick" to issues of social justice in society at large. However, instead of therefore arguing that the psy-boom is a conservative force that simply provides people a tool to accord themselves to this political reality, I explore the forms of agency that do exist in the psy-boom and how these come to be understood as healing for participants therein.

This chapter has been accepted for publication as the paper Bram, Barclay (forthcoming) "Troubling Emotions in China's Psy-boom" *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* "The Politics of Negative Affect in China" special section

METHODOLOGY

Covid-19

Somewhere in Chengdu is a bag of my things. After returning to London in late December of 2019, to spend Xmas with my family, I was supposed to return to China to take a position at Fudan University as a visiting doctoral researcher for the year 2020-2021, under the supervision of Pan Tianshu, the head of anthropology. The visiting position was funded by the Confucius Institute. It was there that I had planned to do the majority of my ethnographic fieldwork for this DPhil thesis. I had a flight booked that was scheduled to arrive the 1st of February 2020. However, by January 25th Wuhan had gone into a complete lockdown with similar measures sweeping across the country. Fudan told me it was unsure what the best course of action would be. I re-routed my flight and went to Thailand and waited for two weeks while Fudan decided what to do. After two weeks they told me they would have a clearer answer at the end of the month. I flew to Manila where I have a friend from my master's programme. Two weeks passed and they still had no answer. I flew to Bali to see a friend from Shanghai who had fled the city. By mid-March 2020 I gave up trying to get to China and flew home, just in time for the UK to go into its own lockdown.

"The strength of ethnography… is that it offers the researcher the opportunity to develop a sense of locally significant *questions* and the strategies for answering them within the context of the field experience," writes one anthropologist (Kipnis 1997: 19, emphasis mine). I had originally conceived of my project as having two years in the field; one in Chengdu and one in Shanghai. I

went to Chengdu with the intention of working out my questions. In Shanghai, where I had worked as a journalist for some time, had a developed social network and would be affiliated with Fudan University, I believed it would be significantly easier to gain access to the right people to then answer those questions. Chengdu, I hoped, would always be a footnote, a way of confirming that what I was seeing in Shanghai was not merely related to its position as China's most global and economically developed city, but was part of a national trend.

In April of 2020 I lost my grandmother to the virus, in Brazil. In the summer my boyfriend and I separated, unable to keep alive a long-distance relationship in a time of grounded flights and tired hearts. China banned all foreigners, meaning I could not return in September of 2020. I started to work in a restaurant as a chef (I have worked in as a chef most of my adult life) and was put on furlough as we went into a second lockdown. We came out of lockdown and into the tier system a few weeks later. I was placed on furlough again. I caught the virus, testing positive on Halloween, of all times. China then relaxed the travel bans, and for a brief window of time I thought I might be able to return. Then a more contagious strain of the virus was discovered in London, and so all British people were banned again. I did not make it back to China to complete the Shanghai portion of this research. I watched as my mandarin level receded, with the imperceptibility of a tide that suddenly reveals the shore rocks.

In 2020, I suffered. As did we all. The year opened with me unable to return to China. I worried about my friends there and what might be happening to them as this mysterious virus took hold and sent them all into the bizarre spectacle of enforced lockdowns. I had no idea I would, only three months later, cycle down London's Regent street on a Tuesday morning and see only a single person; a government employee in a high-vis jacket. Every shop was shuttered. The year ended with me unable to return to China and my friends there worrying about what was happening to

me in London amid the bizarre spectacle of the new strain of the virus and hap-hazard partial lockdowns.

I have been intentional in this thesis not to mention the virus until now. I can barely comprehend what happened here, in London, as I experienced it, without trying to project what might have been happening in China. I could have done interviews remotely over Wechat, but that would have lacked the materiality of actually being there, which is a key facet of ethnography. I was also, to be frank, too busy grieving and trying to ensure my parents survived this year to be able to face trying to incorporate the pandemic into my research.

As T M Luhrmann (2001: 281) has eloquently written, "a philosopher argues about the world as it should be: how we should conceive of our moral responsibilities, why we should think, as Kant insisted, that every person must be treated as an end and not as a means. An anthropologist, less ambitious, tries simply to describe the world as she has found it." This is what I have tried to do with this thesis. I am also not an economist or a political scientist, so I cannot predict how the world will be after the dust has settled from this year. Considering I approached my work as an ethnography, which I will detail below, I was also sceptical of trying to capture an event as multifaceted and monumental as the pandemic through purely digital means while situated in London.

I do not, however, think that the pandemic will fundamentally alter the dynamics that I chart in this thesis. People will still be heavily enmeshed in their personal relationships, their social groups and the nation. The intense competition that exists in Chinese society and the paucity of alternative scripts for what constitutes the good life will remain facts of life. If anything, the pandemic and the fallout felt across the global economy will only increase the precarity already present within the Chinese economic system. The success that the CCP has had in managing the pandemic will create

new national narratives that will bolster the eudaemonic legitimacy that I have written about in the introductory chapter, giving people less avenues for social critique as I explore at more length in chapter 5. Moreover, the trauma of this year will be a catalyst to turn inwards and will surely be a means through which psychological service providers justify their products to the population.

Journalism, Area Studies and Anthropology

I have chosen, throughout my project, to work as an anthropologist of China. I am greatly informed by the interdisciplinary work that is happening in the Area Studies department, but as time has gone on, I have focused more intensely on developing myself as an ethnographer rather than as an Area specialist of China. Though I believe that this study will be of use to Sinologists and contribute to those with an Area-related interest in China, I have targeted my publications at anthropology journals and presented papers at anthropology conferences[9]. I thereby hope that this thesis is read as much as a contribution to the discipline of anthropology as it is to the Area study of China.

Considering that my background is in journalism and that I continue to work as a freelance writer, it is important to state how I understand the divergences between these two forms of writing. This is a way of me engaging in what Sundararajan (2015: 3) calls 'responsible scholarship' i.e. "the reflexive transparency by means of which the researcher spells out clearly the theoretical assumptions behind [his] methodology." As I will explain below, this project was not what I intended at the outset due both to the setbacks I experienced because of the coronavirus pandemic and also because of access issues in the field in Chengdu. Much of this work is therefore based on note-taking which I did in Chengdu informed by my journalism training, which I have now had to

[9] Chapter 2 has been published by *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Chapter 3 was presented at a workshop at the American Anthropological Association meeting in Vancouver hosted by Jie Yang, Chapter 5 has been accepted for publication at *Hau: the journal of ethnographic theory*, Chapter 4 is in peer review at *Ethos*

turn towards in a form of retroactive ethnography. Here I am indebted to ideas expanding the notion of what ethnography is, for example the idea of "patchwork ethnography" which seeks to attend to how "changing living and working conditions are irrevocably transforming knowledge production" (see Cardoza, Varma, Watanabe, and Gunel 2021). Acknowledging that long-term fieldwork is often impossible for people who have caring obligations, people with access issues due to disability or those who cannot attain stable visas or other systemic barriers to prolonged access to communities, these scholars are pioneering work that seeks recognition for the validity of scholarship that does not follow a linear path or that neatly maps onto a tightly structured academic timetable. In my case I was fortunate to conduct an extended period in the field, but as I have said I did not intend for this to be the entire body of work that would constitute my fieldwork. I thus went with a much more exploratory mindset and less focus than had the circumstances been different. When I speak of retroactive ethnography therefore, I am speaking of having to draw threads through disparate material, of trying to build work out of questions that become clear in hindsight but whose answers have to be pieced together while away from the field site. Still, I do see the work that I did as ethnographic.

As Tim Ingold (2014: 383) has warned, the term ethnography is often used loosely as a stand in for qualitative to make interview-based work sound richer than it is in reality. He argues that real ethnography is about participant observation, wherein "to observe means to watch what is going on around and about, and of course to listen and feel as well. To participate means to do so from within the current of activity in which you carry on a life alongside and together with the persons and things that capture your attention." Considering the time I spent in Chengdu as an active participant in Ms. Liu's reading group each week and my socialising within the wider milieu of the psy-boom in Chengdu, I see this project as a work of thick description that provides important insights into psychological counselling in China and speaks to wider questions within anthropology more generally.

Considering that there are long-standing debates within the field of anthropology about how the discipline should understand itself as distinct from the kind of long-form and essayistic writing which I engage in in my professional life, I do not want to shy away from staking my own position. To separate anthropology from mere literary non-fiction Comaroff (2010) argues that we have to understand anthropology as a praxis; "a mode of producing knowledge based on a few closely interrelated epistemic operations that lay the foundation for its diverse forms of theory work, mandate its research techniques, and chart its empirical coordinates." In this respect, he is suggesting something not too dissimilar to Bourdieu's (1980) comment that what characterizes anthropology is "thick description".

As someone who has worked (and continues to work) as a journalist, producing precisely the kind of long-form literary non-fiction that Comaroff (2010) sees as nipping at the ankles of anthropology——he rhetorically questions, what of a discipline that "takes to doing work that could as well be done, and be done as well, by journalists"——then I suppose it is worth stating where I draw the line between being an anthropologist and being a journalist[10]. Comaroff (2010) dismisses journalists as "technicians of ephemera" and while I would like to believe that professionally I am more than that, on some level I agree with the underlying premise of his assertion; journalists work in short time frames and then move on. While it is true that some journalists ply a single beat over a multi-decade career, the stories that they find within that beat are varied and infinitely changing. Even a journalist who, for sake of argument, tracks the bond market, and who may produce similar reports every financial quarter, will still see a huge variation in the prices of bonds and the level of

[10] See Margery Wolf's *A Thrice Told Tale* (1992) for her own exploration of the boundaries of ethnography and other forms of writing. These issues of course are illuminated by James Clifford's (1988) pioneering work ethnography and fiction

volatility in the market generally. This is also to say nothing of the huge regulatory movements and the ever-changing cast of regulatory officials that serve as material to write about.

The financial realities of journalism moreover do not incentivize deep-dive reporting; authors are paid per word, and impact is measured by views. It is more efficient and financially rewarding as a freelance journalist therefore to maximise the number of views for their stories by pushing out six pithy eight-hundred-word articles than it is to publish a single 4,800-word piece. The rate would, at many publications, actually be the same, despite the extra work it takes to produce the latter. This is compounded by the fact that many publications——particularly online and new-media publications——provide little in the way of expenses to support the kind of intense work that producing a well-researched and properly reported 4,800-word article would require. Sadly, my favorite length for an essay is around 6,000 words.

Where anthropology differs, I would argue is precisely here; in the privileging of time. Traditionally, fieldwork that lasts less than a year is deemed suspect (though in the wake of the pandemic there are renewed calls for 'rapid ethnography,' see Vindrola-Pandris 2018, and also the "patchwork" ethnography mentioned above). Observers that do not participate or who stay at too far a remove from their informants are questioned. A journalist overly engaging in the lives of his interviewees would be deemed unobjective. While on the surface the tools of anthropology and journalism seem similar——recorded and informal interviews, going into the field, understanding the wider cultural context of what you are witnessing—anthropology tends to go deeper. Crucially, it adds another tool into the mix: theory.

In this I follow Fischer (2014: 195); "theory should be registered in a text like a sudden ray of light that prismatically deconstructs so that one sees its source and structure; and the immanent resources in social history are illuminated in a flash (blitzhaft, Augenblick). There is something

more to storytelling than a good story, more to the ethnographic vignette than intrigue and curiosity." Anthropology differs from journalism precisely because it is based in theory. In journalism the story is enough; if it speaks to a wider idea or narrative then all the better, but the power of the story itself is a sufficient condition for good journalism. The same is not true for anthropology (for another account of how anthropology differs from other forms of writing drawn from the same subject matter, see Wolf 1992). For Comaroff (2010) what rescues anthropology is precisely this call to theoretical relevance— it hangs on the "imaginative counterpoint between the inductive and the deductive, the concrete and the concept, ethnographic observation and cultural ideation; also, in a different register, between the epic and the everyday, the meaningful and the material." It is because of the fact that my project is more than simply telling a story about how people in Chengdu have sought healing, but rather is drawn in relation to anthropological debates about affect, subjectivity and agency and the rich historical context provided by scholars of China that this work is not just a piece of long-form narrative non-fiction[11].

Having situated myself as a journalist working within anthropology, I still have to acknowledge that that I am based in an interdisciplinary Area Studies department. Therefore, it is worth commenting on how I situate myself within the Oxford School of Global Area Studies (OSGA). Appadurai (2000), writing about the value of Area Studies, makes a modest claim as to its use; "how does the world look—as a congress of areas—from other locations?" Perhaps the entire point of Area studies, and the conceit that Areas exist at all, is simply to attempt to reorient the cartographies of our knowledge, such that we are not constantly looking from western ivory towers

[11] There are of course many anthropologists who have also written for popular audiences. TM Lurhmann's *Of Two Minds* (2001) was one of the books I enjoyed most in the course of reading for this Dphil project, and she has had a regular column for the NYTimes and has written beautiful essays for *Harper's* magazine. Michael Taussig's writing (2004, 2009) has also been inspiring for his use of form and interplay of theory with evocative imagery. Anna Tsing's *Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) has also been a book that has spoken to me, both for its description of precarity and possibility, and for its whimsical writing style. The popularity of this latter work outside of the academy is also encouraging for the potential of the discipline to speak to a wide audience

and out at the world, but rather attempt to go to these places and look at the world from there. In his rather scathing critique of Area Studies, Harootunian (2012: 15) makes the point that "the model for area studies was anthropology". If Area Studies takes after a discipline that favours emic perspectives and strives, through ethnography and participant observation, to privilege local accounts and understandings, then perhaps it can do something to open up the social sciences to different worldviews and to challenge 'western' preconceptions by starting our analysis elsewhere. Moreover, perhaps the truest value of Area Studies is not so much the influence of areas at all, but the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline. As Friedman and Worden (2016: 129) note in their study of the physical architecture of Interdisciplinary Area Studies departments on US campuses, "an array of scholars have argued that interdisciplinary research and teaching can best be advanced by the allocation of campus space for it." In creating a physical locale for interdisciplinary dialogue in Oxford, OSGA creates a space that acknowledges that in trying to reorient our cartographies of knowledge, we have to draw upon the full range of epistemic frames that exist across disciplines. China, if we allow it to be a discrete area, is one that can be viewed meaningfully from history, anthropology, economics, sinology, oriental studies, sociology—viably from, within reason, any disciplinary framework.

That I choose as my epistemic frame anthropology does not mean that I am not vastly enriched by the interdisciplinary dialogues permitted in OSGA. To understand the psy-boom in contemporary China one has to understand the legacy of the Mao era, the economic upheavals of the Deng-era and the present constraints on society under Xi Jinping. It is therefore standing on Bevington Road, in OSGA, at the intersection between the China Centre with its own interdisciplinary sinology and the contours of the discipline laid out in the Anthropology Department just over the road, that I find myself most confident in undertaking this thesis project.

Working backwards

I did not intend for this project to be about the work that I conducted in Chengdu. I am extremely lucky to have been awarded full funding for my DPhil from the ERSC. As part of this funding, I was eligible to apply for a supplementary difficult language training grant because my fieldwork would be conducted in Mandarin. Through this award I was able to travel to Chengdu in the second year of my DPhil project. I intended to spend just over a year in Chengdu and then move to Shanghai (what amounted effectively to two summers and an academic year, concurrent) where I would have spent another year. My time in Chengdu was supposed to help me strengthen my language skills with specialised language around mental health and psychology so that I would be in a strong place once I arrived in Shanghai to conduct a deep ethnography embedded within the community. Considering I already spoke Mandarin well having previously lived in Shanghai as a journalist I decided not to attend a language school to get this training but rather to conduct early fieldwork among mental health professionals and develop the vocabulary within the context I hoped to study. Through this work, I believed I would also manage to refine the questions I would be hoping to ask in Shanghai.

The choice originally to move to Chengdu was partly self-centred; it is a fun and dynamic city and it was the place in China after Shanghai that I had the most contacts, so I was confident that I could settle quickly and start working. I was also inspired by Everett Zhang's book the *Impotence Epidemic,* which took Beijing and Chengdu as primary field sites, arguing that "the two-site choice acknowledged the traditional sensitivity in Chinese studies to differences between northerners and southerners in styles of living, as reflected in cuisine and cultural habitus, as well as in physical type" (Zhang 2015: 15). While Shanghai is not a strictly "Northern" city in the way that Beijing is, it is one of only four provincial-level cities in China (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing). Shanghai is more internationalised than Chengdu and more significant in terms of finance and

politics, which has bred a fast-paced culture that is close to that of Beijing's. This contrasts neatly with Chengdu which is often said to be one of China's most "liveable" cities because of its slow-paced lifestyle, traditional tea drinking culture and the abundance of affordable and incredible food. Therefore, while they do not perfectly align in the way that Zhang argues, I still saw important areas of overlap and divergence to illuminate the project.

People in Chengdu would often describe living there as *haoanyi* 好安逸 in local Sichuanese dialect, which meant something along the lines of "comfortable" or "just right" in a similar way to the mandarin term *shufu* 舒服. Local media often presented Chengdu as "the Land of Abundance" 天府之国. The year I moved to Chengdu was just after the city was classified as a 'tier one city' by *Yicai Global* (2017), a financial magazine. Originally only four cities had been considered tier one: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. That Chengdu was now considered in the same breath as these traditionally powerful metropolises was something that people would often mention to me with pride. Chengdu's population was also rapidly increasing and had broken the 20mn person threshold. It was therefore an interesting place to ask questions about mental health and healing. If Chengdu is really as chilled and as pleasant as everyone seemed to suggest, then what was with the fervent turn towards therapy and psychological services? Was there trouble in paradise? Initially I had considered these questions to be footnotes to work I would do in Shanghai, but without the Shanghai fieldwork these instead became important questions. What I found, as this thesis shows, is that even in a city famed for its relaxed atmosphere and slow tempo 慢节奏, people perceived themselves as time-poor, overworked, and involuted. Competition was no less fierce in Chengdu, and it was having serious psychological consequences for its people, as my time in city showed.

I am extremely lucky that my fieldwork in Chengdu happened. Obviously, I could not have foretold at the time what was to come, but without that year there would be no thesis for me. The project that I have ended up constructing is not the one that I intended and the methods that I have ended up having to use have not been how I would have constructed this thesis had my initial plans been borne to fruition. As I will detail below, my journey into meeting the community of psychological counsellors in Chengdu was itself the result of unexpected and fortuitous happenstance and was already a diversion from the plans that I had laid out in Oxford in the first year of my DPhil.

While I was in Chengdu, I took copious notes, which is a professional hangover from my time as a journalist. I also wrote pieces for a number of magazines on topics about Chinese society. Some of these dovetailed with my thesis, like when I wrote about mental health applications for *Wired*, while others were fairly distant, like when I wrote about modelling or bitcoin mining (though even this topic, in the way it dealt with the anxieties entrepreneurs felt about not missing the latest bubble, informed some of my thinking in this project). I also managed to gain access to a community of psychological counsellors, as I detail below, and socialised with them a lot over my year in Chengdu. This started as a way to try to view their emic definitions of certain terms, but many of them quickly became friends. I was new to Chengdu, though I had visited a number of times while I lived in Shanghai, so finding an open and warm community that were happy to invite me to things was a constant joy.

Once it became clear that I would miss at least one semester of my time in Shanghai due to the pandemic (it appeared in March 2020 that I might be able to return in September) I decided that I would use the time offered to me in London to simply write up my materials from Chengdu as journal articles and submit them for publication. I knew in many cases that this was a long-shot as my ideas were still nebulous, but I also valued the chance to showcase my work in front of scholars,

experts in my field, who could provide very targeted feedback. This strategy ended up successful, with me landing pieces in *Medical Anthropoogy Quarterly* (based on chapter 2 of this thesis) and in *Hau: the Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (chapter 5). Crucially through the pieces that did not land at journals (a draft of a chapter that I have cut from this thesis was rejected by *Positions* for example) I was able to refine my ideas by seeing what concepts were the most fruitful to engage with more deeply and what ideas were dead ends or not sufficiently supported by my ethnographic material. This is one of the retroactive ways that this ethnography was constructed—by testing ideas, forming questions out of fragments of material, and then trying to piece these back together to form something cohesive.

A key critique that I have seen from journal reviewers has been that my ethnographic work is sometimes thin and that I hang my conceptual work on vignettes rather than allowing my ethnographic materials to form my concepts. I agree with this critique, but this is a reflection of the way that I came to write this project. In Chengdu I did not embed as fully in the many venues of the psy-boom as I was planning to in Shanghai. I caught glimpses of the way that it was operating, and at times I was offered deeper and more meaningful access (particularly into the lives of certain counsellors that I became closest to, as this thesis will show). At times in this thesis, as I have done in the introduction in relation to the Jinsha local government bureau, I will indicate the avenues of research I was hoping to conduct had I been able to return to the field. This is the best that I can do. I have to hope that this ethnography is "good enough" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 30), given the circumstances.

Considering I was not able to return to Shanghai in September 2020, and then again in February 2021 because of the British variant of the coronavirus, I had to decide to use the material from Chengdu as the basis for my thesis entirely. At this time, I had a bunch of papers in various levels of peer review, and they came to ultimately form the basis of this thesis. However, working in this

way meant I had a number of self-contained articles, but not a coherent thesis. I did not, to be honest, even really understand how to braid these disparate threads together. I attempted by writing an entire draft that kept the papers largely intact to do so. This draft was submitted to my supervisors by Dec 31st 2020. I then re-read it again at the end of April 2021, with some critical distance and after a few rough months during lockdown 3. I was then able to pick apart key themes and recentre the material that I had around those. I acknowledge this is not the most time efficient way to construct a thesis, nor is it the way that I would have intended to write it had the circumstances been different. This thesis is a patchwork, knitted retroactively from material that in other times might have been discarded.

Serendipity

Ms. Wen was actually the first psychotherapist I met in Chengdu. We met through friends after I had grown frustrated at my lack of inroads into the psychiatric profession in the city. I would regularly cook at the house of Yujia[12], a well-known local translator, and one night I was telling the group of friends gathered about my struggles at meeting anyone willing to speak with me about mental health. A day later I got a message on the social media app Wechat from a random stranger whose avatar picture was of a cat and whose name was simply WXW. She said she had heard that I was looking to talk to someone about mental health and she might be able to help me. We agreed to meet in a coffee shop later that day. When I arrived, it was completely empty save for a woman around my age[13]. Her name was Ms. Wen, and she was a qualified psychological counsellor working for a local practice called *look after*. It turned out she had been invited to the dinner but had had other commitments. Two people from that night had messaged her separately, telling her we should meet.

[12] I focus on her in chapter x

[13] She turned out to be five years my senior

She told me that she had studied to be a psychological counsellor because she wanted to understand people better. *Look after* was doing well. It employed a number of psychological counsellors, all of whom, except Ms. Wen, had studied in Western universities. Their client base was affluent, and the practice was busy. Ms. Wen was seeing a lot of clients each day and in between she was helping *look after* with consulting jobs that the firm took on with hospitals and private medical services to improve their mental health offering. When we would meet, she would often have to pick up the phone and walk off to discuss a private matter, a habit which over time grew frustrating. However, despite this, we became close friends. I admired the way she approached life with an open curiosity and how she was still searching for meaning in her interactions. It was ultimately why she had decided to meet me. She felt that a foreign anthropologist was likely to bring with them some interesting frameworks that she could think through.

Through Ms. Wen, I met Ms. Liu and consequently the milieu of counsellors and hobbyists that she gathered weekly for her reading group. As the scholar Frank Pieke notes, fieldwork in China is grounded in serendipity (Pieke 2000). Meeting Ms. Wen was serendipitous. As was doing a PhD for me in the first place. I decided to learn Mandarin after a year abroad in Hong Kong, starting my language learning in the summer of 2013. Following my time at Hong Kong University I travelled to Dalian, in Liaoning province, and lived with a family for a summer. They spoke no English and I spoke no Mandarin. After months of gesturing, miming and using a translation app on my phone, I had just enough Mandarin learnt to know it was something I wanted to continue pursuing. I continued taking night courses at the Confucius Institute at the University of Nottingham, where I was completing my MSc degree, and upon graduating I attended Fudan University in Shanghai as a British Council Generation UK scholar. This programme was a fully funded year to learn Mandarin, and while there I honed my language skills. I also started working as a freelance journalist and worked with *Vice* magazine's China bureau as a features writer. I then

drifted for two years in New York and Milan as a fashion model, though I kept writing and continued to work on my Mandarin in my spare time. Occasionally I would book modelling jobs back in Asia and would stop in China on the way. I came to Oxford in 2017 for a masters in China Studies. I was lucky to graduate the year that the School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies (SIAS, now the School of Global Area Studies OSGA) was about to open, and to be offered a place in the inaugural class of just seven students. Including, unexpectedly, the former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd.

Another piece of serendipity was the fact that I ended up living in Chengdu with a retired chef, named Brother Bing. Brother Bing's apartment was in the centre of Chengdu. It had been bought by his wife, Sister Zhou's, parents. They had passed a few years ago, but their pictures smiled down from a shelf with a few votives and some incense. The apartment was actually two apartments that they had joined together in an L shape. I lived in the horizontal part of the L, which had been where their daughter had lived. As if to materialize the perfect metaphor for being a foreign anthropologist embedded with a local family, I lived at a right angle to them. Their daughter was now at college by the Qingcheng Mountains. I had my own room, a bathroom with a temperamental shower, a small study and a living room. I shared a balcony with Brother Bing, and we had one kitchen between us that was in their side of the apartment. We cooked together often. He was a retired chef, and I had worked in kitchens as a chef on and off throughout my 20s. He was like a father to me. By the end of my stay, I would refer to him as my Chinese dad. It is with him that my bag of things remains in Chengdu.

We lived next to the famous Tai Koo Li shopping centre, but between the edge of the sprawling mall and our apartment was a single lane of 'nail-houses' 钉子户 that had refused to be relocated by the local government. They were called that because they stood out, decrepit against the sleek neon-futurism of the Tai Koo Li centre, and because, like a nail that stands up, they would

eventually be knocked flush. "Development is a hard truth," Deng Xiaoping had once said (Deng quoted in Gao: 2018). But it had been a number of years now and they had managed not to budge. They were the old danwei housing for the local gas and electric workers. From our balcony you could look down on their roofs and see that the government had stopped coming in to conduct basic repairs as a way to attempt to force them out. The residents had taken giant plastic advertising hoardings and pulled them taut to protect them from the rain. I looked down and a L'Oréal advert looked back, once-pearly white teeth now green with moss.

I refer often to Brother Bing in this thesis, even though he is not a participant of the psy-boom. He was largely untouched by the rise of psychotherapy and his status as a retired man who had had a rudimentary education that had been halted by the Cultural Revolution makes him something of a 'control' for some of the claims I am making in this thesis. As I noted in the introduction of the thesis, one of the distinct features of the rise of psychotherapy in China is the fact that during the Mao-era the discipline was dismissed as a bourgeoise concept and mental illness was disavowed as a political failing. People like Brother Bing have grown up largely without engaging with these ideas in a way that my parents, growing up in Western cultures steeped in psychodynamic understandings of the mind since Freud, cannot said to be.

Ethics

I applied to OSGA for ethical approval with a project that was focused on mental health, which I am interested in for personal reasons. Growing up my father has dealt with serious mental illness and suffered considerably from chronic pain and PTSD. My paternal grandmother died by suicide long before I was born. My mother lost both her parents before she turned 18, an experience so traumatic she lost all her hair for a number of years. My godmother was an alcoholic who died

drunkenly falling down the stairs, the summer I was in Dalian. I have grown up in the long shadow of this trauma, learning how to find joy and light in the spaces between other people's darkness.

This is why I applied to OSGA with a proposal looking at serious mental illness in China. There were obvious ethical hurdles that such a project entailed. The year before I joined OSGA a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge was murdered during his fieldwork in Egypt. He had been researching labour organizing. They found his body brutally mutilated behind a bin. Consequently, Oxford was cautious about granting ethical approval for projects that looked as if they were likely to engage with sensitive topics, especially in nations such as China where such topics could be conceived of as security threats.

I had to go through CUREC 2, the university's highest ethics approval level for research conducted with adults (there is another level if research is conducted with minors, which my project thankfully did not). Prior to travelling to Chengdu, I was granted Research Ethics Approval (CUREC 2) Ref No: R59118/RE001. I also completed risk assessments for OSGA prior to travel. To help in my application for CUREC 2 I got qualified as a Mental Health First Aider by Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) UK, a charity. This qualification was funded by a training grant from University College. One of the key challenges in applying for ethical approval was proving that I would not be at risk from people should they be having a psychotic episode, hence the MHFA qualification. As I noted at the time, one of the frustrating aspects of this process was that it sometimes meant that the lines of questioning that the CUREC board followed ended up tracking along the stigmatising tropes that mentally diverse communities often face. I pushed back on this, and also on assertions that it would be unlikely that people would want to talk to me about mental health or about distress in a country where these might be stigmatised. In my experience as a journalist people are often surprisingly candid and open. If one is able to offer a sympathetic ear and the empathy to create space for such conversations, then there are less barriers than people expect.

As part of the CUREC procedure I agreed that I would keep the interviews on a separate hard drive under pseudonyms, with a key stored elsewhere to let me know which interview corresponded to which person. In this case I used initials and kept the key on my laptop hard drive. All the names I quote in this thesis are pinyin and no Chinese characters are offered as a way to ensure the privacy of my research participants, even though in many cases they were happy to provide their names on record. The only name that is a pure pseudonym is Ms. Zhou, as was her wish because of her honesty speaking about the trauma of her upbringing during the Cultural Revolution. The names of companies I quote, such as *Look After* and *Know Yourself* are the actual names of these companies and the English they have chosen.

The three main interviewees that I focus on in chapter 2 of this thesis, Ms. Liu, Ms. Wen and Ms. Zhou all signed written consent forms agreeing to be part of this project. The rest of my interviewees gave informed consent orally. Any interviews that appear in this thesis were semi-formal and all were recorded. If the quotation I am drawing on does not come from an interview, then I state when I am drawing from casual conversations or from dialogue that I heard in a particular context, for example in Ms. Liu's reading group. In all the settings that I engaged with in the psy-boom I was honest about my positionality as a researcher and in no cases was I turned away or told I could not mention what I was observing. I'm very obviously western, with bright blue eyes, which meant that wherever I went I was immediately identifiable as an outsider and was asked how I had found myself in that particular setting. I would then explain who I was in Mandarin, which would often reassure people that I was who I said I was. In some cases, I would show people my Bodleian card from Oxford, to show I was a student at the university, but this was never because I was actively asked to show I.D., but rather something I did when it felt appropriate.

When I initially conceived of this project, I wanted to focus on suicide and severe mental illness in China. Upon arrival in China it became clear that this would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a foreigner to do research on. I have no medical training, so I was unable to embed myself in a hospital and administer care, as Arthur Kleinman (1986) was able to in Hunan in the 1980s. The most detailed and compelling ethnographic research into suicide in China has been conducted by Wu Fei (2011), a student of Kleinman's and an anthropologist at Peking University. She explored suicide as it pertained to domestic injustice, recognising the way that rapidly shifting family dynamics in reform-era rural China were causing such deep feelings of moral outrage amongst certain people that they felt compelled to take their own lives (Wu 2011). Suicide and severe mental illness are extremely stigmatised in China (as in much of the world) so this work was only really possible because Wu was able to return to her ancestral village, where decades of patronage networks gave her privileged access to government materials and affective ties that meant people felt comfortable opening up to her. As a foreigner with no such access any inroads into such a sensitive topic would have likely been misunderstood by the people I sought out to interview, risked compounding their trauma, or potentially could have been misconstrued by the party-state as a security threat.

The same is true of psychiatry. Had I tried to get access to a mental hospital or sanatorium it is extremely unlikely I would have gotten anywhere as a foreign anthropologist. China is currently pursuing the 686 community mental health project, which is the largest such project in the world. The anthropologist Ma Zhiying (2020) has been conducting research into this project, which has at its core a desire to find all of the severely mentally ill people in China and to ensure that they are monitored closely so that care can be administered to them and they do not contribute to social unrest. As she argues, "the categorization and enumeration of seriously mentally ill patients has allowed psychiatrists and policymakers to commensurate their desires to serve and surveil this

population" (Ma 2020: 27). In other words, for the severely mentally ill in China, care is something that is done to them, as the state manages this population with "kindly power" (Ma 2020: 43).

There is a contrast here between this form of care and the kind of care that was being offered by *look after* and psychological counselling more generally. The 686 project more clearly defines a population to whom care is done *bei guan* 被管. In this context care is translated using 管 which also has the dual meaning of surveilling/controlling. *Look After's* Chinese name was *guanxin* 观心 . The fact that *guanxin* 'to look after or care' was how they chose to name themselves was so closely linked to the *beiguan* or 'cared for' surveillance of the 686 project is significant when we consider questions of the types of subjectivity and agency that were being fostered in the psy-boom and how they relate to other forms of mental healthcare in China at the time. Both of these terms could loosely be translated as 'care' but the object of the care and the way it was administered was extremely different[14].

Again, because the 686 project is concerned with social stability, access to the project for a foreign anthropologist was difficult. While I did make some inroads with the Shanghai Mental Health Project and the embedded researcher Michael Philips who conducted a famous Lancet quantitative study into suicide in China (Philips et al 2002), this contact and subsequent interview did not materialise into substantive engagement while I was in Chengdu. There was potential to deepen this relationship and try to carve a space to conduct research with them, but this would have been contingent on me being based in Shanghai which, as we know, never happened. In Chengdu I spoke with Ran Maosheng of the Chengdu Mental Health Project, but while he was interested in engaging with me as a researcher, he required signed documents to collaborate that Oxford was

[14] For an interesting meditation on different ways of translating and understanding care in China see Wang (2018).

unwilling to approve[15]. Even had either of these avenues panned out, it is unclear whether research participants would have been willing to speak with me considering the stigma surrounding serious mental illness, or whether local government officials would not have tried to intervene in the research in some way.

In the end, with these avenues foreclosed, I turned towards the only remaining and accessible form of mental health care, the society-based psychological counsellors 社会派. Considering much of their psychological services took the form of group therapy courses, psychology trainings or lectures and workshops that were available as a purchasable commodity, I could gain access simply by buying my way in as a regular customer. I signed up to the major psychological service providers on Wechat and started buying their podcasts and meditation programmes[16] and I started going to in-person meet-ups in Chengdu. Because these trainings were far more targeted at personal development, 'building the skill of happiness' or getting to know oneself better, participants did not feel embarrassed in sharing with me what they were learning. In fact, my presence at these events often had the unintended consequence of conferring a sense of legitimacy on the convenor––*look! I am being studied by someone from the University of Oxford!*—and people would often ask me in what ways what they were experiencing was different to what I had experienced in the West. I was an oddity, but a not unwelcome one. It was a good position to be in as an anthropologist.

At first, I was disappointed that I had not gotten access to the 686 project and that my project was starting to track along much more prosaic lines of the ups-and-downs of relatively healthy and affluent urbanites rather than the more clearly troubled lives of those afflicted with serious mental illness. I felt that given my personal history of living with people with serious mental illness, I

[15] Concerns from the Oxford side included that the documents he submitted were extremely vague and could have opened the project to serious complications later on because of ambiguities around rights to data usage and publications based on the data.

[16] I am grateful to a grant from the ESRC which gave me funding to purchase these

would have been in a good place to conduct such research. I hoped my past would have provided me with a reference point from which to bridge the obvious cultural differences I was expecting to observe in the treatment of severe mental illness and the cosmological significance that sufferers and their loved ones place upon their suffering to help give it meaning.

However, over time, I came to see the fact my project turned towards the MOLSS qualification and psychological counselling as a blessing. Unfortunately, no society on earth has found a truly empathetic and adequate way to care for those who are the most vulnerable and socially impaired by severe mental illness. In *Vita* the anthropologist Joao Biehl (2005: 2) describes the place that Catarina, the severely mentally ill and dispossessed Brazilian woman whose life he follows in his ethnography, finds herself in as a "zone of social abandonment". In Nancy Scheper-Hughes's (2001: 46) controversial work on schizophrenics in Ireland, she noted that the situation her rural informants found themselves in was a crushing "sense of entrapment in a no-exit, double-binding situation". Suicide, high rates of mental illness, incest and the desolation of hope were the contours of the land Scheper-Hughes (2001) tracked. In Wu Fei's (2011) study, rural women in China poison themselves with agricultural pesticides to protest against the myriad domestic injustices they feel. Suicide is their only form of redressing the constant degradations that form their quotidian existence. My study, had it tracked along those lines, could have contributed to this collection of human suffering. One more book on the shelf of iniquity.

Instead, my study is more hopeful. By focusing on the society-based camp of therapists I found a group of people who were trying to make sense of the huge social changes that defined their world. Like Ms. Liu they had experienced suffering, and they were now trying to grow from these experiences. They were looking for a toolkit and for answers. They were not without suffering; they had, almost all of them, suffered some great personal tragedy at some point that had encouraged them to seek out therapy or to attend psychological training. But embedded in this

decision was a kernel of hope, a belief that despite what life had thrown at them that there were pathways that could be followed that might lead them to better outcomes. They were interested in psychodynamic therapies, which see the mind as a mutable object that can be retrained after trauma. They saw dynamism in their situations.

This also meant that many of the ethical issues that I had been so careful to plan for during my CUREC 2 process did not arise in the field. The population I was studying was not 'vulnerable' and would have certainly been offended if they believed they were being viewed as such. Rather, they had all had experiences of personal trauma and had lived through times of incredible social upheaval. As I show in this thesis, they turned towards psychology to try and make sense of these experiences and to find ways to heal. In doing so they were developing an affective register to speak through their distress. They were happy to speak about these experiences. They wanted to share what they had learnt on their therapeutic journeys.

CHAPTER 1: "LOOK AT MY MENTAL ILLNESS!" A HISTORY

Brother Bing's eye has a twitch. Sometimes when he is tired, or when thinking deeply, his right eye shivers. As if cold. It is noticeable, but not oppressive. It is something that blends into the texture of a person's character like a tattoo or a scar. That's just Brother Bing, eye twitching as he considers something. Brother Bing was my landlord in Chengdu, though that makes the relationship sound more formal than it needs to be. As I noted in the methodology section, a friend had introduced us, and he let me rent his daughter's apartment while she was away at college. Brother Bing had converted two adjacent apartments into one, which meant that while I had my own bedroom and living room, we shared a kitchen and a balcony.

One day he suggested we drive out of the city to go and get a chicken dish he really wanted me to try. He knew a place but it was on the outskirts so off we drove. It was early into my time in Chengdu, and we were still getting to know each other. His wife came along with us. We pulled up to the place, which was a run-down concrete block with a corrugated iron sheet roof and we ordered their special chicken four-ways (poached and tossed in chili oil, fried in a wok with numbing spices, boiled as a soup and the breast meat made into the famous Sichuanese dish of gong-bao chicken).

As we sat and ate the meal, Brother Bing's wife, Sister Zhou (as they asked me to refer to them respectively) asked me what I researched. She was not retired yet, and was often out of the house, so we hadn't really had time to get to know each other. I'm studying mental health I said. I used the term *xinli jiankang* 心理健康 which is a direct translation from English. She looked at me slightly puzzled. *Xinli jiankang?* She said. Yes, I said, and I repeated the phrase. That's quite a modern thing to study, she said.

Before I could respond Brother Bing interjected and said that *xinli jiankang* was just another way of saying *jingshen bing* 精神病 which would translate more closely to mental illness. Well, I said, yes, it's related. However, we all have mental health that we can consider, whereas I don't think we all have mental illnesses, so they are somewhat different. He nodded knowingly and said that that made sense. Then he said he knew one of his father's friends had had a mental health problem; neurasthenia *shenjing shuairuo* 神经衰弱. I was about to mention that this diagnosis is not often used anymore and has been replaced by terms like depression (see Kleinman 1986 and Sing 2011) when he interjected his own thought. Well well, what is the relationship then between nerves 神经 and mind 精神?

I paused for a moment and so did Brother Bing, clearly contemplating what he had just said. True to form, his eye started to twitch. He laughed, "does this mean I have a *shenjing bing"* 神经病*?* He said, which would translate as a 'nervous condition' and was an outdated and somewhat stigmatising term for mental illness. "Look at my mental illness!!" he cackled, his eye twitching along as his belly huffed up and down. We all laughed, but I was struck by this vignette and all of the complicated questions that this raised about how mental illness and mental health are described. This vignette is important because as I have stated in the introduction to this thesis a key argument for the reason that the MOLSS qualification arose was that the understanding of mental health, and how it should be dealt with, changed significantly during the reform period. This created the conditions for the rapid expansion of psychological counselling. This process was mutually reinforcing, as I will argue in the latter part of this chapter. Not only was the understanding of mental health and wellbeing shifting enough in society to provide the conditions for people to take seriously the need for psychological counselling, but the vibrant marketplace for psychological services, both online and in-person, catalysed interest in psychology more generally throughout society. More and more people found themselves caught up in psy-fever. This development, as I

argue in the later chapters of this thesis, has empowered a discourse of psychological distress that exists outside of the idioms of the medical establishment and that allows people to figure through the intense social changes that have characterised their lives.

This chapter therefore will explore shifts over time in the framing of mental health up to how it is constructed as a problem in the present. I argue that the MOLSS qualification was not simply a response to global pressure to address mental health in the wake of the WHO global burden of disease report (World Bank 1993), but rather mapped onto debates that were already happening in China. I plot a general shift in how mental distress has been conceived in China, showing how it was understood from the earliest Chinese medical text, the *Huangdi neijing*—the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Cannon* through to contemporary China where the 2013 National Mental Health Law enshrined a cleavage between psychiatry and clinical psychology on the one hand and personal development psychology and counselling on the other. As I have stated in the introduction to this thesis, this split reflects a divide between clinical psychology/psychiatry and psychological counselling/personal development. I argue that this cleavage has created a dynamic market for psychological services and an expanded language to discuss mental health.

I argue that this shift is both cultivating new subjects and subjectivities (Foucault 1982: 208, Li Zhang 2018) because it acts as a framing device that provides salience to certain treatment modalities and practices over others (Entman 1993). In any discussion of discourse, particularly one related to mental illness, Foucault is an obvious place to start. In his first work *Madness and Civilization*, he argued that '*language is the first and last structure of madness'* (Foucault 1988: 100 emphasis in original). Foucault showed that the mentally ill came to fill a spot of social dejection that had once been filled by lepers, and that this process was a key corollary to the broader social elevation of reason in the period following the enlightenment. Later works introduced concepts of bio-power, the medical gaze, discipline, surveillance, governmentality and technologies of the self; all

of which are important considerations for any discussions of mental illness (Foucault 1997, Foucault 1982, Foucault 1977, Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982). It is often said that Foucault is obsessed with power (see Jones 2001 for a critical reading that references Habermas). Foucault's emphasis on discourse is often read as a devise to show how power is diffuse throughout modern regimes, however in his own words he has argued instead that his work deals with "modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects" (Foucault 1982: 208). The point is that for Foucault, discourses are not merely power-infused constraints but are instead productive forces. In the context of the discourse of psychological distress in China, I show throughout this thesis how this negative affect is creating new markets and new demands for an expanded consumer base for psychological services.

It is not enough simply to state that discourses are productive. Instead, it is important to understand how it is that certain discourses come to take hold in a given context at a particular moment in time. This is why this chapter takes a longer historical view on how mental illness has been conceived over time in China, so as to foreground a later discussion in subsequent chapters that is more grounded in ethnographic work conducted in the present. Without foregrounding the discussion in this history, it is hard to get a clear sense of how this discourse differs from the past.

Much as Foucault's theories of categorisation, for example how the terms 'mad' and 'sane' operate to empower and disempower certain subjects of power in a given discursive regime, a further theoretical tool that I think has descriptive power in this context can be drawn from communication studies. Robert Entman (1993: 52), seeks to reinvigorate the concept of 'framing' to show how frames "diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe". For Entman (1993: 53), frames are important because they elevate salience—increasing the "probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory". When we look at the discourse of psychological distress in China, we have to be aware of the ways in which actors

such as Ms. Liu and psychological service providers such as *Know Yourself* are framing a complex set of mental health issues so that they are understood by the general public in such a way that justifies the treatment modalities that they are offering. Salience and framing are therefore important concepts that should be included in any ethnographic work on how mental health is understood and explored by actors in any setting. How we locate our troubles and what language we use to discuss them is important. It is also not universal throughout cultures or stable through time, as that conversation with Brother Bing laid bare. Discourses, as Ortner has argued, are "never divorced from real practices and real feelings" (2006: 41). The way we talk about distress shapes the way we deal with it.

1.1 Social Idioms of Distress

I start by offering a potted history of how mental distress has been conceived of in China, to show the ways in which the contemporary situation both builds upon these existing frameworks and understandings, and how it also constitutes something new. I do this to foreground the conversation I had with Brother Bing and then to explore another ethnographic vignette of how these discursive frames become salient within the party state through the rubric of the *Healthy China 2030* project. This history is not complete, but it allows us to draw a constellation through vital points in the understanding of pain and suffering. We start from the beginning. The first known medical text in China, the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Cannon* put forward a healing system that was holistic in nature; "before healing comes proper nutrition, but before nutrition comes the calming and securing of the spirit. Since every aspect of nature is united in Tao, it follows that no suffering or distress can be isolated; nor can the alleviation of suffering be broken up into disparate parts" (Bowker 1997: 368).

Medicine in Chinese history has been characterised by harking back to the canon, where knowledge was seen as already enshrined in enlightened texts and thus required constant reinterpretation and revaluation of existing documents, rather than the western idea that knowledge existed at some point in the future and required striving in the direction of progress (Scull 2015: 41). Much like the Hippocratic texts, the *Inner Cannon* had many anonymous authors and an undetermined date of first publication, sometime between 400bc and 100bc (Scull 2015: 41). The inscrutable nature of the text, and the ontological belief that enlightened medical knowledge was buried in its pages, allowed for the burgeoning of an "immense literature devoted to its explication and exegesis, which certainly allowed for the incorporation of new ideas under the guise of improved reading of the early texts" (Scull 2015: 41).

Madness was differentiated into three main categories, dian, kuang, and xian (Chen 1999: 307). Mental illnesses, as we might understand them, were instead "associated with excess emotions and the imbalance caused by such excess or deficiency in the internal organs of the body rather than located as a mental symptom (Chen 1999: 307). Sadness and grief were listed as two of the seven cardinal emotions, in the *su wen* section, which Kleinman argues means that these states of being were of "at least theoretical interest to traditional practitioners" (Kleinman 1986: 41), even if they did not find themselves decoupled from the wider holistic system at large. This does however create at least an ambient connection between sadness and grief and forms of madness identified in the *Inner Cannon,* though only in the context of them causing excess emotions which unbalance the rest of the system.

It wasn't until significantly later in Chinese history that concepts like depression came to find clinical expression. While *Treatise on the Causes and Symptoms of Disease,* written by Chao Yuanfeng and others in the early seventh century A.D. presents a cluster of symptoms that appear analogous

to depression, Kleinman (1986: 41) argues that the earliest text to do so was Qing Yue's Medical Text, first published in the Ming dynasty, around 1624.

As Kleinman argues,

The author Zhang Jiebin affixed the term yu to this category and today this term remains central to the designation of depression as a psychiatric disease. With considerable analytic sophistication Zhang Jiebin divided depression into three subtypes: 1. Depression resulting from excessive anger (nuyu) 2. Depression resulting from excessive thinking (siyu) 3. Depression resulting from excessive worry (youyu). (Kleinman 1986: 42)

We learn from this a few things. First, it shows that concepts like depression are not just mere western imports but have antecedents in Chinese history. Second, this does not imply that depression is located in the mind. Descartes would have only just told the world that *cogito ergo sum* at the same that Zhang Jiebin would have been theorising in Ming dynasty China. There is no evidence that either was aware of the other's work. Depression, with its link to 'excess' still maps onto a general Chinese medical cosmology that is focused on balance and which argued that emotions should be controlled so as not to cause illness (Kleinman 1986: 55, Ma Zhiying 2015, Jie Yang 2017). This idea is still widely held by practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Zhang Jiebin also did not elucidate other forms of what we might, from the perspective of western medicine, term mental illness.

The holistic underpinnings of the health system and what this implied for how distress was understood still held long into the c19th. Emily Baum (2018: 17), in her work on psychiatry and Chinese medicine in early c20th China notes that the famed physician Ma Peizhi (馬培植, 1820–1903), who had treated the Empress Dowager Cixi, "described a patient who had developed symptoms of dian 癲 (depressive madness) after experiencing a severe "fright and fear."" Here Ma

had noted that the "fright" had "caused the patient's qi to injure his heart, while the "fear" had caused his qi to injure his kidneys" (quoted in Baum 2018: 17). As Baum (2018: 17) argues, this means that in Ma's understanding, "physical, mental, and emotional elements had acted in tandem and in a dialogical manner to create a psychosomatic imbalance: one that could only be corrected by recognizing the interdependence between body and mind." As we can see therefore, even in the late c19th the most prized physicians in China were still understanding conditions analogous to depression as part of a wider cosmology of the body, and not as emerging in a disconnected mind.

The tentative early steps towards a mental healthcare system built on western psychiatric assumptions came in the c19th with the Chinese asylums built by missionaries. John G Kerr opened the first asylum in Canton in 1898, which was followed in 1912 by a Beijing municipal asylum, though this latter institution was run by the police and didn't operate as an overtly psychiatric facility like Kerr's (Scull 2015: 201). Kerr's asylum was not overly successful in instantiating psychiatric concepts throughout society. After his death, the asylum was taken over by a Presbyterian missionary and medical doctor called Charles Selden. As Selden would write in his memoir, in 1905 one of his "'disobedient' Chinese attendants managed to smuggle into the hospital a plate of cakes laced with a strong purgative, oil of aleurites cordata. The patients, naturally drawn to the cakes, consumed them quickly—only to be taken seriously ill soon thereafter" (Selden quoted in Baum 2018: 8). The attendant had been working under the assumption that all that would be required to cure the patients was purging; if they could just eliminate their excess phlegm then their systems would be rebalanced according to the holistic understandings of TCM, and they would be "healed".

The asylum didn't just fail to convince its staff of its methods, it also struggled to find uptake in the wider population. For those who did use the services, it was as a last resort. "Many families

disputed the techniques employed by Western-trained practitioners" and used them merely as spaces to hold their relatives in times of abject crisis (Baum 2018: 9). There are plenty of stories of relatives coming and forcibly discharging their loved ones early, to care for them at home, or bringing in herbs and broths to supplement the 'treatment' on offer with tonics that they believed would actually be effective (Baum 2018: 14, the latter still occurs in the present day; see Ma 2012). Despite the intentions for the Canton asylum to promote psychiatric care, like the municipal asylum in Beijing, in the end it largely functioned as a site to hold people too difficult to be in the community. It was a stability play.

In Beijing, the municipal asylum—or *fengrenyuan* (house for the mad)—stopped being run by the police in 1933, and was handed over by the administration of the city health authorities to be managed by the Rockefeller Foundation's China Medical Board (Wu 2016: 19). It was at this point that the asylum took on a medical function. "This marked a turning point in the modern history of China: 'madness' became medicalised" (Wu 2016: 19).

Medicalisation can be defined as the process by which a problem comes to be "defined in medical terms, described using medical language, understood through the adoption of a medical framework, or 'treated' with a medical intervention" (Conrad 2007: 3). The shift in administration of the Beijing *fengrenyuan* from the police to the medical establishment represents more than a material change in the conditions of authority enacted upon the population there. It also precipitated a discursive and ideological shift in the understanding of madness itself. By coming under the auspices of the medical establishment, it implied that the severely disturbed had medical conditions that could be managed and potentially cured, rather than merely viewing them as intractable social problems that needed to be taken out of society.

The asylum system did not last long after the administrative shift in the early 1930s because of the Communist revolution that soon swept the nation. Considering that a key component of medicalisation is the use of medical language, it is worth looking at the language that starts to be used in this period. With the communist revolution, western ideas about the insane were shelved in favour of Pavlovian ideas brought from the Soviet Union (Chen 1999: 310, Huang 2015: 5). In this period, as ideas about the mentally ill were becoming more formally medicalised, the influence of Soviet ideas saw China adopting the term 'mental hygiene' 精神卫生 as opposed to the term 'mental health' 精神健康 (Chen 1999: 313). As Nancy Chen (1999: 313) has argued, this "indicates the ideological emphasis on hygiene and sanitation in relation to the pathologized category of mental illness". The mentally ill were still a problem to be cleaned up, the difference now was that the tools to be used were medical.

Not only was there a decision to focus on hygiene rather than health, there was also a decision to focus on *jingshen* 精神 as the definition for the mind, rather than the term *xinli* 心理 (Huang 2014: 189). *Jingshen* as the choice of term for the mind should be also be understood in light of the fact that shen 神, jing 精 and qi 气 are the three vital forces in TCM theory which are transformed into each other. This could be why during our conversation Brother Bing so quickly reached for the term *jingshen bing* 精神病 rather than *xinli jiankang* 心理健康. Perhaps he reached for the term *jingshen* because growing up in the late 60s and early 70s any reference to mental health would have used this particular idiom due to the influence of TCM and the impact of soviet-era psychiatry. As Baum (2018: 21) argues, the term *jingshen* was imported from Japan where mental illness was referred to as *jingshen bing* (Japanese: seishinbyō), i.e. an illness of the mind or psyche. This definition, however, did not dislodge completely the holistic assumptions of TCM, but rather mapped onto them. Defining *jingshen* Baum (2018: 21) notes that "the phrase itself refers to two mutually constitutive vital forces: jing (essence), a material substance formed in the kidneys that is

responsible for functions related to growth, aging, and reproduction; and shen (spirit), an immaterial entity that resides in the heart, which is perhaps best understood as a manifestation of one's vital energies." Rather than a wholesale import of western cartesian thought, the discursive frame through which psychological distress was coming to be understood—as 'mental hygiene'—instead was an amalgam of Japanese and Soviet notions of the mind and how it should be dealt with in crisis interplaying with longstanding concepts from TCM.

As the Mao-era progressed there was a turn away from understanding mental illness as a medical issue. It came to be understood as a political failing that could be overcome "with revolutionary spirit" (Gao 2019). Psychology was deemed '"bourgeoisie pseudo-science" and was banned altogether during the Cultural Revolution (Huang 2014: 183). During that same period there are instances of suicide no longer being referred to as *zisha* 自杀 in official discourse, but rather replaced by the phrase, *zi jue yu dang he renmin* 自绝于党和人民 which means to cut oneself from the Party and the people (Lester 2005: 100). Therapeutic practice was co-opted to different ends through the use of "heart-to-heart talk" 谈心/说知心话 and political sessions (Huang 2015: 7). In this sense there was a marked de-medicalisation of mental illness, as the totalising nature of Maoist ideology came to dominate even this sphere of life.

Only with the rehabilitation of academics in the wake of Mao's death in the late 1970s did mental illness come once again to be medicalised. The Institute of Psychology was re-opened in 1977 and in 1978 Peking University established its first Psychology Department (Huang 2015: 8). However, as Huang notes "when a group of psychoanalysts visited China in 1988, they found little evidence of anything resembling western-style psychotherapy" (Huang 2015: 9). Moreover, China was still claiming at this time to have an almost negligible rate of mental illness. In 1982 and again in 1993 national epidemiological surveys managed to show that depression occurred in less than 0.5% of

the population—which, as Sing Lee (2011: 177) notes, would imply that at the time depression was "35 times less common in China than in the US."

This was not quite the reality. As Arthur Kleinman (1986) has shown in his landmark study, the rate of "depression" was low because patients were somatising their distress. They understood their distress as neurasthenia, a term coined in America in 1868 by the neurologist George M. Beard (Kleinman 1986: 15). The Chinese translation of neurasthenia 神经衰弱 implies the actual fraying of the nerves, and patients typically reported headaches, dizziness, and insomnia as well as stomach issues and fainting in favour of describing affective complaints (Kleinman 1986: 54). But yet these same patients responded well to treatments offered in the West for depression. Kleinman (1986) came to see neurasthenia as a cultural idiom of distress. Conditioned by the Mao-era that these patients were still clawing their way out of, neurasthenia provided a language to discuss distress and make lifestyle adjustments to improve their circumstances (Kleinman 1986: 89). It was this condition which Brother Bing noted had afflicted one of his father's friends.

A key point from Kleinman's (1986, 1989) work is that neurasthenia was a socially and politically acceptable illness label, shaped by experiences in the Cultural Revolution of the politicisation of mental health, but also by family relations demanding particular roles for members and making it more or less acceptable to behave in certain ways and require particular types of help. In a similar way, this thesis proposes that contemporary idioms about mental health and the dramatic uptake in psychological services are reactions to and the result of engagements with particular historical and socio-political-economic settings. The later chapters of this thesis provide detailed ethnographic materials from psychological counsellors, service providers and users to support these claims. These observations build on Kleinman's work, showing today how people engaging

with the psy-boom are similarly using the idioms available to them to rearticulate themselves in their social worlds and to find acknowledgement for the distress they are feeling.

By the mid-2000s, neurasthenia was a less relevant idiom of distress and had been overtaken by bio-medical definitions much closer to the Western understanding of depression (Sing Lee 2011). Sing Lee has shown how depression came to take hold in China, particularly as Western pharmaceutical companies sought to crack the Chinese market and thus aggressively courted doctors and medical professionals (Sing Lee 2011: 198). A similar process occurred in Japan, where the heavily stigmatised nature of mental illness meant that companies like Glaxo Smith Klein (GSK) realised they didn't need to market their cures as much as they needed to market the illnesses themselves (Watters 2010: 225). In Japan, GSK helped to coin the term *kokoro no kaze* 'a cold of the soul' for depression, which helped people come to see depression as something that was normal and could affect anyone—and helpfully for GSK, could also be easily remedied with medication (Watters 2010: 225). The term *xinling ganmao* 'a cold of the soul' is also sometimes used in China (Jie Yang 2017: 41).

In this context we can see how depression as a discourse was empowered by companies such as GSK, and thus how the indigenous discourse of neurasthenia came to be disempowered and lose clinical relevance. This process has been identified by Medical Anthropologists working in other cultures as 'disease mongering' i.e. the selling of a disease itself as a precursor to selling drugs to treat it (Moynihan et al 2002). In 1986 the President of the Chinese Society of Psychiatry, Zhang Mingyuan (1986: 191) wrote an article against the adoption of the term 'depression' in China, because he feared that to do so was 'accompanied by the risk of jeopardizing the doctor/patient rapport which is essential for successful treatment'. History tells us that he was not successful. By

the mid-2000s the disease mongering of large pharmaceutical companies had contributed to depression taking over from neurasthenia as the prominent bio-medical diagnosis (see also Geyer and Wang 2019 on anti-depressant advertising in China today). Here we see how actors actively competing over meanings ended up empowering a new discourse which subsequently framed mental illness in such a way as to give salience to new treatment modalities (Entman 1993). However, this frame was effective in reframing serious mental illness but still left a large swathe of prosaic, non-medicalised distress without an adequate frame. The later chapters of this thesis show how this framing has been done by psychological counsellors and the dynamic market for psychological services as they seek clients.

1.2 Global Mental Health

While drug companies might engage in disease mongering (Moynihan et al 2002), what they are also engaging in is a multi-faceted process of creating bio-communicability (Briggs 2011). As Briggs notes "biocommunicable cartographies link researchers, clinicians, reporters, health educators, medical journals, state officials, publics, HMOs, insurers, corporations, and communicative, biomedical technologies in vast networks" (2011: 471). In other words, while there is the narrow aim of a pharmaceutical company to promote a disease so that it can later market the treatment it specialises in, this is just one aspect of a much more complicated process that touches academics, policymakers, the medical profession and end-users. In other words, for Brother Bing, who has never sought treatment for mental illness, it is too simple a causality to say that it is drug companies promotion of SSRIs in China which is causing his confusion around which term is in vogue at the present moment for him to engage in a conversation about mental health. It is a hugely complex swirl of competing ontologies that are vying to create a biocommunicable frame through which to understand the problem so that it can be understood in all of these different venues. As I will argue in subsequent chapters of this thesis, in China this is particularly clear in the changing understanding of therapists of their own profession (chapter 2) and on Wechat (chapter 3).

Biocommunicability, as Briggs points out, creates both mobilities and immobilities—by creating portable concepts that can be utilised globally it creates, in the context of mental health, a set of assumptions that can travel the world and dictate global policies and treatment plans, but it also means that cultured understandings of mental health cease to be communicable (2011: 470). At their extreme these localised understandings of mental health are bulldozed by the more totemic and communicable vision that has been agreed upon in the West. On a more prosaic level, they are at the very least rendered marginal and unable to travel along the same communicable pathways as the hegemonic understandings that have managed that journey. As such, they cease to have global purchase and to form equal partners in the debates about mental health that are had elsewhere.

This of course, in the context of mental health specifically, opens us to the much wider debate about Global Mental Health (GMH). This, in essence, is the question of whether there is a universal psyche (all humans are humans and therefore all mental illness is necessarily the same, even if it takes somewhat different cultural forms) or whether there is no such thing as a non-cultured mind and thus the idea of a universal psyche is actually a slight-of-hand that allows for a westernised mind to stand in for everyone in all contexts[17]. In the introduction I talked about these ideas in the context of how emotions come to be discussed amongst persons through various idioms, and the intense academic debate that exists as to whether or not there are 'universal' emotions or whether all emotions are cultured expressions of pre-verbal sensations.

In the context of my thesis, I seek to leave these questions open to allow the reader to form their own opinion through the ethnographic material that makes up the following chapters. My personal view is that at their extremes neither side of this debate is particularly useful; a fully universal vision

[17] see Rose 2019 chapter 7 for a full discussion of GMH. The argument that western ideas of the mind are overtaking localized understandings is most ably summed up by Ethan Watters' book (2010) *Crazy Like Us: the Globalization of the American Psyche,* which I have already quoted from earlier in this chapter. This book builds on the work of scholars like Derek Summerfield (2013) and Kalman Applbaum (2006).

of the mind not only embeds cultural (in this case, western) assumptions about mental health, it also suggests ontologically that mental health is just a case of faulty neurons and bio-chemical circuitry (hence it's universality) and I'm not fully convinced that this understanding of the mind will still be prevalent in decades to come. On the other hand, to imply that the mind is perfectly cultured can also be to allow culture to speak rather than the person themselves. It can, at its extreme, end up in its own way a form of cultural hegemony, but this time of culture over the individual contours of a human life. It would be easy to say that my informants have a particularly *Chinese* vision of mental health, and to explore all the ways that that might differ from my own assumptions, but this would be to imply that they experienced themselves as Chinese in a way that was intelligible to themselves and that overrode all the other facets that might make up their identity, such as their gender, sexuality, class or education level. No one I interviewed experienced their Chineseness as a stable condition, nor as the sole or most relevant aspect of their being (if it was even an aspect they remarked upon, being as they were Chinese in China and thus so obvious a condition they'd never had to overly consider it). Considering my field site was in Chengdu, many people I spoke with understood themselves as Sichuanese, which came with its own internal debates as to how much this implied cultural traits that separated them from the experience of people in other regions.

Moreover, as I have shown with the history that I laid out above, the debate around mental health in China has preceded the rise of GMH by millennia. The cultural forms they have taken, particularly in the holistic vision of the *Huangdi Neijing* may seem to be quite different to the western understanding of the mind that we have now, but it is not a world's away from the humoral medicine system that Galen proposed nearly 2,000 years ago in Rome and that was still widely used in Europe until the birth of the modern clinic (Foucault 1997). Even in the present day, when we can see shifts in the understanding of mental health in China towards a global and biocommunicable frame, there is still significant dialogue and interpretation between localised

understandings and the prevailing ideas from the West. This is the realm of Li Zhang's 'localisation' *bentuhua* (2014) and can be further seen in the way that anti-depressants are marketed differently in China to the UK (Geyer and Wang 2019).

All cultures have their own understandings of distress and as I have shown these have not been stable over time in China, but nor have they been completely unintelligible to a westerner. It has been understood variously as a bodily complaint caused by excessive emotions, a public stability issue, a political issue, a somatic complaint and now as either a serious condition that finds its expression in a bio-medical language analogous to that of the West, or understood as "psychological troubles" dealt with by psychological counselling and services, which is the realm this thesis is most interested in. Each of these has represented a framing devise that has mobilised its own treatment modalities. As this process has shown, at no point has the social idiom for distress not been subject to some form of institutional and societal negotiation. Discourses do not just arrive from above in their entirety; they are absorbed piecemeal, translated, rejected and interpreted by the subjects they come to alter. At every stage, the shifting understanding of mental illness and psychological distress came with its own language, in a mutually constitutive process. When looked at closely, this process is far too complex to be neatly aligned with either GMH or its opposite. It is in this context that I seek to understand my conversation with Brother Bing not as a simple binary between East and West, but as a much more complicated dialogue that wove multiple strands.

1.3 Whose health anyway?

The conversation I had with Brother Bing did more than just open a space to talk about how mental illness is framed, but also about how we understand health more generally. As I explored in the introduction, the rise of psychological counselling in China has to be understood in relation to Chinese modernity and the extent to which conditions of second order or reflexive modernity

are present (Beck 1992, Rose 1999: 72, Baumann 2000: 32, Lee 2006: 355). For Baumann, these new modernities create "self-determining individuals who take full responsibility for their own problems and who develop a reflexive self" (Baumann 2000: 32). It is worth here noting that similar trends in China have also contributed to a shifting in the understanding of mental health, and who has the responsibility for managing this issue.

Modernity in this context also interplays with issues of governmentality and biopower. As Kleinman (2010) has noted, a key social theory for global health is the notion of biopower, which was coined by "Michel Foucault to model the way political governance increasingly exerted its effects via the control of bodies and populations." In China biopower has been exerted in many ways, from Mao-era socialist thought work 思想工作,or the barefoot doctor programme (Yang 2011), to reform era policies like the one child policy (Greenhalgh 2008, 2011), or population quality drives 人口素质 (Anagnost 2004, Murphy 2004). Biopower has been a key facet of governmentality in China, which can be seen as the shift away from the exercise of sovereign power for its own sake, but the exercise of government to ""improve the condition of the population, to increase its wealth, its longevity and its health" (Foucault 2007: 105). In China this has opened questions of how the state should guarantee "an adequate life" for its citizens (Zhang, Kleinman, Tu 2011) and the kinds of subjectivities and expectations this fosters on an individual level. It also relates to the notion of eudemonic legitimacy that I discussed in the introduction to this thesis (Chen 1997).

Biopower and governmentality open questions about the right to be well and the duty to health (Rose 2011: 237). In governmental regimes the notion that private citizens should take responsibility for their own health is seen most clearly in the "personal responsibility doctrine" pushed by John Knowles (1977: 56), a renowned physician and president of Rockefeller foundation in the USA in the late 70s. "One man's freedom in health is another man's shackle in

taxes and insurance premiums," he argued, making a case that the debt for sins such as 'gluttony' or smoking should be returned firmly back to the individual (Knowles 1977: 56). This movement, which coincided with a broader discourse of personal responsibility and the enterprising capacities of free individuals under neo-liberal regimes, accelerated the creation of "technologies of responsibilization" (Rose 1999: 74) specifically in regard to public health. We were now seen as the masters of our own health and bodies, and it was our responsibility—our duty—to maintain them. "The active responsible biological citizen must engage in a constant work of self-evaluation and the modulation of conduct, diet, lifestyle and drug regime, in response to the changing requirements of the susceptible body" (Rose 2007: 154).

Similar trends are visible in China. As scholars have shown, in the early reform period Western advisors helped to shape Chinese economic policy and encourage the government to shift responsibility for many aspects of social care that had previous been tightly controlled by the state onto the shoulders of individuals (Weber 2020, Gewirtz 2017). Milton Friedman was invited to China in 1980 sponsored by the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and again in 1988 (Weber 2020: 3). While China is not a neo-liberal polity, it evinces some neo-liberal tendencies as it constructs 'socialism from afar' (Zhang and Ong 2011: 3). This has shifted responsibility for public health away from the state towards individuals themselves. In a seminal study Jane Duckett (2010: 1) notes that since the reform period starting 1978 the state's retreat from health has been "swift and thorough going." She notes that the decision to retreat was not governed by China's position in the global economy (in the late 70s, after years of shielding itself, China was only tangentially connected to the international financial system) but was rather ideologically driven by key stakeholders within the government and relevant ministries, like the Ministry for Health (Duckett 2010: 20).

This shift also represented changes in biopower and governmentality, which filtered through to the individual level of society. Foucault's work was travelling in this direction when he sadly died of HIV/Aids in the early 1980s. In response to critiques of his work that claimed he over-privileged power and delimited agency, he coined terms like "technologies of the self" to show how people accord themselves to new regimes of power (Foucault 1983: 203). This is the work that I look most closely at in this thesis, in particular in chapter 3 where I explore it in relation to Wechat and online psychological service provision. Importantly I am interested in how these "technologies of the self" constitute subjective shifts that empower people to feel in control of their own healing—to "change ourselves" in Ms. Liu's telling—and thus what they can help us to understand about agency. In the context of China, as the state retreated from health and fostered a duty for people to be well (Rose 2011), we see the rise of popular forms of cultivation like *yangsheng* flourishing in the reform period. Noting the context of rapid social change in China in the reform period and the often dizzying array of social problems that could cause people to suffer, Farquhar and Zhang (2005: 320) note in their study of *yangsheng* practices that "when people say that they swim in frozen lakes or walk backwards up mountains in the early morning "for their health," we take them absolutely at their word." In a similar way, I see the rise of psychological counselling and the "inner revolution" (Zhang 2020) as a popular response to how duties and responsibilities for health are being understood in contemporary China in regard to mental health and distress.

This is also an area in which my project differs from the work of scholars such as Li Zhang (2020), Jie Yang (2015) and Ma Zhiying (2020) who focus more on issues of power and how governmentality and control are extended using psychological tools. Jie Yang (2015) has shown in her study of laid-off factory workers from the beibiao watch factory in Beijing how the party-state employed laid-off workers as *peiliao* to help maintain social stability by helping their unemployed colleagues find new purpose. She described this as the "kindly power" of the state 关爱 (Yang

2015), a similar term to Ma Zhiying's (2020: 43) "kind power" that she identifies in relationship to the 686 community mental health project. Li Zhang (2020: 54) writes about the idea of "governing through happiness," and shows in her monograph the ways in which psychological concepts have been employed by the party-state in areas such as the military and police forces to improve control and motivation. My project is indebted to this work but is more tightly drawn in relation to the society-based camp of psychological counsellors and how the psy-boom is developing in areas less closely tied into the party-state. I'm interested here in the popular response to the state's retreat from health and campaigns to push for the population at large to take more responsibility for both their physical and mental health.

The doctrine of personal responsibility for health is enshrined today in the government's Healthy China 2030 '健康中国 2030' directive. In July of 2019 the government unveiled the plan with a glitzy documentary, which asked the viewer what kind of China they would see in the future. The answer; "it will be 1.3bn Chinese people, each of them becoming the representatives of a healthy lifestyle!" (jiankang zhongguo xindong 2019). Healthy China 2030 is a cluster of initiatives that are directed at improving the health of the nation, with a heavy emphasis on people taking the reins of their own health. Key aspects include regulating diets—for example keeping salt intake to only 5g a day—submitting to regular health inspections to check for infectious diseases like Hepatitis C and to catch potentially fatal problems like cancer early, and ensuring that a person gets adequate exercise—preferably engaging in strenuous exercise a minimum of three times a week for at least 30 minutes a session (zhong tuobang 2019). "A healthy China starts from me!" noted one blogger after the government released the documentary (Fu 2019).

The retreat from health that Duckett (2010) has shown precipitated the rise of private hospitals and a rapid expansion of the market for non-clinical health interventions. It's in this context that the decision by the government in the early 2000s to launch the MOLSS vocational qualification

for psychological counsellors should be understood. That psychological counselling would initially fall under the remit of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security—as an issue of work—and not as an issue for the Ministry of Health is indicative. In choosing to create a vocational qualification (at a time when jobs like mushroom gardener were also being qualified) shows the hangover of the socialist system still desiring to control new occupations and ensure that the dynamism of the market was still channelled by the state. However, the fact that the decision to create a *vocation* for psychological counselling and then leave the market to decide how to set the price for care and how exactly that care could be expressed, shows the state retreating from health. Mental health was deemed to be a significant problem for which there could be a solution within the market, which is a significant shift given what we have seen above about the various ways in which mental illness had been understood in the past.

Healthy China 2030 has directives clearly aimed at the mental health of the general population. In a list of 50 "national standards" that are being set for people to aim for in their pursuit of personal health, mental health and sleep are given their own section and six key standards (zhong tuobang 2019). These include aiming for 7-8 hours a night of sleep, and finding healthy stress relieving methods (i.e. to not use smoking, drinking or the internet to relieve stress) and maintaining healthy emotions, which the directives argue will help to stop emotions causing you bodily health problems (zhong tuobang 2019). This echoes the understanding from Traditional Chinese Medicine that uncontrolled emotions can cause physical health problems, and that most illnesses are actually the physical manifestation of emotional stresses. The directives even go so far as to state—for national standard #20—that "if you have family problems don't get aggressive or behave in a way that hurts others; don't be cold when responding to issues. Instead, use positive communication methods to solve them." (zhong tuobang 2019).

Many scholars and commentators have argued that neo-liberal regimes, and the subjectivities they create, are responsible for global mental health crises (Watters 2010: 212, Hari 2017: 261, Byung-Chul Han 2017: 11). "All these depressed and anxious people, all over the world-—they are giving us a message. They are telling us something has gone wrong with the way we live," argues the journalist Johann Hari in his polemic *Lost Connections* (2017: 261). Some scholars have pushed back on this notion. As Nikolas Rose (2019: 57) argues in his most recent work, while it is tempting to argue that the privatization of risk and the increasing loneliness of contemporary society is playing its part, "the evidence for a causal relation is equivocal." Rather, he argues, we have always failed to account for the bio-political and social determinants of mental health problems in all societies at all times (Rose 2019). That we are finally starting to account for them at a time in which the system is neo-liberal, or at least, as in China, evinces certain neo-liberal characteristics, makes it appear that there is a clearer causal link than perhaps actually exists.

I would argue that marketization in China isn't *creating* a mental health crisis, but rather creates the conditions for an industry such as psychological counselling that makes mental health salient and offers psychological services targeted at its treatment. This is akin to what the anthropologist Everett Zhang (2015) identified in his work on impotence. He argues that what caused an impotence epidemic in China wasn't actually an increase in the rate of impotence itself, but the creation of a new desiring male subject in the reform period who felt compelled to seek treatment for a condition that had not been pathologized in the Mao era (Zhang 2015). In a similar way, the rise of psychological services in China today is a product of and a response to marketization and the anxieties inherent in its attendant social changes.

As the government has decided to retreat away from health and place that burden on the shoulders of the citizens themselves, this has been met by the creation of an industry of private psychological counsellors (chapters 2, and 3). As I stated in the introduction, in 2017, when the MOLSS

qualification regime was halted (for discussion see Bram 2020, chapter 2), it is estimated that over one million people in China had qualified as psychological counsellors (Huang 2018: 391). In other words, at precisely the same time that the government was retreating from health and constructing policies that would enforce personal responsibility, they gave birth to a market for psychological counselling in the private sector that created a commodity class of psychological services and psychotherapeutic training that the middle class heavily bought into. Concurrently, the government, under the auspices of Healthy China 2030, is imploring people to manage their emotions and find healthy ways of relieving stress, a vibrant marketplace has sprung up to enable individuals to cultivate "therapeutic selves" (Zhang 2018) and take charge of their mental health.

As the introduction to this thesis argued, the MOLSS qualification, and the subsequent National Mental Health law 精神卫生法 in 2013, have helped to create a separation between mental illness, dealt with in psychiatry, and mental health or wellbeing to be dealt with by psychological counsellors. The distinction between these two lines is messier in practice than in theory, as subsequent chapters of this thesis will show through the ethnographic material drawn from work with psychological counsellors in Chengdu. Crucially however, this split has encouraged the psychological counselling industry to empower its own discourses around mental health and well-being, which is the territory that the rest of this thesis will explore. This is why charting the discursive territory of ideas like "mental hygiene" 精神卫生 and "psychological health" 心理健康 is important, especially when we see in subsequent chapters how psychological counsellors like Ms. Liu navigate these ideas to shape their understandings of mental wellbeing and appropriate forms of healing. It was important however, at the outset, to show the context in which this language and its attended subjectivities are becoming social idioms of distress.

1.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to foreground the debates that will be explored in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. I have sought to show how the discourse of mental health has changed over time and how we arrived at the understandings which were circulating in Chengdu at the time of my study. As the conversation with Brother Bing highlighted, no single definition of mental health existed at the time that my fieldwork was conducted. Multiple understandings from different times and stages of development still intermingled. This reality complicates the debate about GMH and helps to situate my project going forward between a purely cultured vision of mental health or one that seeks to show the universality of distress. Further, I have sought to show how material changes in the doctrine of personal responsibility in China have shifted the burden of who is supposed to manage mental health more firmly onto the shoulder of individuals.

As this chapter has shown, shifts in how mental illness is framed by given actors at particular times has had clear impacts in the treatment modalities that are offered and the way that individuals end up understanding their own mental well-being. This draws us into conversation with the anthropologically important themes of governmentality and biopower, and how these shape popular responses on an individual level. One such popular response in China to these shifts, of course, is the rise of psychological counselling and psychological service provision. Understanding the psy-boom as a popular response to issues in society and also as related to the changes in how health and well-being are managed by the government helps to ground the ethnographic material of subsequent chapters. The idea of technologies of the self, for example, will become relevant in chapter 3 when this concept is explored in the context of online psychological service provision. Importantly, the concept of "frames" (Entman 1993) has been used to show how discourses bracket themselves and end up empowering or disempowering certain responses. As psychological counselling and psy-fever generally in China continues to provide idioms of distress that have

social relevance for the population to advocate for their mental health, it will empower its own popular responses. In time, as this particular understanding of mental health becomes more widespread, I am sure it will touch even people like Brother Bing. In the future his eye will still twitch, but he will know for sure it isn't a mental illness.

CHAPTER 2: THREE GENERATIONS OF CARE[18]

The first time I attended Ms. Liu's reading group, I found her sat in an old armchair. In a circle around her were gathered fourteen people, all with a translated copy of Judith Beck's 1964 *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond* open in their laps. Ms. Wen had told me about the group after I mentioned to her that I had been looking online for psychology workshops or training 培训 that I could attend. The group met in West Moon tower, the entrance of which was tucked down a narrow alley just off the 2nd ring road. The building was falling apart, and Ms. Liu's office was on a sparsely populated corridor where a few companies had offices. Someone in one of those offices occasionally brought a dog to work and on those days dog food would be left in a half-masticated clump in a corner by the toilets. Ms. Liu's room however was cosy, and she had a nice view of the city beyond. When I walked in she was immediately identifiable, perched forward in her chair, mediating the conversation. She waved for me to sit down without breaking her rhythm. As the session progressed she would direct who should read what passage and then drew examples from her own case histories to illuminate the messages of our readings. Her armchair was placed below a poster that said *without wind and rain the earth wouldn't have spring.*

Ms. Wen was not a massive fan of Ms. Liu. At various moments in the evening she subtly shook her head at something that Ms. Liu said, and spent much of the reading group playing with her phone, barely disguised within the pages of the book that was opened on her lap. While Ms. Wen was professionally on a par with Ms. Liu, as they were both psychological counsellors, she considered herself apart. Ms. Liu, she said, was outdated; she represented a time when the requirements to be a counsellor were looser. Ms. Wen believed that Ms. Liu's grasp of the concepts she was teaching us was lax, at best. Ms. Wen was there because Ms. Liu is part of a professional

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organisation 协会 that has contacts that would be useful for the counselling firm that Ms. Wen is employed by. She put up with the reading group as professional collateral.

In this chapter I will discuss three counsellors in Chengdu; Ms. Zhou, Ms. Liu and Ms. Wen, who represent three different generations of professional counsellors in China. Ms. Zhou, born in 1949, trained to be a counsellor in the 90s, Ms. Liu in the early 2000s and Ms. Wen in the early 2010s. Although all are legally allowed to operate as 'psychological counsellors' 心理咨询师 in reality they have qualified in three different contexts, with different standards defining what it means to be qualified and different underlying understandings of what a psychological counsellor can do. What I will show in this chapter is that while these three therapists all operate in the context of the wider psy-boom in China, we can see in these three therapists three stages in the development of psychology that have become embodied in their psychological practices, and which therefore complicates our understanding of the wider psy-boom. A key contribution of this thesis is showing the heterogeneity of this phenomenon and how it intersects with other social forces. This chapter helps to show how psychological counsellors understand their practice and how they understand therapeutic care, and therefore also foregrounds this thesis's exploration of other venues of the psy-boom and the subjectivities being cultivated therein.

As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, in China psychological counsellors 心理咨询师 are distinct from psychotherapists 心理治疗师 and as practiced in the West this means broadly that the former are interested in the mind and its social context and the latter in the brain and its neurochemical foibles (Huang 2014: 189). Psychological counsellors 心理咨询师 in China do not typically come from a formal medical background and their qualifications do not permit them to prescribe medication. This is borne-out in the literal translations of their names; a psychotherapist in China has the word 治疗 in their name, which means 'to cure'. A psychological counsellor, etymologically in Chinese, is merely someone who you can consult. This distinction also places

them 'in society' and outside of the medical establishment 体制外 (a distinction also noted by Huang 2014: 203, Huang 2018: 376). Importantly, this distinction was enshrined in the 2013 national mental health law 精神卫生法, which "defines psychotherapy as a medical treatment that shall be conducted by medical personnel in medical settings" and renders psychological counselling of the type practiced by these three generations of counsellors as 'non-medical in nature' (Huang 2014: 203, see also Hizi 2017: 106).

It is important to contextualise the three generations of the psy-boom that these three psychological counsellors represent to show how the environment in which they entered the field influenced their therapeutic practice. As Huang (2014, 2015) has noted in his detailed histories of the psy-boom, during the Mao era "psychotherapy, academic psychology, and the psychological aspects of experience had been repudiated for political reasons" (2015: 2). In the 1980s and early 1990s there was an attempt to rejuvenate the discipline in elite universities such as Beijing University (Huang 2014: 187). The Sino-German course 中德班 launched by a German therapist who had studied at Beijing University in 1976 (Huang 2015: 11) also proved to be incredibly influential and launched the careers of many of the masters who would go on to shape the field (Huang 2014: 196). This is the first generation, which I see represented in Ms Zhou, who graduated from a one-year course advanced psychology course at Beijing University in 1994.

The next generation, which I see represented by Ms. Liu, is the generation defined by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MOLSS) vocational qualification degree for psychological counsellors (see Wu et al 2016: 307, Zhang Li 2014: 287, Huang 2014: 193). As Huang notes in his history (2014: 187) the idea of psychological counselling was originally part of outpatient care within the medical system. As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, it was only with the arrival of the new vocational regime that psychological counselling became a commodity that could be easily consumed by the public and a vocation that people could train towards. By 2014, 600,000 people had qualified as psychological counsellors in China (Huang 2018: 391). As one set of

scholars have noted, this process was akin to 'letting a hundred flowers blossom' and rapidly expanded therapeutic care and consciousness in China (Chang et al 2005: 104). It also created a "training craze" (Kuan 2019: 1, see also Huang 2014: 191) as affluent people signed up to train to qualify as therapists, even if they didn't intend to eventually practice (as we will see in the case of Luna, in chapter 4). Ms. Liu, it should be noted, was a serious candidate dedicated to practicing as a counsellor. She told me that of the people she qualified with, only around 1 in 6 of them decided to practice psychotherapy as their profession. The rest went back to the lives they had been living before they qualified, but newly informed by their training.

This training craze eventually led to anxieties within the field, and the government itself, over the lack of professionalization within the industry (Huang 2018: 371-400, see also yigeren de pingjing 2018, Lakang Xinli 2019a). It was partly a response to the 'untamed' nature of the field (Huang 2018: 371) that the government chose to strongly stipulate that psychological counselling was non-medical in the 2013 national mental health law and also to eventually stop examinations for the vocational qualification entirely by the end of 2017 (see Zhang 2017). By 2017 there were assumed to be over a million people who had achieved the vocational qualification (Huang 2018: 391) It is the professionalising aspect of the field that I see represented in Ms Wen, the youngest of the three therapists. Later in this chapter I will show how these three different training regimes and the wider context of the general expansion of the psy-boom came to be embodied by these three counsellors. I will then draw this discussion of embodiment in relation to the themes of subjectivity and agency that are key focuses of this thesis.

There is a similar pattern in the psy-boom as there is in the practice of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). As Elisabeth Hsu (1999) has shown, the understandings and practice of TCM were heavily influenced by the method in which the practitioner learnt his craft. However, while Hsu (1999) was able to investigate different co-existing transmission methods in parallel, in the context of the psy-boom there is a clear chronological unfolding of different methods. Each generation qualified

under different standards of what "qualification" was supposed to look like, and into a society that had different expectations of what counselling should be. This meant that there were less options in terms of how one chose to train to become a psychological counsellor in each generation, as opposed to amongst TCM practioners who had more options for how they entered the field.

Even as these three women all self-identified as psychological counsellors, because they each represented distinguishable generations that existed in the psy-boom, their different personal and professional histories mean that they each had a distinct professional habitus (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu 1997, Moore & Sanders 2014: 11, Das et al 2014: 8). They each deployed different symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977: 183) and pushed forth their own vision of what the therapeutic encounter should entail. They also constituted their own understandings of the role of psychology itself—and thus of the psychological 'field' within which they all operate (Bourdieu 1988: 113, see also Forchtner, B & Schneickert, C 2016: 294). This also represented an important change in personal subjectivity. Each of these three therapists has had their own distinct entry into the profession—predicated by the available education and requirements necessary to obtain their qualifications. Subsequently they have each, in their own way, built out a professional network around them to both expand their practices and justify their business. They are in a process of "self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society" (Ong 2014: 738) and embody these processes as dispositions that inform their practice of psychology. This is particularly true as Huang (2014: 184) has noted the role that "state-related interventions" have had in terms of both sparking the psy-boom and then attempting to clear the debris.

These therapists therefore represent an interesting problematic in our wider understanding of psychology and mental healthcare in China today. While there have been studies that contextualize the psy-boom and its expression in therapeutic practices (Zhang 2014) and that trace the psy-boom through various media (Yang 2017), the psy-boom is often written about as if there is a

universal understanding of psychology or therapeutic practice that has been somewhat localized and absorbed (see Zhang 2014). Following Bloch (1989: 100), I too note that anthropological works often conflate cognitive systems "with culture, cosmology, and even ideology that members of a given society supposedly all absorb in its entirety" and that this does not conform to the more haphazard reality of how a phenomenon such as the psy-boom develops. Consequently, I argue that the psy-boom was a constantly evolving phenomenon that has been consumed piecemeal by different generations of therapists and that has generated different ideas about how best to put psychological knowledge into practice. The fragmented nature of the psy-boom and how it has taken hold in China is embodied in these therapists.

This chapter not only shows the fragmented and generational divide in therapeutic practice in China, it also shows how emerging disciplines and practices, in this case psychology and psychological counselling, embed themselves. Bourdieu's work on embodiment is an attempt to subvert the duality of system and practice, by tying both up as mutually constituted through the habitus (Lora-Wainwright 2006: 12). The use of the concept of the habitus provides an analytical tool to show the relevance of embodied history when investigating how new systems of knowledge and professions develop and cement themselves into practices. The habitus also plays an important role in personal subjectivity, which is a theme that runs throughout this thesis. Investigating three generations of therapists in China using this concept helps us understand the psy-boom less as a single event but as a more complicated and staggered process. It also provides an analytical toolkit that could be used to investigate similar phenomena and expound on the complexity inherent in the uptake of any new knowledge form in contexts beyond China and in disciplines other than psychology.

2.1. Help-Seekers, Callers and Clients

Ms. Zhou was born in 1949. Her life has tracked, year by year, the development of the PRC. Her father was a principal in a large high school in Chengdu and was well regarded, but, as was not atypical for the time for a man of his stature, was struggled against in the Cultural Revolution and took his own life. Ms. Zhou was then sent off as an educated youth, but due to her class background she was sent to a far-off province, less to be educated but rather, in her own telling, to be reformed 改造. Once she returned, she managed to take the high-school leavers exam 高考, placing in the top 10 in Sichuan province. She decided to study medicine. She became a specialist of internal medicine 内科 but the wounds of her past remained unresolved. She was insomniac and spent time in psychiatric facilities in the early 90s. During one of her stays she found materials advertising a one-year advanced psychology course at *Beida* 研修班, the top university in the country, and decided she should go. She studied hard but found she had more questions than answers. "So, I read more, not just psychology, but history and philosophy," she said. "Heidegger helped me the most."

Upon graduating she had—what amounted to for the time—qualified as a counsellor. As noted earlier, this was before the vocational degree existed and just as psy-fever started to spread. As Huang (2014: 195) wryly notes, "few people had seen a talk therapist in China when the category of psychological counsellor suddenly became a career option." It was in this era, pre-qualification, pre-'hundred flowers blossoming' and pre-psychological consciousness raising events like CCTV12's 'psychological talk show' (Zhang 2014: 48, Huang 2014: 196) that Ms. Zhou graduated from Beijing University. However, she didn't feel like she was in a position to help anyone. She still had too many questions. She returned to Chengdu and kept reading. Eventually, a rich woman that she met through friends of friends started to ask her for life advice. At first the relationship was amicable, but it soon turned professional. Ms. Zhou started receiving a fee for listening to the

rich woman talk about her various problems. This experience gave Ms. Zhou the confidence to open a small counselling practice. She received clients in her home at first, and eventually paid for a small shop-front in East Chengdu. "And that's how I became a therapist," she told me.

Ms. Zhou's path into the profession was informal, a process of seeking that eventually led to her being sought. It is perhaps for this reason that she refers to the people she sees as 'help-seekers' 求助者. This language is important to note as each of the three therapists used subtly different terms to refer to the people who sought their services, and this I see as one of the clearest examples of how the different generations of the psy-boom came to be embodied.

The language that Ms. Zhou used to refer to her 'seekers' is an embodied practice that reflects her entrance to the field. This was before the psy-boom had really taken hold in China, and long before the qualification regime and the training-craze which helped to rapidly expand psychological consciousness in China. The people who came to Ms. Zhou were seeking help—they did not yet have a solid language for their distress (see Kleinman 1986 and Sing Lee 1999 for the development of the category of depression in China) or a clear idea of where to seek help. When they came to her, Ms. Zhou was completely unburdened by any commitment to a particular school or set of ideas. She used Heidegger, she quoted widely from ancient Greek and Roman philosophy—she likes the Stoics—and she would just as happily employ Zhuangzi as she would Lacan. "What works, works," she stated, matter-of-factly. Her aim was to provide people, through the wealth of her broad-based knowledge, a 'key of ten-thousand uses' 一把万能的钥匙. It was this key that had helped her to recover from her own traumas. They sought help, and she provided it, however she could.

Ms Liu's entry into the field was different. She intended to be a counsellor; from 2001 she studied for two years at the Chinese Academy of Sciences 中科院 and then did a year of internship before qualifying. Part of her training involved working on a suicide hotline, one of the first in the country.

Professors from Beijing would come by every few months to check on their work. It was only in 2004 that she started to be a counsellor formally and to see her own patients. This handily coincided with the MOLSS qualification and the CCTV12 'psychological talk show' (Li Zhang 2014: 48, Huang 2014: 196) being aired on national television, two events that synergistically catalysed the psy-boom.

As Ms. Liu noted, at the time she trained there was no undergraduate degree in psychology; that only started in 2004; the year she started practicing professionally. However, by 2002 the MOLSS provisionally issued the Occupational Standards for Psychological Counsellors along with the formalised Mental Health Counselling Training Program (Wu et al 2016: 307). This qualification regime was managed by the Ministry for Labour and featured three-tiers, with level 3 being the lowest and level 1—the highest level aimed at people with qualifying doctoral degrees or medical experience—never actually being enshrined as an achievable qualification (Zhang Li 2014: 287).

As Ms. Liu understood it, level 3 was designed less as a formal qualification for people to consult patients and more as a tool to 'raise therapeutic consciousness' generally in the populace (this chimes with Chang et al 2005's notion of the 'hundred flowers'). Level 2 was significantly harder to gain than level 3 and thus qualified someone adequately to treat patients. Level 1 was unattainable, for obvious reasons, though she intimated that should it exist she would automatically receive it given her years of experience. She lamented that there were plenty of people with a lowly level 3 qualification who took on patients. This she felt was 'not scientific' 不科学.

For Ms. Liu the people who sought her services were never referred to as 'help-seekers' as they were by Ms. Zhou. Rather they were 'callers[19]' 来访者 who came to see her, often with clearly

[19] The Chinese term 来访者 can and is sometimes translated as 'client' (see Zhang: 2014: 284) but I am using a more literal translation of the term to contrast it with the explicitly commercial language used by Ms.

defined problems, for which she had a range of solutions. This terminology was extremely common amongst all the therapists I interviewed in Chengdu, regardless of generation, and seems to have largely been the settled upon term in the industry. Ms. Liu had a more developed understanding of academic psychology—she clearly felt comfortable enough in her own knowledge to convene a psychology reading group targeted at other professionals—and while she too admitted, echoing Ms. Zhou, that "whatever method works is the method that works," she clearly meant this in the context of using psychological concepts to treat psychological problems. While she didn't subscribe to any specific school 流派 within psychology, she was committed to psychology as a practice. This contrasted with Ms. Zhou, who lacked formal training in how psychology might be practiced, and consequently saw psychology more as a body of knowledge that could be drawn on, in the same way as philosophy, when it seemed appropriate. Ms. Liu would have balked at using Heidegger to help a teenager who was struggling in school, but that was because she was much more cognizant of how psychological theories could be translated into more formalized practises, for example through techniques like CBT.

Ms. Wen also referred to the users of her services as 'callers', however, on occasion she would refer to them instead as 'customers', or 'clients' 客户. This is the language of commerce and is how a business would refer to the users of their service or consumers of their products. Ms. Wen trained in the 2010s, reading for an undergraduate degree in psychology, followed by completing two master's degrees, one in psychology and another in biopharmacy, both at the prestigious West China Medical School 华西 in Chengdu. She also attained the MOLSS qualifications. She worked in an organisation called *Look After* 观心 (which I discussed in the introduction). In *Look After* she was one member of a ten-person team working in Chengdu, with another team based in the US. All of the counsellors except for her had done either their undergrad or masters (or in some cases

Wen. This distinction is not clear in English if the term is translated as 'client' but is more obvious in Chinese.

both) abroad, typically in the US. She therefore peppered her speech with academic terminology––often in English—and was extremely cognizant of the broad debates in the field. This was a habit I observed amongst the other people I interviewed at *Look After,* and was clearly a house-style, if not an explicitly agreed upon professional convention. It also reflects the broader influence of western psychotherapy since the influential Sino-German course (Huang 2015: 11), even though scholars have noted processes of localisation as these ideas have taken hold (Zhang 2014).

Ms. Wen represents the 'taming' of the counselling profession as it professionalises (Huang 2018: 371). She also noted that her academic background, and that of her main partner in *Look After,* were sufficient enough for them to actually be qualified as psychotherapists 心理治疗师 but that they hadn't yet felt the need to go through the lengthy exam process. Their business was doing fine; their clients were diverse and sufficiently educated to understand the potential of their services—"today I had three clients with suicidal ideation who all want to throw themselves off buildings," she once said to me, with resignation on her face after what had clearly been a long day. This stands at odds with the findings of Gil Hizi (2016) who argued that Chinese people with serious mental health issues likely avoided talk-therapy because of the perceived risk of losing face. This may be because of our respective field sites—Chengdu is notoriously laid-back and Jinan, in Shandong province where he collected his data, is adjacent to Confucius' birthplace, and much more conservative—but it also might represent the success of the professionalising manoeuvres identified by Huang (2018) and the increased cementing of psychological consciousness in the intervening years of the psy-boom since Hizi's data collection. It also shows the blurred boundaries between psychological counselling and psychotherapy. According to the 2013 National Mental Health Law, these patients should not be seeing a counsellor but should be engaging with medicalised psychotherapy in a clinical setting. Clearly, however, they had chosen to seek counselling and Ms. Wen had agreed to see them, which shows both that enforcement of the law

is not perfect, but also that it is hard to draw a line between "serious" mental health issues and those that should be dealt with in counselling.

While each of these counsellors grew up in a different context of the psy-boom, they also grew up in a different context of the overall reform period in China. Having said that, there were several striking similarities between them. They each could point to experiences of intense personal suffering that had set them on their healing journey. For Ms. Zhou this was her experience in the Cultural Revolution, as I already mentioned. Ms. Liu had married in her early 20s and was divorced by 30. She never remarried and had to fashion a life as a single woman in a patriarchal social context that treats divorced women unfairly (I explore this more in chapter 4). Ms. Wen suffers from intense migraines which can be debilitating. At times when we would meet she would be wearing sunglasses, even on overcast days, because she had become so photosensitive from the pain of her headaches. On a few occaisions she cancelled altogether, stating that beyond work she had no energy to socialise and would go straight from *Look After's* offices to bed, where she would remain in the darkness, unable to fall asleep for the pain.

Beyond their personal experiences of trauma, there were other similarities. They each had what constituted for an elite education in their generation. They were all women and had spent much of their adult lives alone. Both Ms. Liu and Ms. Zhou had married in their early twenties and were divorced by their mid-30s. Ms. Wen is in her mid-30s and unmarried. While Ms. Zhou's background was complicated by the Cultural Revolution and she therefore swung between being the daughter of a counter-revolutionary to that of someone posthumously reformed in the eyes of the party state, all of the women were from backgrounds that enabled them to pursue an education and to build financially independent lives. These features thereby act largely as controls (to the extent that one could ever 'control' for the vastly complex forces that shape a human life) which allow us to focus on their respective positions within the unfolding psy-boom.

Here we have seen that the way these counsellors trained informed the way they referred to their clients. In a way, this process is not too dissimilar to the way that the framing of mental health shapes treatment modalities that was explored in the previous chapter (Entman 1993). Reaching for the terms help-seekers, clients and callers is an embodied practice that tells us about how these counsellors came to their therapeutic practice but also how they viewed the people that they were providing care for. Here we can see how embodied history shapes subjectivities and world views.

2.2. Life Coaching vs. Therapy

The fact that these counsellors had subtly different ways of referring to the people that came to them for counselling informed their practice. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, therapy is expensive (to the point that many people choose instead to train to become a therapist, rather than simply purchasing therapy for themselves). This makes it difficult to cultivate long-term therapeutic relationships with patients that have no clear "end." Culturally this is also complicated by the fact that a therapeutic relationship that does not have an obvious moment in which the person can be said to be "healed." This is "incongruous with Chinese representations of the expert healer who can produce speedy results" (Chang 2005: 108). Moreover, by offering an expensive service, counsellors naturally end up with affluent clients who are more used to having their needs met quickly and efficiently in other aspects of the market economy. When an hour-long session costs as much as $1/6^{th}$ of the average monthly wage in Chengdu (CEIC 2019) the relationship between counsellor and therapist is marketized and many patients have neither the money nor the time to sustain an open-ended therapeutic relationship.

These conditions meant that people often misunderstood what the purpose of a counsellor was. As Ms. Wen would often say—"I'm a therapist! I'm not a life coach! 人生领导." The resoluteness of Ms. Wen's not being "a life-coach" was a response to the systemic issues that counsellors face in China due to the economic and cultural pressures of their clients. "A key challenge facing

Chinese talk therapists is how to make Western-originated psychological and psychiatric knowledge and therapeutic models "fit" Chinese social norms, cultural values, and desires" (Zhu 2018). As Li Zhang's ethnographic work has shown, there has been a clear localisation process as therapists have localized western concepts to make them fit a domestic audience (Zhang 2014). However, it is the issue of the "desires" that counselling clients have in relation to their counsellors that causes a number of pressures on counsellors, which can cause them to operate more as life-coaches than as therapists as understood in the West.

Another issue is that in the digital realm of the psy-boom, as we will see in the next chapter, self-help and "chicken-soup for the soul" 心灵鸡汤 literature—which are both results oriented and offer quick-fixes—have become conflated with academic psychology and represent the entry-point for many lay-people into the wider therapeutic sphere (Jie Yang 2017: 182-3, Hizi 2016: 68). Clients arrive with an expectation that their therapist will be able to offer quick and insightful life advice. The three therapists I engage with in this chapter each had different understandings of how they were expected to meet this reality. Ms. Wen was clearly annoyed and troubled by the idea of being a life coach. When I asked Ms. Zhou whether or not she was a life coach, she hedged by stating that many people in China lacked guidance—she was, however, clear to remind me that her guidance differed from others because of her experience and her deep reading. Other conversations with therapists in Chengdu with peers of Ms. Liu and Ms. Wen also re-affirmed therapists' frustration in their clients' demands and unwillingness to build long-term therapeutic relationships (see Hong Yuan and Yu Mimi 2019a). This problem saw its manifestation in the way some therapists marketed their work—Ms. Wen pointed out that *South Island* 南岛, a local counselling practice, offered a "buy 9 sessions get the tenth free" package. "Does this not imply that if I haven't cured you within 10 sessions I've failed?" she asked.

Both Ms. Liu and Ms. Wen staunchly rejected the idea that their therapeutic practice had anything to do with 'life-coaching'. Having said that, Ms. Liu also acknowledged the point that Ms. Zhou

made about the need for guidance amongst the people who approached her. "Society has changed so much and so fast," she told me, "that sometimes people just want someone to tell them what choice to make 做决定." She said however that she strove not to do that, but rather to help people to think through how they felt about the choices they made. "If someone wants to get divorced, I can't tell them if they should or not. But I can help them to try and figure out what each of those choices will entail and what emotions and thoughts that is bringing up." This is where she felt she differed from a life coach (and implicitly from Ms. Zhou). Ms. Liu argued that life coaches could often be reckless in their advice because it was ungrounded in any scientific theories 不科学 and they had no training whatsoever. It made sense however that given the structural issues that counsellors face from their clients expectations, that the boundaries between life coaching and therapy were often blurred.

These structural issues help to account for the popularity of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in China, which as Li Zhang notes (2020: 47) is one of the three most popular psychological approaches practiced in China today. It was notable therefore that Ms. Liu had chosen one of the founding texts in CBT for a years-worth of sessions of her reading group. CBT, at its core, holds that thought distortions and maladaptive behaviours play a significant role in psychological disorders (Field et al 2015). Practitioners argue that CBT can help to reduce symptoms and associated distress by teaching new thought processing methods (Field et al 2015). Importantly, CBT differs from psychoanalytic therapies which plumb a person's history to try and piece together the events in the past that might have contributed to the issues a person is facing in the present. Rather, CBT argues that correcting thought patterns today enables a person to react better to events in the life course, regardless of what has happened in the past[20]. In this sense it means

[20] There are numerous critiques of CBT. Some therapists believe that by ignoring a client's past it is inadequate to address significant aspects of suffering (see Leader 2008). Moreover, large-scale reviews of the existing literature tend not to find significant results in terms of preventing relapse for serious conditions such as schizophrenia and bi-polar, suggesting that practioners are cherry-picking studies that actually overstate its efficacy (Lynch and Mckenna 2017). Finally, there is the argument that CBTs popularity is less to do with its efficacy and more to do with its price and clearly defined objectives, making

that CBT is more practical, with a clearly defined toolkit that can be utilized by the client. CBT practitioners will often set homework for their clients, which they work on between sessions (In chapter 5 I mention one such homework exercise Ms. Liu set the reading group). CBT therefore is more results oriented and gives clients a greater sense of the purpose of each session, hence its popularity in China[21].

Ms. Liu's decision to have us read a CBT text could be understood in reference to her desire to separate psychological counselling from life coaching. CBT had core principles that could be taught to the group and its uses were clearly defined. As she said one evening, "the idea of this work is that when something bad happens to you, you have a choice about how you respond. This will not stop bad things happening, but it will help you not make it worse." In a similar vein to what she had said about life coaching, she was not training us to tell people what to do, but how to identify and alter the thought patterns through which a decision was made. This was clearly different to how Ms. Zhou understood her therapeutic practice. Ms. Zhou, with her "key of ten thousand uses," did not have a problem telling people what to do[22].

Having said that, this did not mean that Ms. Liu's reading of CBT was infallible. Ms. Wen, as I noted in the introduction, was sceptical of how much Ms. Liu really understood the modality that she was now teaching us. For example, one evening after the reading group, Ms. Wen was quick, once we had adjourned and were stood on the street outside, to point out the flaws in Ms. Liu's thinking during the reading group. She said that Ms. Liu's understanding of cognitive therapy was weak. "When we see rain on the floor, the average person assumes it has rained," Ms. Wen told

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it a neat fix in neo-liberal contexts (Leader 2008). Again, as stated in the introduction to this thesis, the aim here is not to try to evaluate whether or not CBT was the right choice for a therapist like Ms. Liu to practice, but rather her emic understanding of what it was, how it could be used and why she choice to pursue it.

21 It is also popular elsewhere, notably in the UK as the National Health Service has massively expanded and invested in CBT since 2008 (NHS 2018), and in Silicon Valley where there is significant investment in the creation of therapy apps based on CBT principles (Bram 2021)

22 This extended to our conversations, where she at various times told me to cut my hair, eat more and to buy an apartment as soon as possible.

me, standing on a muggy Chengdu street not far from Ms. Liu's office where water was visible on the ground, "but this isn't always the case. Maybe someone dropped a bottle of water, or maybe a cleaning truck came past. The point of cognitive therapy is to help people to figure this out."

Ms. Liu, she worried, was not nuanced in her application of CBT, and the way she was teaching us would not enable the counsellors and hobbyists to be able to nimbly sift through all of the various reasons for which a person might be suffering. It might not be the rain, after all. Ms. Wen was able to call on a far deeper reservoir of academic psychology to engage with CBT. She was aware of prominent critiques of the modality that informed her of when it was most appropriate to use. She was unconvinced that Ms. Liu was really that much more advanced than a life coach in the way that she was employing CBT. Even though Ms. Liu was correct in identifying CBT's core aim as helping people with how they responded to their issues, the rigid manner in which she engaged with the modality, and the fact she did not engage enough with critiques of it, meant that she still ended up teaching us techniques to try to alleviate the issues themselves, as much as the thought patterns associated with them. Ms. Liu, she worried, was trying to use CBT as an umbrella to prevent the rain altogether.

The point here is that each of these therapists was responding to the needs of their clients in subtly different ways due to their understanding of psychology and the uses of counselling. Cultural and economic forces push their clients towards desiring quick fixes and guidance. In response, Ms. Zhou sees no problem in offering it to them, because she feels she has the appropriate life experience and intellectual fortitude to know the right way to steer people. Ms. Liu intuits that such behaviour is not grounded in evidence and is unscientific, so she reaches for a psychological toolkit like CBT. However, her fluency with CBT is questionable, so she ends up, somewhat unconsciously, leveraging the modality towards solving problems rather than patterns of thought, despite acknowledging that this is not the purpose of this particular therapeutic method. Ms. Wen, armed with her master's degrees and sophisticated reading of CBT, is quickly able to spot the holes

in Ms. Liu's teaching. As I argue below, this divergence is representative of embodied practices and how habituses come to constitute social worlds and subjectivities.

2.3. Social Context Defines Psychological Problems: the LGBTQ+ issue

As we saw in the section above, clients' expectations of the type of care they expected to receive shaped each of these counsellor's therapeutic practice. Knowing what they did from their training, they pushed back to differing extents against prevailing attitudes that sought quick fixes to their clients' problems, offering particular treatment modalities that conformed to their understanding of how healing could best be achieved, and what worked within the context of the marketplace as they found it. However, not only is this process heavily constituted by the social context in which the desires of their clients are shaped, the problems that their clients seek help for are also intimately related to what the wider society deems as problems. This was clearly visible in the way that each of these counsellors understood LGBTQ+ issues.

The 1950s-1970s represented a "dark-age" for homosexuality in China (Worth et al 2019: 39, Wu 2009: 117). Even though homosexuality has never been explicitly criminalized in China, as it has in many other places in the world, including the US and Britain, during the political campaigns of the Mao-era homosexuality met severe persecution, and in some cases execution. (Worth et al 2019: 39). This coincided with Ms. Zhou's formative teenage years. In the early reform period, even though sexual mores started to change, homosexuality was often caught up under the vague crime of "hooliganism" —a crime which could see a person sent to a re-education camp for several years without trial (Worth et al 2019). While the legal status of homosexuality was always vague, this was compounded by the fact that homosexuality remained categorised as a mental illness until 2001 by the Chinese Psychiatric Association. This meant that those who were caught committing homosexual acts were not only at risk of being criminalized under the umbrella term of

"hooliganism." They also risked forced internment in psychiatric facilities and conversion therapy. This was the social context of homosexuality at the time that Ms. Zhou started to see "help-seekers" in the early 2000s.

It is not overly surprising that when I asked Ms. Zhou what her views on homosexuality were that she was quick to note that it was a "perversion" 变态. "In fact, I have cured many cases like this," she told me. This was before I told her that I was in a same-sex partnership, as I was at the time of my study[23]. I obviously found this hard to listen to, but I was nonetheless interested in where her prejudice came from and why it was that she felt this way. We were sat in a trendy coffee shop not too far from my house when we had this conversation. Somehow, the coffee shop had imported a stuffed buffalo's head from the USA and had a taxidermy fox curled along the bar near the coffee machine. At night, it became a cocktail bar. I mention this because as we will see in the next section of this chapter, the type of spaces that counsellors felt comfortable inhabiting was itself a form of embodiment that distinguished them. In this case, though I had not intended this venue specifically to have this conversation with Ms. Zhou, it happened to be where I had gone for a drink with my boyfriend the first night he had visited me in Chengdu. He had flown over from Berlin, where he was based. Chengdu, at the time of my study, was sometimes colloquially referred to as "gay-du" and was seen by many as China's most tolerant city towards the LGBTQ+ community[24]. There were several prominent gay and lesbian bars in the city (though this was not one of them), and it was common enough to see same-sex couples in non-queer spaces (like the coffee-shop/bar we were sat in). In other words, for Ms. Zhou to say that she felt that same-sex

23 I identify as bi-sexual or queer

24 It would be a chapter-long tangent to fully explain exactly why this might be, but locally people would explain that this was most likely related to a) "the mountain is high and the emperor faraway" 山高皇帝远 i.e. Chengdu is far enough from Beijing and the locus of Chinese power to have a more permissive culture and b) the general laid-back nature of the city which meant people were relaxed enough about everything to not overly care. Of course, not caring about seeing LGBTQ+ couples in bars is one thing; whether this amounted to personal tolerance should a family member come out or if someone made an advance is obviously another and beyond the remit of this thesis

relationships were "perversions" felt particularly jarring when juxtaposed with the physical setting in which she said this, which was a space that I had always found tolerant and welcoming.

I asked her to elaborate on what she said. "When I have seen cases like this in the past," she said, "the people are extremely traumatised by their sexuality." There are many psychological fallouts from this—depression, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress and plenty of other associated issues like eating disorders or substance abuse. The incidence of mental illness amongst the LGBTQ+ population in China is higher than amongst the average population, which is typical worldwide (see Beijing LGBT centre 2019). For her, therefore, the answer was to cure the person of their sexual desires. She argued that in many cases this was possible—she would delve into their personal history and discover the soil in which the roots of their "perversion" had taken hold. For her this was often in the broken relationships between mothers and their only male offspring (due to the one child policy), who overly identified with each other and had scant relationship to the absent father who was off making money[25]. These mother's would "love-drown" their children 溺爱 and this created over-attachment and an inability later for these men to develop sexual relationships with women. Instead, they engaged in same-sex partnerships with men. This masculine love was also, she deemed, a yearning for the absentee father. For Ms. Zhou therefore, redrawing the boundaries between these men and their mothers, was crucial in her "curing" them from their sexual "perversions."

This thesis is not about the state of LGBTQ+ lives in China[26], so I do not want to go into the many ways in which what Ms. Zhou was saying were wrong or discriminating. It is worth however

25 I explore gender dynamics as relates to the affective burden mothers face and the fact that men are perceived as breadwinners in chapter x of this thesis

26 When working as a journalist I wrote a number of articles about LGBTQ+ lives for various western and domestic Chinese outlets (see for example Bram 2016, 2017a, 2017b).

exploring how the social context in which she came to practice psychological counselling influenced her views on the LGBTQ+ community and why it was that she had come to these conclusions. As I said, as she grew up there was no public acceptance of LGBTQ+ lives, and until the early 2000s it was still considered a mental disorder. It made (unfortunate) sense therefore that she would still have an understanding of LGBTQ+ issues that was retrograde and ill-informed.

When I told her that I was in a same-sex partnership I could see that she was slightly off-footed. I am bisexual, and I am easily straight-passing in most social contexts. When I asked her if she also thought that I was "perverted" therefore she tried to walk back some of her previous comments. "You are foreign," she said, "so I have no idea about the context in which you were born." I told her that I didn't think my sexuality was something that should be cured, but that falling in love with a man had been one of the most important formative experiences of my life. She nodded and said that I was lucky then[27]. We awkwardly finished our coffees and walked into Chengdu at dusk. I walked her to the subway in silence. As we got closer to the station the flow of human traffic increased. "What I mean when I say "perverted"" she said to me quite suddenly, "is not a bad thing. I just mean it's not normal 正常—" I opened my mouth to question why she picked the word "normal" but then decided to let her finish. She pointed around her at the flow of people, "imagine a child. It's hard enough to grow up here. It would just be so much harder if both parents are the same-sex. It's just not possible 不可能."

I don't want to make it seem as if I agree with anything Ms. Zhou said. However, in that moment I did experience some empathy for her. She had never seen a same-sex couple successfully raise a child. She had grown up in a context in which the outcomes for LGBTQ+ people were terrible. I do not believe that there was any specific religious or cultural stereotype that she was drawing

27 I am

from that told her that LGBTQ+ people were in some sense "wrong" or "un-natural." However, to her, they were certainly non-normative. She wanted to apply her "key of ten thousand uses" to help them. Unfortunately, she was trying to open the wrong door by trying to cure their sexuality, rather than help them to build better coping mechanisms to exist as themselves in a society that did not yet recognise them.

Ms. Liu qualified to be a counsellor in the early 2000s at the same time that homosexuality was formerly de-listed as medical issue by the Chinese psychiatric association. As scholars have noted, despite this change, in practice the shadow that the medicalization of homosexuality cast on the practice of psychiatry and psychotherapy has been long (Longarino 2019). Test prep materials for the vocational qualification in psychological counselling that Ms. Liu attained still listed homosexuality as a "sexual perversion" as recently as 2017[28] (Longarino 2019). Conversion therapy still exists. According to a report by the NGO Human Rights Watch, beyond the futility and stress of the treatment itself, this includes such abuses as "coercion and threats, physical abduction, arbitrary confinement, forced medication and injection, and use of electroshocks" (HRW 2017). Attempts by activists and campaigners to close the worst of these centres has had some impact in recent years, though many have simply rebranded themselves as centres for "problem behaviours" such as internet addiction and have kept doing gay-conversion therapy as part of their overall package of services (for a first-person account, see Wang 2019). Ms. Liu did not practice conversion therapy in a formal sense, but she trained at a time when such treatment was considered a normal response to LGBTQ+ people.

I was not surprised that she too saw homosexuality as something that could be "cured." However, her understanding was somewhat more nuanced than Ms. Zhou. "There are some people who

[28] Which as we will see below was the last year of the qualification itself

come to me with uncomfortable feelings that they want to change or be rid of," she told me, "whereas there are some people who you can tell are just naturally homosexual 天然的同性恋." For this latter category she did not try to change their sexual desires, but rather tried help them better cope with the stresses that these unchanging desires brought with them. Lots of these people, she noted, had strained relationships with their families, struggled to advance in their careers and generally felt themselves perpendicular to the society at large. This disjuncture was isolating. While this group did not want her to address what she viewed as the core issue that underlined these other issues, she did feel able to help them through her counselling practice. "Everyone has family issues," she noted, "while these particular sets of circumstances are of course more complex than for a normal person 正常的人, many of the same tools and frameworks that we would use can still be applied." Her use of "normal," here was again jarring, but was typical of how members of her generation generally spoke of straight people in the context of LGBTQ+ discussions.

One of my first encounters with Ms. Wen was watching her give a lecture at a Wework in central Chengdu which was focused on trans visibility. The talk was part of a series of LGBTQ+ themed lectures that her counselling service *Look After* was being paid by Wework to put on across the four branches it had in the city. The talk was open to the public and was widely publicised to the community of entrepreneurs and employees of the Wework. About 40 people had turned up. "Gay people, bi people, trans people, they are all normal people," was one of the first things that Ms. Wen said in the lecture, before showing a slide which offered a typology of the various sexual minorities, including translations for terms like intersex 间性人, pansexual 泛性恋 and asexual 无性恋[29]. For Ms. Wen there was no question that LGBTQ+ should be "cured." What had to change was the society around them. This was why she was excited to participate in the lecture

[29] This was the first time that I saw the characters for these words in Chinese

series which she saw as crucial to the efforts of the LGBTQ+ community to normalize itself so that they suffered less stigma.

When I worked as a freelance journalist, prior to becoming a Dphil candidate, I did a series of stories about LGBTQ+ lives in China (a selection; Bram 2016, 2017a, 2017b). I did the bulk of the interviews and writing in 2015/16. As in most parts of the world, the key issue that the LGBTQ+ community faced was stigma. However, as Zhang Beichuan, one of China's most prominent sexologists noted to me at the time, this stigma was not related to something inherent in Chinese culture (as we know, Taiwan legalized gay marriage in 2017), nor to strong religious opposition as is the case elsewhere in the world in countries such as in Nigeria or Georgia, where I have also reported on LGBTQ+ issues (Bram 2017c, Bram 2018). Even HIV/Aids, which is often a key stigmatising force for LGBTQ+ communities, is complicated in China by the fact that tainted blood has been a key disease vector[30], meaning it has affected the heterosexual community at higher rates than elsewhere. Stigma, as Zhang saw it, was far more intimately related to the inability of the LGBTQ+ to advocate for itself in China's deeply censored media environment. Misunderstandings of what it meant to be a sexual minority abounded. At the time I was conducting this reporting a number of prominent LGBTQ+ themed shows, such as the extremely popular drama *Addicted* 上瘾 about a gay couple in a Beijing high school, were taken offline by the government. I profiled the LGBTQ+ director Fan Popo in Beijing after several of his documentaries about children coming out to their parents were deleted from prominent video platforms (Bram 2017a). He sued the government for an explanation, which shot him to international fame (see Bram 2017a for the full story).

[30] See Anagnost 2006 on tainted blood, and Jun 2011 about the politics of the commodification of blood. Elenah Uretsky's *Occupational Hazards* (2016) also shows heterosexual transmission of HIV/Aids amongst corrupt officials and prostitutes in Yunnan province

I note this here because I seek to provide some near-historical context for the environment in which Ms. Wen was giving her talk at Wework. In 2015/16 when I was writing these LGBTQ+ themed pieces, I attended Shanghai Pride. A series of rather academic lectures, film screenings and a few workshops, it was a far less exuberant pride than other global cities boast. There was no parade. However, the fact that it had been running for several years was notable, and each of the events boasted audiences of at least a hundred. By 2020 however, Shanghai Pride was officially cancelled due to government pressure. There are no other Pride festivals in China. Fan Popo, the director I profiled, left Beijing two years after I wrote that story. He moved to Berlin, fearing for his safety as the situation for activists grew increasingly precarious under Xi Jinping. LGBTQ+ focused accounts on prominent social media platforms have also been shuttered by the government, meaning there are even less venues for the community to advocate for themselves. Gay marriage remains illegal, adoption impossible for same-sex couples, and LGBTQ+ organizing largely impossible. Politically therefore, the situation for the LGBTQ+ community remains largely unchanged, or potentially worse, than when I wrote those stories[31]. Progress is inert under Xi Jinping.

This is relevant because the reason that Ms. Wen was giving this talk was that it presented an opportunity for *Look After*. While explicit LGBTQ+ activism is untenable, the government recognises that this is a community that has a large mental health burden and medical issues like HIV/Aids that need addressing. The government does not censor groups that are focused on promoting the health of the community. This creates a niche for an organization like *Look After*, particularly as they are also aware that running consciousness raising events for the community will also serve to advertise their services. The audience who attended the lecture was self-selecting.

[31] In another sign of the worsening environment more generally, *Vice*, the magazine that I wrote these stories for closed its offices in China in 2019 as the political situation became untenable. As a "counter-culture" magazine they found that increasingly the only stories they could publish were about street clothes and dance competitions.

If they worked at Wework they were already likely to be affluent and well-educated enough to have chosen an international co-working space. The members of the public who came had done so by choice, and likely because they had seen marketing promoted by the Wework and their employees, so they were already predisposed to be open to the ideas that Ms. Wen was speaking about in her lecture. At the end of her talk Ms. Wen put her Wechat QR code on the screen, as well as that of *Look After's* account, and said that they had a few qualified counsellors who identified as LGBTQ+ themselves, and therefore would be extremely well positioned to help anyone who was struggling with any of the issues that she had raised.

Ms. Wen and *Look After* are responding to the market reality for counsellors (see next chapter for more on this) by cleverly marketing their services to a community that they know has disproportionate needs for them. I don't mean to sound cynical here, because regardless of the underlying motivation, I think that it is a good thing that resources are made available to the community. However, it is important to point out that it is psychological counsellors who are allowed to take up the reigns of raising consciousness for the LGBTQ+ community when the community itself has been prevented from doing so through government censorship. It is unlikely that Wework would have been able to host an explicitly LGBTQ+ charity or advocacy group for a similar set of lectures. The fact that it was a counselling group that explicitly noted the therapeutic benefit of their services made this politically acceptable. If this trend continues then there is a worrying future in which the LGBTQ+ community finds itself closely aligned with the psy-disciplines, which even if it is in the context of consciousness raising and offering therapeutic interventions, still has uncomfortable associations with pathology and "cures[32]." It also means that the LGBTQ+ community is heavily reliant on a separate community, in this case psychological

[32] I was unable to continue this line of research due to the pandemic, but had I been in China an interesting area of research I would have hoped to investigate was the use of psychological concepts by the LGBTQ+ community to provide self-help and advocate for themselves, and the forms of sociality and mutual aid that these groups were creating through engagement with psychology.

counsellors, to speak on their behalf. Aside from the sad reality that this passes the microphone and limits the voices of the community itself, it can also lead to misaligned incentives and messaging.

This section has shown the way that the social context surrounding LGBTQ+ lives has been interpreted by these three generations of psychological counsellors and the extent to which they viewed homosexuality as an issue that should be "cured." This section cannot be expected to give a full account to the rich history of the LGBTQ+ community in contemporary China (see Zheng 2015), nor has it tried to delve into the full complexity of these issues as they were perceived by the counsellors I have profiled. Instead, I have hoped to show a more basic point, which is that the notion of what should and should not be cured by a psychological counsellor, or what can be considered a psychological issue at all, changes with social context. For Ms. Zhou it was sexual desire itself. For Ms. Liu it could be desires, but she was also open to trying to help a person change aspects of their life affected by their desires, such as their relationship to their parents, if they did not want to change their desires. For Ms. Wen, it was society that needed to change to become more tolerant to stop creating such an outsized psychological burden on the LGBTQ+ community.

2.4. Location, Location

As I noted at the start of this chapter, I would often find Ms Liu surrounded by her devotees in the reading group, under a poster that read *without wind and rain the earth wouldn't have spring*. I would like to now extend my discussion of habitus by showing how the professional environments in which I interacted with these three counsellors also represented the embodiment of their particular era of the psy-boom. Bourdieu stresses the "economic bases of social formation" (1977: 83) and his concept of habitus is better positioned than its antecedents to account for the fragmented and

contextualised psy-boom in China, and how this has come to be embodied in these three counsellors.

I always met Ms. Zhou alone. Sometimes we would go for tea and sometimes she would let me take her to one of the new coffee shops that have started to sprout up around Chengdu. This was the case for the conversation we had about LGBTQ+ issues. She enjoyed the atmosphere of these spaces, and I got the feeling that she didn't have anyone else in her life who would take her to explore these new shops that were rapidly opening around Chengdu. I noticed that she almost always forgot to drink her coffee. When I asked to see the store-front where she conducted her therapeutic sessions, she would demure. It was unmarked, had no advertisements, and the door was painted strangely after someone had punched a hole in it during a session (they had come back a day later, apologised, and paid for it to be repainted). She admitted that she felt it was too small and that it would be slightly awkward for her to show me. I think of this storefront as an embodiment of her place in the psy-boom. She too was unmarked—with no formal vocational qualification to practice—she did no advertising of her services beyond word-of-mouth, and she too bore the wounds of a heavy past.

Ms Liu, however, I met at her reading group, which constituted a form of "training" 培训 for the attendees, regardless of whether they were a hobbyist or a counsellor themselves. In this sense she was part of the training craze (Kuan 2019: 1, see also Huang 2015: 13) that typified her era of the psy-boom. She noted that despite taking 40rmb from each participant she didn't make money overall from the reading group. She did it because she wanted to improve the general quality of the field. As such, she was simultaneously part of the "untamed" sociality of the psy-boom, as she created a venue for practitioners and hobbyists to interact (in many cases these were indistinguishable until they self-identified), but also part of the "professionalisation" of the field as she tried to push people to deepen their knowledge of academic psychology (see Huang 2018 for this dichotomy).

I met Ms. Wen at a WeWork. *Look After* has similarly plush offices nearby, also in the heart of Chengdu's business district. It is immediately obvious from the way she inhabits such spaces that she is at ease in them. These spaces reflect the professional qualities of her chosen career path, and the kind of "clients" she expects to receive. I could never imagine Ms. Zhou in that WeWork, even though the coffee was free and she was at greater liberty to forget it.

One could argue this has little to do with the psy-boom itself and more due to the physical generation gap between Ms Zhou and Ms Wen. Critiques of Bourdieu abound, including Sherry Ortner's (2006) contention that the habitus is overly reliant on history and diminishes individual agency. While I take the critique, the generational gap is similarly reflected in the society and "economic bases of social formation" (Bourdieu 1977: 83) from which their respective help-seekers and clients are drawn, thus creating a mutually constitutive process that enforces the gulf between them. Moreover, while I agree with Ortner (2006: 145) that "people seek to accomplish valued things within a framework of their own terms, their own categories of value" I still think that the generational aspect of the psy-boom has had a clear impact on the personal value categories of these counsellors, and thus the types of capital they leveraged to seek recognition.

To the extent that the counsellors were able to shape their practice, this was bounded by the wider context of the psy-boom itself—Ms. Wen's highly informed calls to academic psychology would have been far too advanced for the "help-seekers" who first sought out Ms. Zhou in the late 1990s, and Ms. Zhou is similarly finding her appeals to Heidegger to not have as wide an appeal as they once did. The psy-boom can be seen as embodied not just in the language these counsellors refer to the people who use their services, but also in the environments they inhabit and constitute as venues for the continued unfolding of the psy-boom. To the extent that these therapists were "knowing subjects" (Ortner 2006: 111), their knowledge was heavily bounded by the progress of the psy-boom itself. Moreover, the fact that Ms. Zhou didn't decide to go and get the MOLSS qualification, or that Ms. Liu hasn't brushed up on the English terms for some of the psychological

concepts she uses, implies that the capital of their generation in the psy-boom still holds relevance to them, and that they haven't felt the need to go and spend time and money on acquiring these new forms. I don't believe they are doing so unconsciously; I think that they have staked out their corner of the psy-boom and are surviving within it.

This is clear in the way that each counsellor could be seen to deploy different social and cultural capital to underscore their claims to authority (Bourdieu 1977: 183). Cultural and symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu, are respectively found in a person's general cultural background, knowledge, skills and their accumulated prestige (Bourdieu 1977: 183). Like physical capital, they take time to accrue and can be seen to offer returns on their investment—in this case, by reinforcing the claims to the psychological authority of these counsellors. For Ms. Zhou it was clear that her cultural capital was her broad reading, her Beijing University degree and her general erudition. Her symbolic capital came from her status as an elder states(wo)man in the field, who had cured cases that the medical profession had wiped their hands of (Zhou 2019a). Her appeal was eminence-based, not evidence-based. For Ms. Liu, her status within the psy-boom as someone who gave training rather than received it was clearly a strong piece of cultural capital that enforced her authority within the community. Ms. Wen could point to her multiple degrees and their scientific foundation as a large constituent of her non-physical capital. Any patient who came into contact with her would be convinced by her claims to science, her easy recall of peer-reviewed studies and fluency discussing complex theoretical concepts, peppered with academic terms that she recalled in English.

While what I have sketched here so far can be read as the increasing sophistication of psychological practice in China over time as the psy-boom has progressed, it is worth noting a few points. The first is that, as I noted in the introduction to this thesis, there is no one unified vision of "psychology" anywhere in the world from which these counsellors are drawing on. Instead, they are sifting through a dynamic discipline that is itself in flux and applying this knowledge to a rapidly

developing society. While aspects of this process are manifested in a rigorous debate amongst counsellors themselves and within the wider society over the professionalization of the industry (Huang 2018, Yigeren de Pingjing _2018), part of this is also a question of how knowledge translates into practice. As I have argued earlier in this chapter, embodied history here is important because of the way it shapes subjectivity. Each of these counsellors subtly interpreted their practice and the uses of psychotherapy differently due to the history that they carried from their training and the intersecting forces of the society they found themselves in. This then filtered into the way they were regarded by their respective help-seekers, callers and clients.

As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, subjectivity can be cultivated. Moreover, following Teresa Kuan's invitation, I seek to explore forms of subjectivity that do not simply see the subjective as a synonym for personal interiority, but rather as existing in the "dynamic between influence and response so central to indigenous Chinese thought" (Kuan 2015: 49). In this chapter I have shown how the interplay of a myriad of forces such as social context, economic development, training regime, the understanding of LGBTQ+ issues and the understanding of psychology at a given time in society have all coalesced to form particular subjectivities for each of these counsellors that has manifested into embodied practices. These practices also shape the way they provide counselling, the things they feel are within their remit to "cure" and how they help others to heal. In this way, we can see how dynamic intersubjective forces shape personal subjectivities which form particular understandings of agency—the way these women shaped their counselling practices are intimately related to their understanding of what healing was and how it should be offered to people.

Ms. Zhou is an intellectual who has a sophisticated knowledge of psychology and philosophy that provides her with a compelling language to speak on the human condition, and a wealth of life experience to draw from, but she has no formal training in how this might be turned into an effective therapeutic practice. For example, she was very proud of the fact that she had no

'supervisor' who she consulted with, and that she herself had never sought out a therapist for her own distress. Ms. Wen has an incredibly nuanced understanding of how psychology is practiced and has regular weekly supervision that is logged online and is a marker by which her clients can see she is a reputable therapist. That said, she is also younger and less interested in the human condition than Ms Zhou which means that one could argue she has less resources to draw from when engaging with her clients. Ms. Liu sits between these two and cut her teeth in the generation that was at the forefront of trying to figure out how to practice psychology in China.

In the early reform period after Mao's death, when Ms. Zhou was trying to understand what happened to her father during the Cultural Revolution and was suffering from her own mental health issues, the predominant social idiom for distress in China was neurasthenia as we know from Arthur Kleinman's (1986) famous study. Patients somatised their distress and did not view their experience as psychological (Kleinman 1986). In the early 2000s this idiom was coming to be replaced by bio-medical definitions of psychological distress as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), with depression superseding neurasthenia among patients and the medical community (Sing Lee 2011). The discursive shift here is marked; distress has moved from the body to the mind. Ms. Zhou was early to intuit the value psychology might have for helping her understand and overcome her distress. By the time that Ms. Liu was training the psychological aspect of distress was widely accepted, and the question shifted as to how best to use this new understanding to create effective therapies. This debate is still ongoing, of course, but it is now increasingly technical, as we see through the example of Ms. Wen.

Considering that the habitus is taken to be embodied history, it makes sense that as the field of psychology has developed in China and the demands on therapists to provide evidence-based therapeutic interventions has increased, this external shift would manifest in the embodied practices of these therapists. Silva (2016: 84) notes that in Bourdieu's thinking "we come to desire what gives recognition – desire as the desire to be desired – which is field orientated and involves

processes of recognition." As the psy-boom has taken hold in China the forms of recognition and the orientation towards the wider psychological field have changed. With it has changed the way that these counsellors have been able to shape their counselling practices. At the height of Ms. Zhou's career it was her general erudition and her willingness to point to the psychological aspects of distress at a time when this was not widely understood which provided authority and credence. By the time we arrive in the present day, where psychological concepts are more widely understood and spread throughout China, erudition is no longer a sufficient condition to be a therapist. Ms. Wen has multiple master's degrees, vocational qualifications and speaks the language of evidence-based psychological science. Ms. Zhou is alone in her storefront; Ms. Wen is speaking to the urbane audience at a WeWork.

2.5. Conclusion

In September 2017 "psychological counsellors" were removed from the register of National Vocational Qualifications 国家职业资格, meaning that the Ministry of Labour and Public Security qualification was no longer going to be continued (Huang 2017: 37). It is unclear what this means for the future of counselling in China; whether existing level 2s and 3s will need to requalify under the new regime, or whether they would continue business-as-usual and the new rules would only apply to new entrants into the field. In an ironic re-staging of the original 'hundred flowers' campaign, it seemed as if the government had decided it was time to do some gardening (Chang et al 2005).

Many assumed that the qualification had been stopped because there were too many "speedy-assembly line" cowboys practicing and bringing the industry into disrepute (Yigeren de Pingjing 2018). Zhang Haiyin, one of the most respected psychologists in Shanghai sat for an interview in the wake of the qualification change and said that "when a field develops as fast as this, of course there will be problems… this was initially considered to be an issue of a vocational qualification,

but it is really a matter of public health, and that is obviously beyond the Ministry of Labour's remit" (Zhang 2017). Ms. Wen had a different view, stating that it was an argument between the Ministry for Health and the Ministry for Labour over who should collect the fees for the qualification itself. A popular article shared widely amongst the therapists I follow satirically likens this struggle to a modern "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" aping the Chinese classic of the warring states period (Lakang Xinli 2019b).

In interviews with dozens of counsellors in China I was unsurprised to note that no-one ever identified *themselves* as a cowboy, though they all spoke of knowing people in their profession who behaved in that way. I do not view Ms. Zhou, Ms. Liu or Ms. Wen as cowboys either, but the figure of the unscrupulous practitioner bringing the industry into disrepute was something that all of them pointed to. This tended to mask deeper questions of knowledge and practice[33], which would have been more interesting to divine as to the direction these counsellors wanted to see their industry move towards. Instead, they would tend to foreclose such discussions by saying that the biggest issue facing the industry was ensuring its legitimacy in the eyes of the public by removing bad actors, rather than deeper and more existential questions about how different ideas about psychology might translate into local therapeutic practices.

What is playing out in China is not so different to debates that are happening in other countries over who can rightly call themselves therapists, and what is an appropriate form of regulation for such services. In the UK, where I am from, the BBC recently conducted an investigative report which showed that shoddy qualifications were available for as little as £10 online that people could use to claim they were registered counsellors (BBC 2020). Confronted with this evidence, the Department for Health in the UK stated that changing the regulatory system would be "disproportionate" to the current potential risks facing patients and the public (BBC 2020). What

[33] For a different ethnographic investigation of knowledge and practice, as pertains to TCM, see Farquhar 1994

we see globally therefore are poor regulatory regimes that are inadequate to evaluate who has the right to administer therapeutic interventions for vulnerable people. This is coupled with an unwillingness by governments to engage with the deeper questions that this opens about how to meet the massive burden of mental health care required in our societies, who has the right to provide this care and what can constitute effective and reasonable treatment.

At present in China, the decision to cease the qualification regime has left the industry in stasis without an obvious direction in which it should travel. Whatever the reason for halting the qualification, clearly whatever emerges will constitute a new generation of counselling in China. As one commentator has noted, the halting of the qualification means that the "profession cannot meaningfully perform gatekeeping or housekeeping" (Longarino 2019). This represents a new context, and with it will come new understandings, new professional habitus and new forms of capital that will have to compete for credibility in the wider psychological 'field' (Bourdieu 1988: 113, see also Forchtner, B & Schneickert, C 2016: 294).

Considering that the habitus is "engendered by history and by the economic bases of social formation" (Bourdieu 1977: 83) this chapter has shown that the way that counsellors entered the field, the different qualification regimes they encountered and also the wider context of how developed the psy-boom was at the time of their entry into the field, has shaped how they conduct their therapeutic practice, speak of their clients, and inhabit space. In a sense, there is a parallel here between psychology and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). TCM has been shown by a number of scholars to not be a static medical system but rather an 'invented tradition' heavily constituted by how it is transmitted (Hsu 2009, Hsu 1999, see also Taylor 2005, Scheid 2002).

In much the same way Elisabeth Hsu showed how different contexts of transmission co-existed at the same time in TCM with each imbuing different understandings of the purpose and practice of this medical system (Hsu 1999), so too in psychology in China today we see competing professional habitus determined by the way therapists learned their craft and embody their wider

life experiences. By using the concept of habitus, we can understand why the divide in therapists is far more clearly demarcated by the generational divides and training regimes of the respective counsellors themselves than those of TCM practitioners, who were less divided by chronology and rather by school and mode of transmission (see Hsu 1999). The concept of habitus and embodied history also contributes to our understanding of how the overall psychological field is understood in China (Bourdieu 1988: 113, see also Forchtner & Schneickert 2016: 294). The psy-boom, as we have seen through the experience of these three counsellors and their therapeutic practices, has not been experienced in China as a single phenomenon.

A key contribution of this thesis is to show the heterogeneity of the psy-boom and the way that it intersects with other social forces in China, providing a space for participants to articulate themselves and figure through often contradictory desires in the face of dramatic social upheaval. Through these therapists we come to a better understanding of the psy-boom as an ongoing process—as knowledge has been turned into practice. In each of these counsellors' lives, we can see how they embodied history and how this in turn constituted observable changes in their therapeutic practice. Here we have seen how intersubjective social contexts have been embodied by these counsellors and their subjectivity has been formed as a result. These subjective shifts are important to understand as they shape the way people understand healing, what they feel needs "curing," and the tools they have at their disposal to provide care.

CHAPTER 3: BUILDING THE SKILL OF HAPPINESS

"Pain is human's best invention." "If you are a flower, spring will pass; if you are spring, you will always have flowers." "In a marriage how hard is it to forgive someone who cheats?" "Studying a bit of psychoanalysis, you'll feel the results for a lifetime." "Sweet little Britney aged 37 is sent to the mental hospital, so, is it all her family's fault?"

These aphorisms and questions are the headlines of articles published on a single day (April 27th 2019) by the three biggest Wechat public accounts 公众号 operating in the mental health sphere in China: *Know Yourself*, *Yixinli* 壹心理 and *Jiandan Xinli* 简单心理[34]. Cumulatively the companies behind them have received millions of dollars in venture capital funding (Qian Zhuang 2019, interview). The largest of them in terms of audience, *Know Yourself*, has a following of over 12mn people.

This chapter pursues two aims. First, it will introduce these public accounts, how they operate, what services they provide and how they fit into the wider context of treatment for mental health in contemporary China. As the introduction to this thesis argued, after the government launched the MOLSS qualification, a vibrant marketplace for psychological services developed in its wake. This is due in part to the market conditions for psychological counselling in China, but also due to the popularity of social media platforms like Wechat which happened to be expanding rapidly at the same time. It will be argued that a platform like Wechat creates the necessary digital

[34] Know Yourself is not a translation, the name of their company and platform is in English. Jiandan Xinli's name in Chinese literally means "easy psychology," however it does have an official English name, which is "My Therapist". "My Therapist" refers to the platform itself, but not to the holding company that controls it, which is called Jiandan Xinli. However, as Huang (2017: 29) points out, "both the company behind the platform and its English title are not well known in China," and therefore in his work he chooses to refer to "Jiandan xinli" to denote both the platform and the company. I choose to also do the same. Yi Xinli does not have an English name, so I choose to refer to it by the pinyin transliteration of its name.

framework for online psychological services. Importantly, the functionality of Wechat, which allows for payments to be seamlessly integrated into content, means that there is a clear link created between psychological concepts and marketed techniques to improve wellbeing and mental health. The idea of mental health being itself a kind of commodity is therefore rendered explicit on the apps. This is not unexpected as these are private companies operating for profit. It is also a reflection of the market conditions in which they operate where interest in psychological concepts and mental wellbeing is largely concentrated amongst affluent and educated urbanites. However, the architecture of Wechat heightens the commodification of psychological techniques and this becomes a subtly distinguishing feature between these applications and those that exist elsewhere in the world.

Secondly, having started with a view from within these companies, looking at their intentions and product offering, it will shift focus to examine the content that these applications use to promote mental wellbeing and a psychologized understanding of the self. The aim of these companies is to help their customers turn inwards and create a robust and resilient self. As Qian Zhuang (2019, interview), the CEO of *Know Yourself,* said when we spoke, "happiness is a skill; I want to help people develop the skill of happiness." This chapter takes seriously this claim and asks exactly what that skill is. In attempting to provide people with the skill of happiness, these companies have the potential to change a person's subjective understanding of themselves and of their mental health. As this thesis has so far shown, the existence of a psy-boom in China is well documented and it should be no surprise that it finds its most contemporary expression online. As psychology and therapeutic consciousness embed themselves more deeply into the lived experience of people in China, they constitute a new subjective frame through which people come to understand their lives, their sorrows and their mental health. It is important to explore how this manifests online, particularly as this is the most dynamic front in the broader expansion of the psy-boom across China. Individuals' use of the online psychological services is less explored in the extant

anthropological literature on China's psy-boom, because it is a recent phenomenon intimately related to advances in technologies and social media platforms like Wechat. It is a development that has only really taken off since 2015/16, in lockstep with these technologies.

A recent article in *Forbes* looking at the demand for mental health treatment in China speaks of there being "at least 180 million potential customers, 4.3 million of them in desperate need" (Chen 2016). It is into this 'marketplace', for want of a better term, that these three companies have waded and staked their positions as online psychological service providers. They not only sell mental health related services, but also market the concept of mental health as something that can be regulated and adjusted. This is why the first half of this chapter focuses closely on these companies and the marketplace for psychological counselling that they operate in. This is to show how particular technological advances and market conditions have come to structure the development and marketing of particular services. These in turn help users cultivate particular subjectivities, or as Qian Zhuang sees it, "skills of happiness." The second half of this chapter then explores how people position and nurture themselves through these apps.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the psy-boom is an important phenomenon in China because of the way that it is generating empowering discourses about mental health and well-being which create subtle changes for people's subjectivity and their understandings of personal agency. Kleinman and his collaborators demonstrate that the subjective realm—what they refer to as "deep China" —is now the most dynamic and critical site for social change in the contemporary PRC, showing not just how life is experienced but also how it is governed (Kleinman et al 2011). Building on this observation this thesis illuminates the way in which the rise of psychological counselling speaks to questions of subjectivity and agency. In this chapter online psychological services are seen as literal "technologies of the self" (Foucualt 1983: 210, for discussion see chapter 1), helping people to rearticulate themselves within their social worlds, better know themselves, and feel more

capable of navigating the complexity of contemporary life. In this way, they are also tools shaping how life is experienced and expanding how people understand their capacity to act.

Building on the work of scholars such as Ann Swidler and her concept of "strategies of action" and Lauren Ahearn's (2011: 112) notion of agency as a "socially mediated capacity to act" I seek to show how the psy-boom, and in the context of this chapter, online psychological service providers, help provide people with particular psychological toolkits that they use to shape their understanding of the ways they can heal themselves and others. In this chapter, I show how psychological service providers promote psychological concepts and sell products that help people develop skills that are explicitly targeted at expanding their ability to control their emotions and better understand themselves. In doing so, they are expected to be better able to heal themselves and to sit better with the anxieties and doubts that characterize modern life. In this thesis I put forth the idea of "considered action" as a way to describe the form of introspective agency that is fostered in the psy-boom. I deal with this in more detail in the latter half of this chapter, and in the following chapters.

Writing in a non-China context, Simon Mussel has argued that the wider "affective-turn" in critical theory has allowed for a greater acknowledgement that the subjective realm can be an active site for social change (Mussel 2007: 26). Moreover, this affective turn—a term coined by Patricia Clough (2007)—creates the conditions for a more intense connection between capital and affect; what Clough (2008: 17) sees as "the real subsumption of 'life itself' into capital, as the accumulation of capital has shifted to the domain of affect." This affective shift foregrounds the way in which these Wechat accounts and the companies that operate them are part of what Eva Illouz identifies as "emotional capitalism" (2007) i.e. a regime of marketed and regulated affect. In this work Illouz[35]

[35] Ibid, 54

shows how the logics of the market come to embed themselves within people's emotional habitus––relationships, for example, are things that we invest into, and which require trade-offs between people's emotional 'needs.' This thesis argues that the MOLSS qualification and the resulting dynamic market for psychological services created in its wake are both a reflection of and a response to the economic reforms that have fundamentally altered Chinese society over the last decades. These reforms while lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, have also created new desires and anxieties. As this chapter argues, these online psychological service providers are responding to the demands created by people who are seeking to navigate the intense social changes that have characterized the reform period. However, the form that this response takes, as psychological services sold online, ends up creating an explicit link between mental health and consumable products. This therefore further embeds the market within individuals and creates a link between the marketization of society with personal subjectivity. These psychological services, despite being a way for people to seek healing amid the distresses of contemporary life, also help the market to gain further traction within the subjective realm of lived experience.

3.1. The Ouroboros

The fact that psychological service providers have rushed to provide their products online is not simply due to the digitization of the Chinese economy, though this is certainly a factor. Instead, there are two clear driving forces that pushed psychological service provision to go online. These make the Chinese case somewhat unique compared to online psychological service provision elsewhere. These factors shape the way that mental health is marketed and the types of treatment that are offered. The first factor is that, as we have seen in the previous chapters of this thesis, while the MOLSS qualification was effective in creating a large class of psychological counsellors, it could not guarantee the quality of these counsellors. The MOLSS qualification has been accused online by Chinese critics of being a 'speedy-assembly line' (yige ren de pingjing 2018) creating poorly trained counsellors ill-equipped to meet the needs of their clients. In response to the poor

quality of the industry, a number of online platforms developed to create directories of reputable counsellors (Huang 2017). These platforms migrated to Wechat where they spawned innovative business models based on the technology of the platform. The second factor has been the market for counselling itself, in which only 15% of qualified counsellors practice full-time and earnings for the average counsellor are low, meaning they have to diversify their revenue streams beyond simply offering one-to-one therapy sessions if they want to make a living.

Jian Lili (the online pseudonym for Li Zhen) was a blogger before she founded *Jiandan Xinli.* From the early 2000s she wrote about mental health online, on platforms such as the popular literary website *douban* 豆瓣, and developed an avid following (Huang 2017). She was struck by the fact that as she wrote about therapy online—explaining in detail what people should seek in a therapeutic relationship and the pitfalls that existed in the way therapy was being practiced in China at the time—that people would message her privately to ask her to connect them to therapists they could trust. She saw a gap in the market for a service that would be able to help provide some form of accreditation online to help sift through the chaotic field of psychological counselling (Huang 2017). In 2014 she launched *Jiandan Xinli,* having attracted millions of dollars of venture capital funding at a moment in which a neat confluence between excitement in the market for digital innovation was met by broad social interest in psychology and desire for therapeutic services. As later sections in this chapter will show, migrating this platform to Wechat created an impressively expanded range of revenue streams and new capacities to offer psychological services.

Jiandan Xinli's initial offering was a website that provided online booking services to help clients arrange counselling services. This platform has now been replicated by numerous psychological service providers, who connect clients with counsellors in over 400 cities in China, with *Jiandan Xinli* and *Yi Xinli* taking a small fee and *Know Yourself* offering this service for free. As Huang Hsuan-Ying (2017) shows, offering a booking service was how *Jiandan Xinli* managed to become

a leading player in this field, and propelled its founder, Jian Lili, to fame. Creating a booking service has been important in China where coverage for mental health care is sparse country-wide and suffers from huge regional disparities. For example, there are 12 mental health professionals per 100,000 in Shanghai compared with only 1 per 100,000 in Ningxia (Philips 2019, interview). Providing a digital booking service therefore is a potentially beneficial bridge to allow people to find the range of services available in their area and to conveniently book them. One can also connect to therapists online via video call. As Huang (2017: 230) notes in his article on *Jiandan Xinli* its commercial potential has only been realised because of its ability to exploit gaps in the market created by the shortage of mental health professionals, the inefficiency of China's mental health care services, and the lack of a strong regulatory body to help patients choose reputable therapists.

From the perspective of counsellors themselves, getting access to these platforms is also very beneficial. Where older counsellors like Ms. Zhou (see chapter 2) traditionally relied on word-of-mouth and the relative scarcity of any kind of mental healthcare to market their services, by the time the *Jiandan Xinli* platform arrived on the scene there was already a glut of "qualified" psychological counsellors in China. Huang (2017: 3) estimates that by 2014, the year the platform arrived, there were already 600,000 people who had gained the MOLSS qualification. Trying to differentiate themselves in this chaotic field was difficult, and thus the veneer of respectability that came with being able to offer services via *Jiandan Xinli,* which would only accredit counsellors that it felt met their standards, provided a lifeline to many counsellors. Similar booking and accreditation services started appearing from other providers soon after.

The reality of counselling in China is brutal. As one prominent psychology blog noted in 2017, surveying 1477 counsellors, for those with less than 5 years of full-time experience, 60% of them were earning less than 50,000rmb a year (Lakang Xinli 2017). It also found that of those who were

not full-time, 45% of counsellors had a monthly income of less than 2,500rmb, which is significantly less than the Chengdu average salary of 6,000rmb a month. On top of that, counsellors have to pay for supervision from other counsellors[36], which can be extremely expensive. That same blog argued that for a counsellor to earn the necessary level of qualification to be able to open their own practice, it might cost as much as 82,000-180,000rmb just in supervision costs alone (Lakang Xinlin 2017). If a counsellor does not manage to open their own counselling service, but instead relies on being hired by a practice that has the necessary qualifications, they can expect to see their earnings slashed by the company. Many counselling practices have a 60:40 split, meaning new therapists might only earn 90-120rmb for an hour of private counselling (based on 300rmb/h) (Lakang Xinli 2017).

Part of what drives these market dynamics is the fact that while there are a lot of counsellors, the demand for counselling is still developing. Courting clients therefore is incredibly important, especially when there are plenty of poorly trained counsellors competing for each potential patient. This was the reason why Ms. Liu decided to launch her reading group—to try to improve the quality of counsellors that she felt were not sufficiently trained to actually see clients despite their qualifications. It was also why Ms. Wen was so keen to showcase her credentials and her fluency with academic debates in psychology and psychotherapy, as a way to further distinguish herself. As more and more people have trained to become counsellors, the demands exerted on each individual counsellor to rise above the crowded field have increased, such that Ms. Wen operates with a different set of pressures to that of Ms. Zhou. Ms. Zhou had to justify psychological counselling in and of itself. Ms. Wen has to not only justify counselling, she also has to justify herself as a counsellor when there are so many others to choose from.

[36] as we saw in the last chapter this is generational and part of the professionalization of the industry

Counselling, as we have seen in previous chapters, is expensive, and there are still cultural barriers and expectations about what counselling should entail that end up impacting the demand for services. Indeed, the irony is that for those who are really committed to engaging in therapy and who believe that counselling might provide a key for their healing, it is cheaper to buy psychological training rather than therapy itself. In this way, the market has managed to churn out 'qualified' psychological counsellors at a rate far higher than the extant demand in society for counselling. This is why Ms. Wen finds herself in such an intensely crowded field. More and more qualified counsellors arrive on the scene, without the demand for their services increasing at the same pace. It therefore becomes expedient for counsellors like Ms. Liu to sell services, such as her reading group, aimed at trained counsellors or those who are already interested in psychology as a practice beyond simply seeking healing. This imbalance has created the conditions for the market to resemble an ouroboros—a snake eating its own tail (Lakang Xinli 2017).

The irony of course is that this means that psychological counselling, whose popularity is intimately related to the stark pressures and brutal competition of China's market economy, suffers from precisely those same forces. Qian Zhuang's *Know Yourself* is in direct competition with Li Zhen's *Jiandan Xinli*. They are both young female CEOs who shot to online fame by writing about psychological concepts in an accessible way and ended up attracting millions of dollars of venture capital to create sprawling online psychological service companies. Plenty of other famous psychologists in China ape the business models pioneered by these women. Wu Zhihong (who we will meet in chapter 4) has also built a platform that features articles (often about himself and his theories) and an online booking service for therapists. Whatever innovation any of these platforms makes is quickly copied by their competitors, meaning the industry is both dynamic, from a consumer perspective, but that must also be intensely exhausting and stressful from the perspective of the entrepreneurs and employees building these services.

Counsellors also suffer from intense competition. Many advertise their services on multiple platforms, and as stated above, because their earnings are so slight per customer many of them have intense workloads. In the last chapter I mentioned Ms. Wen stating she had three clients with suicidal ideation. When she said this, we were having a coffee next to *Look After*'s offices, at 4pm in the afternoon. She had already seen nine clients that day and had a 45 minute break before she was going to return to the offices and see clients until at least 9pm. Then she would have dinner and do paperwork until she went to sleep. She was close to burning out. This unfortunately meant that she was intimately aware of the pressures her clients were facing and the stress that they were operating under. Their stresses were her own. Just because she was a counsellor did not mean she was immune to the same forces that everyone else experienced.

When I presented some of my work on how Wechat was shaping mental health in China at a conference run by Jie Yang to coincide with 2019's annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), a man roughly my age approached me after my talk. His name was Yichen and he was in the midst of doing fieldwork for his Phd in anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He was also a qualified psychological counsellor, who trained via *Jiandan Xinli's* two-year accredited course (more on this below). His anthropological work was not about the psy-boom or mental health (it is about peer-to-peer lending and digital finance). However, he noted that his role as an anthropologist and the fact he was getting a PhD from a prestigious university was a form of cultural capital that separated him from the rest of the saturated counselling field. Without it he wasn't sure how he would differentiate himself. "It's only because I'm not full-time and I have my funding from my university that I can also pursue counselling," he told me, "if I tried to have it as my sole income it would be impossible." He paused for a moment. "Sometimes I feel like training to be a counsellor is like building an enterprise in which you constantly throw money into the business with no return. I have no idea when the profit-loss ratio switches."

With the market heavily skewed by an oversupply of psychological counsellors, it becomes necessary for counsellors to go online, to Wechat, to sell their services. It also makes them diversify beyond simply selling one-to-one counselling sessions. They make podcasts, they write books, and they hold workshops in specific modalities as a way to create new revenue streams for themselves. They also hope that in doing so they will build enough of a name for themselves that they can charge more per hour for their counselling services. These activities, beyond raising the profile of the counsellor, also have the added bonus of raising the profile of psychology generally and of whatever healing modality is being spotlighted. Not only are these counsellors justifying their position within the psy-boom, but they are also trying to expand the psy-boom as widely as possible to try to attract new customers. This means that the market for psychological services is incredibly dynamic and innovative. It also goes beyond simply selling services, but also selling a particular conception of mental health and well-being, as we will see below. This process is also spurred on by the particularities of Wechat as a technology, which supercharges the creation of these services.

3.2. Affordances

In 2011 Wechat was founded by Tencent, one of the three tech-giants[37], that form the backbone of the Chinese internet. Within 433 days of launching, Wechat had amassed over 100million users (Lu 2018). Today it has over a billion. Wechat is sometimes referred to as a social media application, but as anyone who has used it can attest, it is far more than that. One recent academic paper is entitled *Wechat as Infrastructure* (Plantin & de Seta 2019). In Chinese it is often referred to by the term 生态 *shengtai* or eco-system. Huang Hsuan-Ying (2017: 30), writing about *Jiandan Xinli*

[37] BAT—Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, which cumulatively are invested in or own outright over half of the 124 'unicorns' in the Chinese economy (companies valued over $1bn). (Deng 2018)

has noted that it is an example of 'infrastructural entrepreneurship" in the way that it built out a system for connecting people with therapists. I would add that a key part of that infrastructural entrepreneurship is the underlying infrastructural architecture of Wechat itself, which is also what distinguishes the wider Wechat-mediated psychological mass movement from similar psychological services in other countries. Wechat's incredible range of functionality makes commodifying services within its platform easy, which in turn has helped these online psychological service providers market products to consumers. This therefore creates an explicit connection between consumption and mental health.

For anyone who has travelled to China, Wechat functions as a super-app which is used in almost every digitally-mediated social interaction. It has payment functions, messaging functions, a social-feed function like Twitter or Facebook, and small-apps that resemble an operating system, with even more functionality besides. While living in Chengdu I would lock my wallet away in my desk drawer because I never needed anything besides my phone and Wechat. Wechat's tendrils reach far and wide; with Wechat pay it can be used to pay for virtually anything conveniently by using QR codes. To give a sense of the range of things it can be used to pay for, I used Wechat pay to buy vegetables in the wet market by my apartment, sometimes in denominations of less than 1rmb, and also to pay for my rent each month which was my biggest expense. Wechat is also integrated into government services with over 20 million government affiliated public accounts (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018). In Guangzhou the provincial government has rolled out a digital ID card by meshing government-issued national ID cards with registered personal Wechat accounts (Guanzghou Ribao 2017). One group of scholars refer to Wechat as "super-sticky" for the way it has now become an intractable fact of digital life in China (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018).

Given that Wechat is now a cornerstone of the Chinese techno-sphere, and that its role as a super-sticky infrastructure allows it to function as an entire social ecosystem, the affordances of its system

are large. Within tech, an affordance is generally understood as the properties of an object that define the possible actions that can be undertaken with it (Gibson 1966; see also Norman 2013's updated term "action possibilities"). Because Wechat combines the social functions of social media, allows new media functions such as self-publishing and "small apps" and payments all to be rolled into one package, its affordances are extremely broad. Most of these online psychology service providers primarily use public accounts as their interface with the public. A "public account" on Wechat, despite a user's ability to join it, is far more than simply a collection of individuals like a Facebook group, and despite it having publishing functions, is far more interactive than an online magazine. These broad affordances make Wechat substantively different from similar platforms in the West like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram.

The point therefore is that operating through Wechat allows the companies to easily create a system that goes from consciousness raising straight to marketing a particular service to then selling it, taking the payment *and* offering the service all within the same eco-system. It is seamless. A good example of this is an article posted by *Yixinli* on 13.8.2019 which focused on the American HBO TV show *Chernobyl*, entitled "What is it like to live through hell?" (Shudan 2019a). The article is a review of the show, published under the by-line 书单 which is their dedicated author for pop-culture reviews. Not only does it explain key plot-points, but it reminds people of the importance of cataclysmic events—"suffering reminds us to be vigilant". At the end of the article is a note from the editor; "at the same time that we've recommended a well-regarded American show, we want to recommend a well-regarded healthy lifestyle method" (Shudan 2019a). This method happens to be meditation, and after that suggestion is a button that can be clicked on to immediately buy a meditation package *Yixinli* has created in association with '100 global experts.' There is also a QR code that you can share with friends which will give you a 'scholarship'—a 10% price reduction—for this package (Shudan 2019a).

Clearly, by merging social, payment and media functions, the affordances of Wechat create the seamless conditions to both promote mental health and then provide services to meet the resulting demand. One way these accounts promote mental health is by offering free educational materials that help to provide a basic understanding of psychology, drawing from academic psychology, pop-psychology, sociology, self-help and examples from pop-culture, both western and Chinese. On April 27th *Know Yourself* posted an article about how much family responsibilities should be taken into account for mental breakdowns, grounding its discussion, somewhat improbably, in the examples of Aaron Carter, Lindsey Lohan and *xiaotiantian bulanni* or as we might know her, Britney Spears. That same day, *Yi Xinli's* discussion of fidelity in marriage opened with the snarky line, "As in all famous couples when one cheats, one side apologizes and one side decides to forgive the other. In this way, Zheng Xiuwen decided to forgive Xu Zhi'an" using the example of a celebrity couple in China that had recently made tabloid headlines for temporarily splitting up. The content therefore uses pop-culture as a way of anchoring more abstract psychological concepts in a relatable and engaging manner.

The psychological service providers then offer various for-fee training services for those who want a deeper understanding; from "short courses" 微课 which are like podcasts and are offered by particular psychologists who then build their own personal brands and followings off the back of them, all the way up to the online two year accredited psychoanalytic psychotherapy course which *Jiandan Xinli* offers as part of their "Jiandan Xinli Uni" in partnership with the International Psychotherapy Institute. It requires 10 hours a week of free time to listen to the lectures online and complete the relevant coursework and there is an annual 5-day meet-up in Beijing. It costs 41,200rmb[38]. This was the course that Yichen had taken to qualify as a counsellor. Upon graduation

[38] For reference, the average monthly salary in Chengdu at the time was less than 6,000rmb

he had then been able to advertise his services through *Jiandan Xinli* itself, which meant that he was tied into their ecosystem. These courses are often advertised through the free articles that are posted daily and can be booked seamlessly through buttons placed at the end of the article, as the *Yixinli* example above showed. There are also offline events such as lectures, meet-ups and conferences, all of which are bookable through the platforms themselves and with ticket prices varying per event. As with the short courses, these are also often mentioned in the articles themselves or advertised in banners that run concurrent to them.

What is the actual content offering of these companies? Where do these companies sit within the wider psy-boom in China? Following the trends described in the previous chapters which show how psychiatry and psychology are more distinctly defined in China through the MOLSS qualification and National Mental health law, these psychological service providers also decouple mental health from mental illness in their content offering. In fact, this is core to the business models of these companies and is helping to raise broader psychotherapeutic consciousness in society. This constitutes a key facet of the psy-boom that has not yet been adequately explored in the already available literature, particularly as it is a recent and rapidly evolving phenomenon.

3.3. Decoupling Mental Health

Winter is a writer for *Know Yourself*. After being introduced by a friend via Wechat, we met in Shanghai. He does not have a background in psychology; he considers himself a poet. When we met he told me about his time in rural Xinjiang as a volunteer, about the mountains and the lakes. He had some experience of writing for a Wechat public account where he had reviewed films; when he applied to *Know Yourself*, they were interested in whether or not he'd be able to take his experience writing about films and apply a psychological spin on them. He was happy to have the job; they were happy for him to grow with the company and learn what he needed about psychology (Winter 2019, interview).

<I Don't Need Your Affirmation> is an example of the work that Winter went on to produce for the company (Know Yourself 2019a). A psychological assessment of the Marvel film Wonder Woman, he manages to weave in a technical description of the film (his opening gambit is "here are my two favorite scenes,") with a more academically robust discussion of Margot Waddell's 'primary identification theory.' Winter explains that Waddell's work is about how we become ourselves, and that there are three main routes she describes. First is "adhesive" 黏着式认同, whereby people reach for the predominant value systems and lifestyles they see around them. The second is "projective" 投射性认同 wherein a person builds themselves in light of the expectations of others. The third is "introjective"内摄性认同, which sees a person deeply reflect on the expectations of others while still retaining enough sense of self to be able to make their own choices about the right course for themselves. As Winter points out, in the film Wonder Woman, the protagonist loses her memory, which means she becomes a blank slate for the projections of others. Only once she gets her memory back towards the close of the film is she able to reflect on the person she actually is and what she is fighting for. Winter sees her as moving from projective selfhood to introjective. He implores his readers to do the same—to be able to choose what expectations they should meet, and what they should let go of.

The content is therefore a hybrid; part pop-culture critique with an added sheen of Western academic psychology thrown in to provide context and justify its position within the wider universe of mental health and wellness offerings that *Know Yourself* provides. These articles tend to more heavily engage with Western psychology rather than looking at the existing psychological frameworks embedded in Chinese cultural traditions such as Confucianism or Daoism. As Winter is someone who writes the free educational articles that help entice people to buy services from the content provider, it is important to look closely at these articles as they elucidate exactly how these companies promote mental health, the underlying assumptions they are working from, and how these end up creating the conditions for people to buy mental health related services. These

articles are essentially the "gateway" into the wider universe of these companies.

Another example is a piece on the TV show *"all is well"* (都挺好) which asks "why is this family so messed up?" in which Winter writes about each family member in turn, assessing their psychological condition and "how they should face and work through the influence of a family such as this" (Know Yourself 2019b). For example, Winter believes that the character Su Mingcheng 苏明成 is just a vehicle for the dreams of his mother, and therefore recommends that he gives up trying to please her. He must recognise that his mother is as flawed as he is, and that he should strive to be "good enough" 足够好. Though he does touch on the notion of filial piety, his essay largely invokes ideas more closely aligned with the Western psychological understanding of family. In the end, he concludes, separating out the characters of the title so that 都 refers to "all" as in all of the aspects of a life, that regardless of how messy they can be, in the end we must still strive to work on ourselves and our relationships. If we manage to do this, well, that would be pretty good 挺好.

These are two small examples of articles from one of the authors from *Know Yourself*, but they represent the wider content offering pushed through the Wechat public accounts of these psycho-therapeutically informed media companies. They manage to skilfully blend pop culture, celebrity news and general vignettes about contemporary urban life with insights gathered from pop-psychology, sociology, academic psychology and self-help.

According to Qian Zhuang (2019, interview), the founder of *Know Yourself*, the average user of her service is 18-35, from a 1st or 2nd tier city, has a university education—40% of users have a master's degree—and over 70 per cent are female. This bias is reflected in the content; the issues discussed are overwhelmingly the kind that would be met by an upwardly mobile urbanite. The references to foreign films, American celebrities and domestic life are directed firmly at this demographic.

When I asked Qian Zhuang why she believes her audience is overwhelmingly female she noted that men tend to somatise their distress and deny its psychological aspect (I return to the question of gender in the next chapter). She also argued that family-life and relationships tend to be the preserve of women. Winter agrees and also notes that the content of the platform is targeted less at people with severe mental illness 心理疾病/心理问题, but more for people dealing with psychological troubles—what he terms 心理困扰 *xinli kunrao*. He distinguishes between *kunrao* 困扰 and more severe mental illness that could be considered bio-medical and for which more serious treatment might be sought. His point is that psychological troubles are something that men might brush off and trivialize, while women take these troubles more seriously and are willing to seek advice and make according lifestyle adjustments. A banner advert that runs at the top of many of the articles posted on the site (as of June 2019) invited users to send the *Know Yourself* team a text message detailing what was "troubling" them. The company guaranteed it would respond to the sender in 48 hours with advice.

A key aspect of these companies is the decoupling of mental health from mental illness. In the case of "psychological troubles" this process is made explicit. I focus more on this term in the final chapter of this thesis, but as Qian Zhuang noted, one of her macro-level goals with *Know Yourself* is to advocate for a more expansive vision of what health is—that health can involve both physical and mental health. However, because these platforms assume an outsized role in the psychological field in China, they are also taking on aspects of mental health care which the government has not yet managed to address. This means that while they fill in gaps in state service provision and are managing to expand the conversation to include mental health as well as mental illness, it is unclear where people who might be suffering from more severe mental distress fit within the universe of these companies. In our conversation Qian Zhuang explicitly stated that her company is for the generally healthy; "sometimes there are patients with serious diagnoses, and we don't know what to do with them. We can refer them to a therapist, but if something goes

wrong then…" she trailed off, unable to answer her own question.

For Qian Zhuang, the issue is that while these companies take on an outsized role in the mental health sphere in China, they are not capable of dealing with the severely mentally ill. Given the overall patchy provision of mental health care in China, these Wechat accounts walk a delicate line between dealing with everyday distress for the average citizen, while trying to avoid having to provide care for the seriously mentally ill—who they are legally not allowed to help, and who they are also not substantively equipped to help. In an interview, the founder of *Jiandan Xinli*, Li Zhen, told an academic that she was amazed at what the company had achieved, especially considering "that a large part of what it had done should probably have been handled by the government or the professional associations" (Li Zhen, quoted in Hsuan-Ying 2018). The split between psychiatry and psychotherapy is legally defined in China, in the 2013 national mental health law, with the former the only state-sanctioned means available for dealing with the severely mentally ill. However, the popularity of these services is such that it is inevitable that they will regularly brush up against people whose distress goes beyond that of psychological troubles—in much the same way the Ms. Wen was dealing with cases of severe suicidal ideation. In such cases, Qian Zhuang is worried that her service, beyond referring them to someone more qualified, is stuck—it cannot help these people, yet she assumes that from the perspective of the state if it fails to help them and something serious happens, like a suicide, that *Know Yourself* would be held accountable. This worry is not totally unfounded, as Plantin & de Seta (2019) argue in *Wechat as Infrastructure*; "Chinese authorities allow these ambitious companies to disrupt inefficient public sectors, as long as they do not compromise sociopolitical stability and remain aligned with the techno-nationalist pursuit of cyber-sovereignty." In this sense, *Know Yourself* is allowed to operate in the mental health sphere and to work towards the broadly stated goals of public health issued by the government—and to profit in the process—so long as doing so does not create instability or compromise other facets of technological governance.

This fear means that *Know Yourself's* content is extremely careful in treading this delicate line between targeting the worried well without professing to hold the potential to cure the severely mentally ill. In doing so it reflects the wider psy-boom in its separation between an understanding of distress as psychological and social, verses more serious mental illness. As discussed above, the audience that is most receptive to this in China is urban, well-educated and female. Aware of this, Qian Zhuang said that one of her aims in the future is to reach beyond her current demographic and try speaking to people in 3-4th tier cities where people tend to be less affluent and to convince men of the need for her service. Know Yourself, she said, is "trying to learn their language, so we can talk to them in their language to reach them".

The exact form this will take remains unclear. Many articles feature memes in English (one, posted by Know Yourself on 1.3.2019 featured an image of wave and the caption "all the days are bleeding into one and I have become numb" without a following translation into Mandarin. The use of English memes is a regular feature of their articles), and they quote heavily from American pop-culture and current affairs. While there are other Wechat accounts which focus more on traditional Chinese culture and the interplay with those values and psychology such as "Psychological Analysis and Chinese Culture" 心理分析与中国文化 and "DaRu Psychological Counselling" 大儒心理咨询 these accounts are significantly smaller and less influential than the accounts this article focuses on.

Another recent article by *Know Yourself*, about male sexual health problems, was written from the perspective of a female partner trying to understand the complexities of erectile dysfunction (汁儿 2019). Stylistic decisions like these create a mutually enforcing relationship whereby a young female urbanite audience sees their interests reflected in the content and also continue to demand such content. As Winter noted, the writers and editors see the readership metrics for their articles and so are fully cognizant of which topics land and which do not. They therefore reinforce the

stereotypes of the platform that lean towards specific audiences. I return to the gendered aspect of the psy-boom in the following chapter.

3.4. Knowing Yourself

In decoupling mental health from mental illness and creating commercial services and products accordingly, these companies are responsible for creating a new psychotherapeutically informed subjectivity for the people who regularly consume their products. As stated above, the accounts largely perform two roles. The first is educational; they explain psychotherapeutic concepts and promote an expansive concept of 'mental health' and wellbeing. The second is that for a fee they offer access to counselling services and, in the case of *Know Yourself*, other services such as mindfulness meditation or the ability to speak to a CBT trained chat-bot. Thus, they perform an educational/pedagogic function which helps to destigmatise mental illness and concieves "mental health" as something which can be worked on and improved, and then they offer services to meet this demand. This is not to suggest that these apps are *creating* the demand for mental health care in China—this demand is extant, serious, growing and not met by consummate resources. Rather, what these accounts are helping to create is a normative environment in which western psychotherapeutic concepts are the dominant discursive framework for discussing the mental health burden in China and also the primary mode for intervention amongst an affluent and urban consumer class.

To take a broad definition of subjectivity it is "the sense of one's self and one's place in the world" (Biehl 2007b: 129). Subjectivity is the historical and contextualised sensibility through which the self is understood and mediated, which as I explored in the previous chapter can also be understood as emerging through the dynamic of influence and response. The subjective aspect of the psy-boom is explored in greater detail in the second part of this thesis. While there is a large and blossoming literature dealing with China's psy-boom, it is worth going beyond understanding

the psy-boom's effects on therapists and the institutional framework around psychology and psychiatry (Jie Yang 2017, Li Zhang 2014, 2016) and rather to see the psy-boom as creating a new psychologically informed subjectivity in China. In this sense, we cannot understand the role of companies such as *Know Yourself, Yixinli* and *Jiandan Xinli* in China without seeing them as a catalyst accelerating the psy-boom and causing a commensurate shift in personal subjectivity. It is on top of the extant literature about the psy-boom that this chapter sits—showing how the psy-boom gave rise to these platforms and is accelerated by them.

The issue of subjectivity is especially relevant in the context of mental illness, as scholars have long noted that the medical category itself represents a subjective intervention; "rather than existing as an isolated medical fact or a 'mere' social construction, mental illness actually unites the social and biological streams of experience into a new subjectivity" (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007: 126). Mental illness informs a new subjectivity, regardless of whether one self-identifies or is medically diagnosed as mentally ill or not, because the existence of the category of mental illness creates the conditions for a discussion about mental health—and this is something that every person can participate in. In China this subjectivity is bounded by the spectrum that runs from severe mental illness through to "psychological troubles" 心理困扰 (chapter 5) and all the way to full mental health—which is almost certainly an imagined category that no person achieves. Where one self-identifies or is diagnostically placed upon that spectrum will have a huge impact on personal subjectivity. In fact, just to acknowledge that there is a spectrum at all, and that one's position along it might change throughout the life course but is not determined at birth, is also an important realisation. As Yujia, a translator (who we meet in chapter 4) told me, one of the most important takeaways she had from working on several books about mental illness was an acknowledgement that people who suffered from serious mental illness were no different than herself but that they were afflicted by a medical condition largely out of their control. This helped her to empathise with them and created a more tolerant subjectivity.

As discussed above, these Wechat accounts tend to focus less on specific illnesses or medicalised definitions of distress and more on grounding discussions of distress within articles about common social phenomenon or pop culture. The comments sections underneath these articles show a lively conversation around social issues and how relevant they are to people's lives. Under a recent *Know Yourself* article about the '996' work phenomenon (计儿 2019b) of working from 9am to 9pm 6 days a week and how such a lifestyle is incompatible with personal relationships one comment—'liked' over 219 times—by a user called Amiu asked 'why is it that every article KY puts out is exactly what I'm going through?! Do you have cameras in my house?' A similar point was made by Rui Qi (chapter 5), one of the psychology hobbyists I interviewed in Chengdu, who said that *Know Yourself* was willing to "write about the problems we are all facing but maybe don't speak about." The ability of these companies to correctly gauge their audience and target them with content appropriate for their lives is part of the reason for their success.

The articles can then help people to open up discussions amongst themselves. As Qian Zhuang noted, one use of the platform that surprised her was that people would read the articles and then send them to their partners as a way of sparking difficult conversations they might not have otherwise felt confident broaching themselves. On *Yi Xinli* I noticed an article that looked as if it had been specifically written with this in mind (Yi Xinli 2019). It was drawn like a comic-strip and was about a couple who kept fighting over who takes the trash out. The couple has a whiteboard where various tasks are written by each of them for the other to complete. The boyfriend keeps forgetting to check the board and thus misses the trash. His girlfriend gets increasingly annoyed at him[39]. However, while he is neglecting to look at the board he is doing other things around the house. He makes her coffee, he buys her small treats on the way home from work, and he makes the bed. This, he feels, she doesn't notice. She writes an angry message one day on the board after

[39] It is worth noting the fact that they are happy to depict a cohabiting unmarried couple rather than a husband and wife. This reveals something about the urbane nature of the readership. An All-China Women's Federation item would not portray a couple like this.

spotting he once again hasn't taken the trash out. He sees the message and gets angry that she would speak to him like that—and also that she would forget all the other things he has done. The comic strip then pauses here to discuss the idea of 'confirmation bias,' giving a psychological definition of the term and showing how once a person has a certain narrative in mind they will focus on the details that confirm that. Once the guy feels offended all he sees is his girlfriend's tone on the whiteboard, and once the girl feels neglected by him not reading the whiteboard in the first place, all she sees is his continued inability to take the trash out. Once the article has explained the psychological dynamic at play, it shows the couple resolving the issue—he tells her all the things he *has* done and she reminds him that she really does love him. The final panel of the comic is a sign on the whiteboard. 1) take out the trash 2) I love you. It is easy to see how an article like that could be sent amongst couples who are dealing with issues in their relationships as a way of trying to patch up their differences.

The platforms are conscious of their role in promoting psychological concepts—note how the *Yi Xinli* article made explicit the idea of "confirmation bias." They are also active in shaping the content to make clear that these concepts have use. This is functional knowledge. Once this has been established, it is then easy to market products at the consumers of this content. In other words, once you have seen that an understanding of confirmation bias might help you to deal with issues in your relationship with your romantic partner, you can then be sold a suite of products which purport to help you learn more techniques and how they can be applied.

This ties into the concept of agency that this thesis explores. Here we see how psychological tools are offered as a way for people to feel in control of their emotions no matter the situation. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, agency can be understood as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2011: 112). Here we see how a psychological concept like confirmation bias is offered to readers to help them better understand their ability to act within their relationships. Instead of just thinking about themselves, they are invited to take a moment to

reflect on the other person and decentre themselves. This is precisely the kind of "considered action" that I see as being fostered in the psy-boom. Here personal subjectivity has been altered by the psychological concept of confirmation bias, which allows people to reflect on a given situation and foster a particular form of action.

How a person considers themselves capable of acting in any given situation is also intimately related to the kind of person they think themselves to be. An important aspect of *Know Yourself's* business is selling psychological assessment tools. Under the "psychological services" tab on *Know Yourself's* Wechat public account it offers a suite of "psychological assessments" 测试 for 25.90rmb. These psychological assessments are similar to the kind that workplaces sometimes employ to screen candidates. In the case of *Know Yourself,* however, the assessments, while they draw on this format, are for a much wider range of psychological applications. There are assessments for a huge range of lived experience. To choose one example, there is one that aims to help the user better understand their relationship to sex. 66 questions are asked in total, in a format of "how much do I agree with the statement…" One selects on a scale of 1-5. Examples include: how much do I agree with the statement that sex is something I enjoy? How much do I agree with the statement that I feel like I am a sexy person? At the end, a detailed read out is given which is supposed to provide the person with insights. Armed with this knowledge, one assumes, they are now better able to navigate their sexual relationships and to advocate for their needs.

Knowledge of the self, here, is the commodity. Of course, it is questionable the extent to which the results of these psychological assessments really accord with reality. What they provide is an approximation of the complex interiority that constitutes a person. With this in hand, people can then make choices about what they want to do, what kind of relationship they are seeking or whatever else the psychological assessment is pointing towards. In a sense therefore, they function on a similar plane to an astrological chart or a palm reading. They help draw constellations to guide a person through the night-sky of their existence.

As Illouz (2018: 7) argues in her later work, "consumer acts and emotional life have become closely and inseparably intertwined with each other, each one defining and enabling the other; commodities facilitate the expression and experience of emotions; emotions are converted into commodities." She calls the "*co-production of emotions and commodities* and the many nodes in which emotions and consumer acts coincide an *emodity"* (Illouz 2018: 7, emphasis in original). The knowledge of self that is provided by doing a psychological assessment can also be seen as an emodity because it is both its own commodity and also generates affective feelings within the person which primes them for more consumption. Once you have been told that you are a sexual person by one of *Know Yourself's* psychological assessments, you might also then decide that you want to purchase a set of "short-courses" about finding sexual fulfilment in relationships. A hermeneutic relationship therefore exists between the way that the content of the platforms makes you feel, and the desire to consume more products offered by the platform. Considering that knowledge of the self is not a final destination but an endless exploration, it is an inexhaustible resource for the platforms.

The desire to know oneself or to build the skill of happiness is not an isolated event but part of a much broader shift in Chinese society that the scholar Li Zhang (2020: 54) refers to as the "inner revolution." The desire of people to consume the products of these psychological service providers should be understood not just as part of the psy-boom but also as part of a wider uptake in a broad spectrum of health and wellness products. By 2018, gyms and fitness centres represented a US$6bn industry in China, and sportswear was a US$43.10bn industry in 2020 (Holman 2018). Physical fitness also finds its expression through apps and digital interventions; one fitness app, *Keep*, had over 100mn users in China as of 2017. Dovetailing with companies in the mental health sphere, *Keep's* audience is also predominately in 1st and 2nd tier cities, and over 77% of them are under the age of 35 (Holman 2018).

If 21st century bio-medicine increasingly targets the healthy by offering "upgrades" (Harari 2017:

405), then it shouldn't come as a surprise that the rapidly expanding niche market cornered by these online psychological service providers similarly targets the "psychological troubles" of urbanites. It also makes sense from a purely financial perspective; Know Yourself is in its B round of funding, and while Qian Zhuang was unwilling to state exactly how much money they were seeking, it is clear that it was in the tens of millions of $usd. The scholar Jie Yang writes that the internet had helped to push the market value of psychological counselling companies more generally, and that in recent years the industry had expanded by a factor of thirty (Jie Yang 2017: 18).

Targeting affluent millennial consumers and offering a product that is packaged less at curing a particular disease and rather at helping to generally improve the affective aspects of a life—family, personal relationships, fulfilling romantic lives etc—creates a sustainable business model. There is no cure here; there is only a hedonic treadmill in which no matter how optimised any of these affective aspects become, they can always be tweaked and improved. For example, under Winter's article about Wonder Woman <I Don't Need You to Affirm Me> the top-rated comment, with 2513 likes, was from a user called "Cherry Blossom Meatball" who wrote "my mum spent 25 years telling me 'I have to leave a good impression on people'. I now will need to spend even longer than that to teach myself "you can't live in the shadow of other people's opinions."" Another comment, from a user called Miyako, that had 550 likes, noted that one should be "independent but not isolated" and that while you might know what is best for you, that doesn't mean you can do away with the support of others altogether.

The fusion of self-help, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), life-coaching and blended pop/academic psychology that these accounts draw from and package for their viewers are all grounded in an assumption that sees emotions as something which can be extricated and looked at objectively and then rationally managed with work and patience (I return to this observation in the final chapter of this thesis). By knowing the primary identifications, a person can then examine

their own life and try to piece together how they are constructing their self. Instead of taking it as axiomatic or a priori, they see that the self is malleable. *Know Yourself* is both an invocation and a practice. Take for example a comment under the aforementioned review of "All is Good" that Winter authored. A user named Avril园子 writes that even though not all girls might be able to find a lover as compassionate as the one in the show, "they are all still striving to live despite adversity, striving to cure themselves and striving for their own personal development and lives."

The view of life presented by these apps is one in which emotions can be regulated—*here are the tools to do so*; in which happy homes are easily achievable—*if you only follow these steps*; or where you can understand yourself better—*if you buy this psychological assessment*. The nature of these public accounts and the ease with which this information is commercially packaged as a result of the affordances of the underlying technology of Wechat means that they are helping to embed market logics in the deepest recesses of individual psyches through the sale of emodities (Illouz 2018: 7, also Illouz 2011). The market ends up forming the meta-context of this particular conception of wellbeing and health. Twined with this emotional capitalism is Clough's (2008: 17) conception of the biomediated body. For Clough the wider affective turn creates the conditions for affect to be seen as a site of social change. The opening of affect allows for full subsumption of all aspects of life into the commercialized realm of the market as affect is now commercialized and bounded by market logics. Illouz's and Clough's arguments both point to the idea that affect has become commercialized. For Clough this is because capital has at last found a way of attaching itself to the most intangible and elusive aspects of our personhood, which as Illouz contends, is because of a shift in our understanding of affect which sees it as something that can be tamed and controlled.

It must be noted, however, that it is not only in capitalist regimes that affect is seen as a site of social change or control. Drawing on Illouz's work, one scholar argues for the existence of an emotional socialism which "accepts suffering as unavoidable, and thus better taken with a clenched jaw rather than with a soft embrace" (Lerner quoted in Aronson and Duportail 2018). The Mao-

era in China was full of campaigns which used affective claims to inspire people to throw themselves wholeheartedly into production and to sacrifice to achieve the ideals of the communist state. The notion of a "great-leap forward" is affective, as is the entire framing and conception of the "century of humiliation"—the hundred or more years that China was subjugated by foreign powers and invaded by Japan which came to an end with the rise of the CCP. The scholar Elizabeth Perry (2002: 150) refers to "emotion work" in this period as the affective tie between political campaigns and people's daily lives. The point of these campaigns was to drive people to subsume their individual desires and aspirations to achieve the collective aims of the state.

This could be seen, for example, in the discourse of "eating bitterness" 吃苦. As I have stated before in this thesis, when I lived with my host family in Chengdu, the family head Brother Bing, was a retired chef born in 1960. He would often describe his childhood in the midst of the Cultural Revolution as a time in which he had to eat a lot of bitterness. Though there were certainly people who suffered more than him, his childhood was one of material deprivation and extremely hard work. He only ate meat once a year at spring festival. He went to culinary school when he was still a teenager. This was not because he loved cooking but because it was part of a training programme linked to a large state-owned restaurant group. To grow up under Mao was to constantly subject oneself to the continuing needs of permanent revolution. Brother Bing did not bemoan his childhood. When he spoke of eating bitterness he did so without resentment. "This is just how things were," he would say. The constant affective demands made by the regime created the conditions for an emotional socialism. It makes sense that as society has opened, and capitalism has taken hold, that there would be a movement towards a regime of emotional capitalism. Now, throwing oneself into inner revolution, people are exhorted to be happy and to know themselves better. There is also a different relationship to bitterness amongst the affluent. Previously having eaten bitterness was either something to take pride in or at the very least not something to bemoan. Amongst the affluent today living well implies rising above having to eat bitterness. Brother Bing

was keen to shield his daughter from having to suffer the depredations that he had. We would sometimes be in the apartment together and he would smile and say, at least I can leave her this.

From a society-wide perspective, this development has existential implications. If under Xi Jinping the hope is the realisation of a "moderately prosperous society for all" and the eradication of poverty by 2020 (Westcott and Wang 2019) then what is the role of suffering in society? As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, CCP rule is predicated on "eudaemonic legitimacy"—"a mode of legitimacy in which a regime justifies its rule by successful economic performance and effective provision of economic benefits to individuals in society" (Chen 1997: 22). The continued existence of unexplained suffering in China could present a threat to regime legitimacy. The regime cannot do away with suffering; I believe we can follow the Kleinman's in arguing that "suffering is one of the existential grounds of human experience" (Kleinman and Kleinman 2011: 1). While this is true, the frame through which suffering is understood can and does shift with its cultural, political and economic moment.

The view from these public accounts is part of a larger shift in China in which Western concepts of mental health and psychology are being employed to understand and try to cope with suffering. If a society is no longer implored to eat bitterness but the vicissitudes of life still leave an aftertaste, then how do people reconcile pain? One way is to turn inwards, to develop psychotherapeutic tools and a robust concept of the self. In this telling, the cause of suffering is because one does not have the correct toolkit to navigate life. This is not to try and adjudicate whether or not there is objectively more or less suffering now in China than in the past, though it is likely that with economic development and the vast change in lifestyles that it likely the case that there is less. Rather, what is significant is the shift in the responsibility for caring for that suffering, and in the purpose of the suffering itself. Suffering need not be a fact of life. Through these public accounts, one learns that a person's suffering is directly proportional to how much or little they have

developed their own skill of happiness. If they have worked on themselves enough, done enough assessments to better understand themselves and worked on the psychological techniques necessary to balance their personality flaws, then suffering can be managed. Suffering here is not a constituent part of life, but an impediment to the good life itself.

These psychological service providers not only help to reframe suffering, but by providing consumable tools targeted at wellbeing they are also exerting a form of power over the consumer. This "therapeutic authority" can be thought of as posing "in a new way an old problem in the exercise of authority—the relation between authority over others and authority over the self" (Miller and Rose 1994: 36). This authority creates the conditions for a new form of governance—therapeutic governance—which Pupavac defines "as a mode of control through which psychosocial intervention is used to manage social risk" (Pupavac 2001: 362). This governance is done not just through the creation of a new bio-medically informed episteme which categorises and organises society, but by turning individuals away from the extant reasons for their social distress. Consequently, people do not organise against these social forces, but rather turn inwards and build their own inner resources to cope with them (Pupavac 2001, Miller and Rose 1994). This is a line of critique that is worth exploring in more detail, especially for what it tells us about agency, which I take up in the following chapters of this thesis.

Foucault wrote at length about technologies of the self (Foucault 1982: 208). These he believed had the potential to transform a person, through the force of their own will, in thought, conduct, and mode of being in the world. Is there a more literal *technology* of the self than online psychological service providers pulling the levers of social media to explicitly tell consumers that a better, healthier and happier self is within reach, and then for a nominal fee providing the tools? These technologies and these new selves are part of a wider discursive shift occurring in China as part of the psy-boom. This shift shares a hermeneutic relationship with these companies; they meet a

demand in the wider market and sustain it by educating people as to the needs they might have that are not yet being met. They also represent a market-based solution to the anxieties exacerbated in society through marketization. This is an emotional capitalism that sees its purest representation in a technological platform whose affordances create the conditions for the further marketing of regulated affect.

3.5. Conclusion

Considering that Wechat is a super-sticky app that mediates the Chinese internet and creates wide affordances for its technology, it makes sense that China's psy-boom manifests and sustains itself online through public Wechat accounts. As this thesis argues, a key facet of the psy-boom is the dynamic marketplace for psychological services that has developed in the years after the creation of the MOLSS qualifications. These psychological Wechat accounts developed out of a need to accredit counsellors but then developed into diverse psychological service providers in their own right, leveraging the technology of Wechat itself to offer innovative products and services. The irony is that counsellors have turned to these services as a way to differentiate themselves in a marketplace characterised by brutal competition in which it is extremely tough to survive—mirroring precisely the same dynamics that customers turn to psychological services to get relief from. Online psychological service providers not only market individual counsellors or particular healing modalities, but they also market a psychological understanding of distress itself.

In doing so, these accounts push for an expansive concept of mental health and provide the tools for an affluent and educated urban audience to construct a more psychologically robust self. In this way, they are also responsible for pushing a particular understanding of what constitutes mental health. As this chapter has shown, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the

market and mental health that is furthered by these psychological service providers. Wechat acts as a catalyst in the continuing marketisation of the affective realm. This constitutes a subjective shift in a person's understanding of themselves and their affective life. As we will see in the following chapters, this vision of the self has social impact in the way that people who consume these services and buy into this particular framing of wellbeing come to embody this knowledge and how it changes their perception of their ability to act upon themselves and others in pursuit of the good life, and how this relates to healing. As Kleinman notes in *Deep China* (2011: 267), given the intensely harsh social changes and traumatic legacy of the Mao-era, "isn't the audacity of simply being happy and enjoying life the most remarkable of collective and personal changes?" Going further, this chapter has shown that today happiness is not merely a state of being that might be fortuitously arrived at, but rather is seen as a skill that can be fostered through the use of psychological tools.

CHAPTER 4: THE SPECTRE OF THE STRONG WOMAN

In Chengdu I met three women engaging in the psy-boom who helped shed light on the way that gender intersects with many of the other dynamics I have already explored in this thesis. The psy-boom is a gendered phenomenon; the reading group and almost all of the psychological training activities 培训 I attended were populated by over 70% women. This figure is like that of the audiences of the major psychological service providers on Wechat (chapter 3). Many scholars have noticed that women are over-represented among counsellors and among "hobbyists" in China's psy-boom (see for example Jie Yang 2015), but few have sought to ask exactly why this might be. In this chapter I address that question, by exploring the emic reasons that women offer to explain their attraction to psychology and their willingness to attend trainings. The three women that I focus on here represent the multiplicity of forms that the psy-boom takes and the diverse uses that engagement with psychological concepts can be put towards. One of the women, Luna, is a qualified psychological counsellor who is also a successful insurance broker. She does not practice as a counsellor full time and considers herself more of a hobbyist. The second is Ms. Wu, who runs a family counselling service and is a franchisee of the Shu Xin method, which I detail below. The third is Yujia, a translator who has translated a number of popular books on mental health. Each of these women have, at various points in their life, drawn on their knowledge of psychological concepts to help them navigate issues in their life that are directly related to their identity as cis-gender women in China. In particular, each of these women have had issues with the label "strong woman" 女强人, which I explore in detail below.

As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, the psy-boom is an important phenomenon in China because of the way that it connects affect and subjectivity to influence perceptions of agency. Defining agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001: 112) it is worth

investigating how each of these women applied psychological concepts they had learned in the psy-boom to give them a sense of control in situations in which many of their actions and desires are otherwise constrained by the wider patriarchal system. Here I show how these women applied their knowledge of psychological concepts and their experiences of psychological training and therapy to navigate the complexity of their lives in this social context. The introspective tools of the psy-boom allowed them to pursue a form of agency I have termed considered action. One of the key insights of this thesis is to represent the heterogeneity of the psy-boom, and as such I show the diverse uses that these women apply this training towards, even though in each of their cases they are working within the same patriarchal context. The psy-boom is a phenomenon that intersects with other social developments in China, including as I show in this chapter, gender. As I have argued throughout this thesis, contemporary society in China is characterised by extreme competition and increased anxieties.

In this chapter I show how these features of society at large intersect with gender to create an added burden on women who are expected not only to define and ensure success for themselves and their children, but whose ability to do so is constrained by gendered norms. The rise of psychology and uptake in psychological services in China by educated and affluent women is a reflection of the affective burden that they face and helps them to feel as if they are able to make decisions for themselves and their children. This is what I have discussed in this thesis as the ability for considered action, which as I have argued is an important concept to expand understandings of agency. In this chapter I seek to show the ways in which these women have used psychological concepts or what they have taken from their experiences in the psy-boom to foster this capacity to act, but I also question the extent to which this action amounts to substantive social change. If healing is considered to operate on the level of the self or the family (or close-kin) and the psy-boom is understood as fostering "inner revolution" (Zhang 2020), then we should also ask whether this cultivated subjectivity can amount to wider social change.

Despite the rapid economic advancement of society, the reform period has not distributed these gains equally. Gender inequality has been cemented by economic reforms. This inequality is based on a socio-biologically rooted understanding of gender difference that has been articulated in different ways since the early decades of the PRC but has not basically shifted (Greenhalgh 2011: 160). The Mao-era represented an attempt to rebalance gender roles that had been deeply patriarchal during the imperial dynasties that had preceded them and been characterised by degradations like foot-binding and concubinage. "Women can hold up half the sky" is a Mao-era slogan that is often invoked to show the emancipatory ideals of the time. Of course, as scholars have shown, this largely amounted to involving women more fully in socialist labour production while still maintaining gender imbalances in terms of the burden of domestic labour or access to positions of power to favour the male elite of the CCP (Pimentel 2006: 343, Johnson 1976, Honig & Hershatter 1988). Women were also forced to compete in a hypergamous marriage market that saw them become "consumers as well as the sexualized objects of consumption" (Zurndorfer 2016: 6). For those who do enter marriages, they experience "a double burden" (Pimentel 2000: 341) that sees them drawn between striving to be successful in the market economy while also having to ensure that the affective realm of the household is well managed. State campaigns reinforced gender stereotypes by highlighting women's affective qualities, which one scholar has described as 'the feminization of intimacy' (Evans 2012: 121).

The fact that the affective realm of the home was considered to be the responsibility of women (see Pimental 2005) meant that there was a constant negotiation between developing the blunt tools that were suited to succeeding in a patriarchal marketplace and those softer skills that were needed to navigate the complex and ephemeral emotional realm of the domestic. The interplay of state campaigns and the gendered social reality gave rise to women offering up their own analysis of why it was that women participated so much in the psy-boom. Their emic reasons tended to

mirror the gendered stereotypes of society at large. Juanjuan, who was a regular attendee of Ms. Liu's training group, argued that the reason that women dominated in these groups was due to the material conditions of Chinese labour. "Men have too much work pressure to deal with emotional things," she said, "family problems are down to women to solve 调解." That men are seen as productive labourers contrasts their commercial *effectivity* with feminine *affectivity*. Almost all the women I met in my fieldwork took it as axiomatic that women were more emotional than men and that this effective/affective distinction was natural.

That this explanation is a re-packaging of a long tradition of state discourse emphasizing women's affectivity to demand they take on a greater share of domestic labour—'the double burden'—shows the effectiveness of China's "patriarchal authoritarianism" (Fincher 2018). Fincher argues in her landmark study of feminist activists that "China's all-male rulers have decided that the systematic subjugation of women is essential to maintaining Communist Party survival" (Fincher 2018: 328). This existential calculation has led the state to increasingly marginalise feminist voices and to promote rhetoric that emphasises female domesticity. Xi Jinping has pushed for women to take an outsized role in the home——"women should take responsibility for youngsters' education; boost the traditional positive virtues of the Chinese nation; and, contribute to the social ethos," he has said (Xinhua News, quoted in Fincher 2019: 326).

However, as Harriet Evans has shown (2012: 121) the "feminization of intimacy" in post-reform China is not merely the reflection of market processes nor the existence of an "established ontological category," but rather down to intense discursive shifts that have re-emphasized women's emotional capacities. She notes that even during the 1950s the stereotypically "'gender neutral' or 'masculinised' woman of the Mao era" was often portrayed as sympathetic, patient and thus better suited to domesticity and child rearing (Evans 2012: 133). In the 1990s, women's emotional attributes were once again reinforced as "women were urged to communicate with their

children as a condition of the latter's healthy development," (Evans 2012: 135, see also Wu 2010 for more on the evolution of gender discourse). This presupposed a natural division of labour that was not natural at all, but rather has been consistently reinforced by state rhetoric and post-reform era marketing. The feminization of intimacy brought with it a particular kind of gendered affect and subjectivity, which still finds expression in the psy-boom as women understand themselves as Juanjuan did—as especially affective beings who needed to work on their emotionality. This helps to explain why women were so overrepresented in the psy-boom, which is a key contention of this chapter and thesis more broadly.

The idea that women were predisposed to be emotional was often an idea that the women themselves offered as to why the psy-boom skewed so female. "Women have a sixth sense," noted Ms. Wu, a family therapist who had twinned practices in Chengdu and in the nearby town of Dujiangyan, who was also at the seminar that I met Luna at. She argued that women were naturally sensitive and therefore it made sense that the affective tasks of the family fell on their shoulders. "Men are like bottles, they are upright and contained," argued Ms. Liu, the reading group organiser, one night over dinner in a Japanese restaurant. "Women are like plates," she said, waving her hands over the dinnerware in front of her, "they are flat and take on more." When I asked her to elaborate, she answered by saying that men just didn't feel like they needed psychological training—they either felt that they didn't need the tools it offered (considering they didn't do any of the affective labour of the home anyway) or that engaging with psychology too deeply might imply they had some kind of problem themselves.

The choice to participate in the psy-boom was a reflection of and response to the gendered dynamics of wider society. Whether or not the psy-boom itself represents a way of subverting those gendered norms or whether it ends up reinforcing them is a question that I return to in the conclusion of this chapter. The women I engaged with were not blind to the fact that the deck

was stacked against them and that they had significantly more affective labour to engage with than their male counterparts. Amongst the participants I interviewed engaging in the psy-boom, many of them had grown up in single child families in which they were the sole object of their parent's affection and told that they could have any future they desired, only to find that society was heavily favoured towards men (Wu and Dong 2019: 10). Outcomes for women are steadily declining in China. "Over the past decade, China's ranking in the World Economic Forum's global gender gap index has declined significantly — from 57th out of 139 countries in 2008 to 103rd in 2018" (Qin 2019). Explicit feminist organising has also been dramatically clamped down upon. In 2015, on the eve of International Woman's Day, a group of women's rights activists—"the feminist five" ––were arrested for planning to hand out stickers warning against sexual harassment on subways and buses (Fincher 2019). Three years later, on International Women's Day, Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, banned *Feminist Voices* the most influential feminist social media account on the platform (Fincher 2019). Its Wechat account was also removed the following day, which sent a clear message that this deplatforming was the result of coordinated efforts to stifle explicitly feminist voices (Fincher 2019). In the context of China's patriarchal authoritarianism, feminism poses a real threat to the continued legitimacy of CCP rule (Fincher 2019: 314).

But it is not only the state which is anti-feminist. There is also a strong anti-feminist line of critique that is present throughout society. As Wu and Dong (2019) have argued, Chinese feminism, or C-fem as they refer to it, is a heterogenous phenomenon. They identify two broad strands within the movement. The first, entrepreneurial C-fem, encourages women to "exercise their autonomy on the marriage market to maximize their personal returns" (Wu and Dong 2019: 11). This strand of C-fem takes hypergamy as a social fact and therefore construes feminism as anything a woman does to increase her marriageability to better her life. The second "non-cooperative" strand denounces "the prevalent marketization of the marital institution," and sees women choose to focus on their own careers and building their own resources (Wu and Dong 2019: 12). But even

though these two avenues of C-fem are substantively different, they are often conflated in the popular imagination, and anti-feminist sentiment is widespread in society. Importantly, both of these transgressive strategies rely on competition, either for men or for material resources, and thus lead to class-based critiques from men who see women's empowerment as challenging to mainstream distributions of power. Popular narratives therefore collapse the two branches of C-fem, labelling Chinese feminists as hypersexualised and hyperprivileged, and thus open to broadscale social critique. Feminism therefore becomes a term that is somewhat toxic, and often one that women are wary of adopting for themselves without caveat.

As I show in this chapter, the psy-boom ends creating a space for discussions that are feminist in nature, but not discussed in the politicised and marginalized language of feminism. It ends up psychologising some of these political considerations, which is an important observation of this chapter and a topic I explore at length also in the next chapter in the context of social change. This builds on my observation of the psy-boom as a phenomenon that evinces some of the same characteristics identified by Zhang and Farquhar (2005: 309) in their study of *yangsheng* as a form of life that is "political but non-confrontational." As I show in this chapter, the forms of agency that these women were trying to cultivate for themselves do not fit neatly as either ways of comporting themselves to the gendered dynamics of society nor of confronting them, but rather agency was expressed in the way that they chose to articulate themselves and their desires in conditions of anxiety over how to achieve a good life for themselves and their loved ones. With feminism considered a highly politicized and necessarily confrontational standpoint, I seek to explore the ways in which feminist ideas can still permeate and find alternative idioms in spaces like the psy-boom.

It is in light of prevailing gender norms that a label like "strong woman" 女强人 can be pejorative. As John Osburg (2013: 151) noted in his ethnography of male entrepreneurs in Chengdu, they

would often dismiss their female counterparts as "strong women," implying that their success in the business world either rendered them unfeminine, because they had modified their personalities to succeed in a masculine dominated economy or because they had mortgaged their sexuality to get preferable treatment from more powerful men, which these entrepreneurs saw as an unfair advantage they lacked. This is why one scholar has referred to Chinese women as being in a "no-win" situation (Zurndofer 2016: 16). Building themselves enough to live independently can see them "condemned for their ambitions" (Zurndofer 2016: 16), while relying on a man sees them dismissed as sexual objects. In each of the women I profile in this chapter, the spectre of the "strong woman" loomed large in their understanding of how they wanted to shape their life. However, I seek to problematise the idea of women being in a "no-win" situation by showing the ways in which they utilised psychological concepts and their engagement with psychological services to create a sense of control over their lives.

Moving beyond anthropological tendencies to draw distinctions between power and resistance, with agency understood as a function of the latter (Kuan 2015: 21), I seek to show how the psy-boom creates a space for these women to try to articulate complex and often competing desires thrown up by the circumstances in which they find themselves. This thesis argues that the reform period is often ambiguous and the huge social upheavals it represents cause people to feel anxious about how best to navigate these choppy waters. I show how each of these three women draw on their various engagements with the psy-boom to try to formulate and actualize their visions of the good life. While this might not amount to a "winning" situation, it allows the women to feel as if they are not simply powerless in the face of the gendered dynamics of their society.

4.1. The Spectre of the Strong Woman

Luna was seated in the second row of a lecture on family therapy. A qualified psychological counsellor 心理咨询师 she was there because she wanted to get a better handle on how to deal with her son. Her husband had left this work up to her, though she didn't gripe about his absence from these issues. She was too busy fretting about the right course of action for her boy. Luna is in her late 40s. Despite her counselling qualification, she works full-time in insurance for a global brokerage. She had taken the day off to attend "training" 培训 related to her passion for psychology. In particular, today she was interested in trying to learn how best to manage issues she was having with her son. She is representative of the blurred boundaries of the psy-boom created by the MOLSS qualifications, which has provided a small population within China's middle class with some form of psychological qualification and a legal capacity to deliver psychological services, but who either by choice or due to the over-supply and lack of demand for talk therapy find their relationship to psychology more artisanal and hobbyist 爱好者 than professional.

In the lecture on family therapy, where we met, Luna was one of an audience of approximately 35 people. Seventy per cent of the audience were women, though the lecturer himself was a man with a family practice in Shanghai. The gender composition of the audience in the room was typical of the psy-boom at large. Luna and I connected after the convenor asked me, as the only foreigner, whether I was married. I said that I was not. He asked me if I had a Chinese girlfriend. I told him I did not[40]. Was I planning on getting married one day? I told him I was not, and that my parents, despite having been together for over 45 years, were also not married. There were audible gasps in the room when I said this. "This is a very modern arrangement!" The convenor said, and sensing that I was growing slightly uncomfortable, told the room that he expected to see more and more arrangements like this.

[40] At the time I had a Jamaican boyfriend, who lived in Berlin

Luna came and found me afterwards. She was interested to learn more about my parents, and she said she had some concerns about her son. We met up a week later at a coffee shop on a tree lined street in a residential part of the city. I asked her why she had trained to become a psychological counsellor. "I am pretty successful," she said. "I work for a global insurance brokerage and I own a number of homes in Chengdu. But many of the women I see at my level…" she studied her words for a moment, "well, many of them are very *strong*. They have all that you could want in a material sense, but the same set of skills that had allowed them to build such successful careers had hollowed them out at home." She used the phrase *strong women* 女强人 as a pejorative. For her, the tools that allowed one to succeed in a harsh market economy were at odds with the tools that could be used to create a happy home. The fact that she had been so successful in the former arena meant that she keenly felt the potential to fail in the latter. The psy-boom was a venue for her to cultivate softness. It was a way for her to exercise the kind of indecision and gentle frustration that would have been antithetical to her succeeding in an industry like insurance brokerage.

While her general interest in psychology was related to her fear of being perceived as a "strong woman," what had drawn her to the lecture on family therapy specifically was an issue she was having with her son. He played a lot of video games and didn't seem too interested in meeting girls. He was 17, and she said she was worried that he spent too much time studying for his exams or looking at a screen. When I asked if she would prefer that he had a girlfriend, she demurred. "Well, that might distract him from his exams," she said. "At the school they aren't supposed to date." She told me that school administrators would sometimes intervene if a young couple was caught spending too much time together.

This is an obvious contradiction. She was worried that her son was not interested in girls, but simultaneously she was worried that a girl might distract him from getting ahead with his schooling.

When I pointed this out, she nodded. "Yes, I know. But ultimately I want him to do well in his exams so that he is at a good university and can meet the right kind of girl!" So why was she concerned now that he wasn't interested in girls? "Well, if he doesn't try to spend time with girls now, then maybe he will be too shy when he gets to college," she said.

As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, China's partial movement towards a more individualised society has not represented a full shift away from more collectivist and relational models of the self (Chen 2018: 832, see also Sundarajan 2015: 9). There is an argument that could be made that Luna felt so strongly about her child because the boundaries between her selfhood and that of her son were less distinct than they might be in other cultures. This is what one scholar has referred to specifically about maternal relationships in China as 'expansive I' relationships, in which the selfhood of Luna would be understood as enveloping that of her son (Chen 2018: 832). However, I want to steer clear of ideas that might essentialise cultural characteristics or that could pit this form of relationship in contrast to the anxieties that a western parent might also feel about their child. Instead, I would argue as Teresa Kuan (2015) does in her book *Uncertain Love* that the challenges of the reform-period, with its intense social competition and scarce avenues for reaching socially recognised forms of success, draws parents in often contradictory directions.

From a position of critical distance, it was hard to see what Luna was getting so frustrated about. The concerns that she had about her child seemed impossible to resolve at that moment and were the kind that would almost certainly work themselves out over time. He would do however well he did in his exams, and he would then meet whomever he ended up meeting in college. But while this might be true in an objective sense, it is not experienced as such by Luna. Instead, she is torn by the opposing nature of her two desires. She wants her child to be successful materially, but she also wants him to be happy emotionally. By taking her foot off the throttle of his studies now, he might slow down enough to have a relationship that would bring him joy. But this joy in the

present might harm his exam results and thus prevent him from what she perceives would be a greater joy in the future—if he gets into a top school and earns a lot of money, he will be a better prospect in China's hypergamous marriage market (Wu and Dong 2019: 9). But her psychological training complicated this material calculation. It wouldn't be enough that he is materially successful to guarantee a good match. As she knew from her psychological training, unless he had experienced some heartbreak and understood enough about himself to know what he does and does not want from a relationship, how would he make the right choice of partner in the future? These issues were often in direct opposition.

These anxieties caused her to become what might be referred to in America as a "helicopter parent" —someone who hovers over her child at all times, surveilling them and swooping in when necessary to push them towards the good. This term is often pejorative, but in China an equivalent term, "the tiger mom" is more ambivalent. When the Yale professor Amy Chua wrote her famous book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom* (2011) about pushing her child to Harvard, her harsh parenting tactics were derided as sadistic by some Western commentators (Hoby 2014). However, as Chua has noted in interviews (IQ2 2014), the reception of the book in China was far more admiring. Instead of seeing the book as a somewhat ironic memoir, parents viewed it as a self-help book that held clues as to how to get their child to the most elite institution in the world. In this sense it was read alongside books like *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting* 哈佛女孩刘亦婷, written by her father Liu Weihua (2000) as a "character training record." These books are read as offering specific tools to help build the kind of character a child might need to succeed in China's hypercompetitive society. Liu Yiting had to hold ice cubes in her hands until they went bright red; Chua's children had the paintings they gave her torn up in front of them for not being good enough.

However, while these books are popular, people are not unaware of the downsides of such parenting. They know that the cruel tactics they advocate can cause serious psychological harm—

hence why Teresa Kuan (2015) opens her ethnography on parenting in a psychiatric facility. Even when this style does not cause obvious harm through its sheer cruelty, the helicopter style of constant micromanaging can cause too much dependence on the parent as the child is unable to ever make choices for themselves. This is the argument put forth by Wu Zhihong, one of China's most famous psychotherapists. His book *Big Baby Nation* 巨婴国 (2016) argued that the way that parents were so heavily overinvested in their (often only) children had created a nation of permanent infants, unable to make choices for themselves or take responsibility for their failings. His book was swiftly banned by the government for its negative portrayal of the Chinese people, but it did not stop it being an underground success online and sold in bootleg copies via imports from Taiwan or Hong Kong. He even coined his own healing modality—"big baby therapy" 巨婴疗法—as a way to tackle the issues he identified in his book. The tension therefore between tiger mom's and big babies would be aware to anyone who has spent time engaging in psychotherapy in China. The fraught complexity of trying to parse how close to hover above your child was what was troubling Luna.

I asked her if these kinds of worries had informed her decision to participate in the psy-boom originally. She noted that a few of her friends had children who "were going through some issues" and she wanted to help them. Studying psychology provided her with a toolkit that was "useful" 很使用 and allowed her to communicate with her friends about their children. This was a common refrain I heard amongst other psychology hobbyists and counsellors during my research. It also mirrored much of the advertising of the psy-boom itself, which as we have seen in chapters (2 and 3) actively markets itself as a tool to better know oneself and others (see also Zhang 2020: 59). Further, Li Zhang (2018: 55) has argued that women are "primarily responsible for taking care of familial relationships and engaging in emotional labour" which precipitates their involvement in a movement that is specifically targeted at improving their affective capabilities. As I argued in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, this affective division of labour is one that has been

consistently reinforced by state discourse such that women engaging with psychological concepts or attending training offer it up as an emic reason for their participation.

This aspect of the psy-boom was reinforced one evening in the reading group. Ms. Liu offered up the apocryphal story of an old man, his grandson and a donkey. At first, the old man let his grandson ride the donkey while he walked alongside. Then a man walks past and criticises the child—"how could you be so unfilial to allow your grandfather to walk in the road!" So, they switch. Then another person comes along and criticises the old man for not looking after his grandson. They decide to both ride the donkey. Then an animal rights activist points out that this is harmful for the donkey. Finally, they both walk alongside the donkey. "Hah! You guys are so stupid that neither of you is riding the donkey," a passer-by scoffs. "What are we to take from this story?" Ms. Liu asked us. "Don't listen to others!" two of the women in the audience shouted in unison.

In a society like China, which has undergone huge social upheavals in recent years and where so many competing forms of the "good life" co-exist (see for example Zhang 2020), it is easy to see why cultivating an ability to hunker-down and listen to your own internal calculus would be beneficial. But the kind of individualism such a self implies might only ever exist as an idealised form, especially if one believes that there is a "small self" embedded in a larger, socially contextualised, one (Li Zhang 2018, for discussion see chapter 5). The women were aware that they could not completely shut out critical voices—whether these came from the state itself, from their workplaces, within their own home or from society at large. However, psychology was supposed to be able to help them temper themselves to withstand this onslaught. It was a tool to allow them to plod along, whether they saw themselves as the grandfather or the child, or, perhaps, the donkey.

Even then, the toolkit was not able to offer a perfect solution. While two of the women were quick to shout that they shouldn't listen to others, there were moderating voices amongst the rest of the group who tried to work through each perspective. Some sided with the argument that the grandfather should be on the donkey as this was filial, while others argued that children should be protected at all costs. There was no easy answer—just as for Luna trying to understand what the best course of action for her son consisted of innumerable complicated strands that had to be puzzled through. In the end, Ms. Liu concluded that what was important was not the decision itself, but rather that they were able to make a decision at all. Then, once they had done so, they had to live with that choice and settle into it.

When I asked Luna if she felt that she knew what she wanted for her son, she raised her hands and let out a sigh. There were too many ways for his life to pan out, so she could not say. Would it be ok if he did not get married? I asked. She thought about it for a while and then said that this was really something she could not answer. "I admire what your parents have very much," she said, "but I am not sure if society will have moved enough for my child to make such a decision." I noted that when my parents made the choice not to get married it was not widely socially accepted either; they both wore a cheap silver band that made it look like they were married because in the early 1970s, when they started dating, they spent a lot of their early years together travelling around Europe (my mum is Swiss and my dad is Polish), and it was impossible to book hotel rooms as a couple unless they were married. Without pretending to be married, they would have had no-where to stay. They did not, however, cave to the pressure and just get married for the sake of convention. She took my point but was still unconvinced; she could see many of the ways in which such a decision could negatively impact her child. I started to wonder whether or not her participation in the psy-boom had actually benefitted her. Despite her counselling qualification and her continued engagement with psychological training, it didn't seem as if it had helped her to find a more balanced relationship with her son. She was still wracked with doubts.

Her son's autonomy—his capacity to succeed or fail regardless of her actions—would always be cause for anxiety. Had the psy-boom helped her reconsider her strength at least? That the psy-boom is a gendered phenomenon goes without saying, given the fact that its audience is so predominately comprised of women. As I showed in chapter 3, the way that psychology focused Wechat accounts market themselves creates its own logic as content largely consumed by women comes to be targeted at them, in a reinforcing feedback loop. Still, the argument that Luna made about *strong women* was at odds with the kind of corporate feminism that was popular in the West at the time I was conducting my research. Hashtags like #girlboss and books like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013) were obvious manifestations of a wider trend in which female empowerment and a feminized spin on the neo-liberal obsession with individual success were seemingly omnipresent. This trend is best discussed by the cultural critic Jia Tolentino (2018: 80), who has argued that this form of corporate feminism "has put such a premium on individual success, so much emphasis on individual choice, that it is seen as unfeminist to criticize anything that a woman chooses to make herself more successful." In other words, at the same time that the predominant form of feminism in the West was one in which there was no limit to what could be considered feminist and certainly no upper bound to the strength of a woman, Luna was still exceedingly aware that her material success might put her at odds with also having what she considered to be a successful home life. This chimes with Wu and Dong's (2019) argument about the limits of C-fem. Luna was so worried, in fact, that she had spent many days of her life and tens of thousands of RMB on psychological training.

These anxieties were not common amongst the men that I interviewed. I seldom encountered men in my fieldwork at psychological trainings, but amongst my male friends and men I encountered socially in Chengdu many were perplexed by why I would go and spend days attending psychology lectures and workshops. "I'm not sick," one of my friends said categorically when I asked if he was interested in attending a workshop with me. The issue of 'face' was understood to be

something more masculine—"men care a lot more about face 靠面子," Juanjuan said in response to why she thought men didn't feel comfortable coming to the reading group.

The men who did attend had clearly defined goals and could point to the material benefits they had managed to achieve by participating in the psy-boom. Kong Ziran, who was one of only two men who ever turned up regularly to Ms. Liu's training group, noted that for the future psychology "is a useful thing" and that it helps with his personal development. Dujiang, the other male attendee, was explicit in his desire to turn counselling into a fulltime career. At one session, after Ms. Liu had mentioned the anxieties a man had been having over what would happen to his wife after his death, Dujiang blurted out, "cases like these are very common… We can earn a lot of money with this!"

Not all men view the psy-boom in this way, and there are of course men who use psychological services to deal with emotional issues or mental health concerns. However, as Jie Yang (2017: 181) has noted, one of the early phases of the psy-boom saw the rapid translation of US self-help books such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. These books, which are sometimes referred to as "success studies" 成功学 are extremely popular amongst men. It is clear that while women tend to participate in the psy-boom by actually participating in the social milieu——undertaking trainings, using psychological services and engaging with online forums——men still tend to overwhelmingly engage with the psy-boom through "success studies." They were more attracted to the aspects of the industry that have an obvious material benefit and tend to view this as an individual pursuit. This may be a reflection of the way in which success is intimately tied into masculinity, such that one scholar has argued that "success" 成功 is a hegemonic force that becomes a pre-requisite for being considered a "good man" (Liu 2019). For Kong Ziran and Dujiang the path of personal development was a linear track towards greater success, which would reinforce their masculinity. For women the path is not linear, and instead forks between their desires to be autonomous

individuals and their reality as socially embedded persons in a patriarchal society (Hizi 2018: 305). The spectre of the *strong woman*, as Luna pointed out, is a manifestation of this divide.

Fearful of being a *strong woman* and of not nurturing her son properly, Luna attended psychological trainings. Where for Kong Ziran and Dujiang attending psychological training neatly aligned with their career goals and their personal goals, for Luna attending was to offset the imbalance she felt from all the success she had achieved. In attending, she realised that even with all the material wealth she could offer her son there was still an entire realm of emotional riches that she needed to accrue to shore up his future success. This is what was causing her anxiety. Knowing that society is hypergamous it would be easy to just push her son to achieve the external trappings of success and to play into the system at large. Instead, she was trying to subtly push him towards a more holistic vision of success by wanting him to date early and build up emotional resources that would serve him in his later relationships, and hopefully marriage. This would, even though she did not explicitly mention it, also benefit his future wife, should she ever materialise. In this way, while her actions were constrained by the reality of C-fem and the spectre of the strong woman, her time in the psy-boom helped her to navigate the often-contradictory desires she felt for her son, and in the end to try and gently push him towards the good.

4.2. Mistress Dispelling

Luna turned to the psy-boom to ensure that she maintained her softness and did not harden into a *strong woman.* In this way, gendered expectations came to foreclose her ability to sit comfortably in her role as a successful insurance broker who had achieved material success for her and her family. Instead, she fretted over keeping her external successes balanced with enough emotional growth and psychological security that she could also fulfil her obligations as a mother and the person in charge of the inter-personal dynamics of her family. She turned to psychology and

trained to be a psychological counsellor precisely because it enabled her to feel that she was learning how to tip the scales so that she could find balance, without feeling as if the fulcrum was unfairly placed in such a way she had no control over it. It seemed clear that for Kong Ziran and Dujiang, the two men who attended the reading group most frequently, there was no upper limit to their success. At no point did they worry that success would be at odds to their masculinity in the same way that Luna felt that her moderate success might come to render her un-feminine. For those men, the psy-boom was not about balance but about reinforcement—any tools that they could derive from it could be used to further fuel their success. The more successful they were the more at ease and masculine they would feel (Liu 2019).

These gendered dynamics were particularly evident when I met with Ms. Wu. Ms Wu was also at that same seminar that I met Luna at, though she was there as an assistant to the man who was running it—Shu Xin, the co-founder of Weiqing International Marriage Hospital Emotion Clinic Group. Weiqing 维情 literally translates as 'preserve feeling' and the aim of his company and the "Shu Xin method" that he has pioneered is to preserve marital harmony. As one author has described his business, he is a "mistress dispeller" (Fan 2017). The key issue at the crux of most couples collapsing, according to Shu Xin, is the spectre of mistresses—'little 3s'小三. "Little 3s tear marriages apart", he told the room, to audible murmurs of approval. Ms Wu sat next to him, nodding approvingly and surveying the room with a furrowed brow, trying to parse people's expressions to see how the lecture was being received.

As I noted above, she told me that women had a sixth sense, and were generally far more emotional than men. For her, the gendered division of labour which saw women take on an outsized role in the affective management of the home was a natural one. It was not the result, as Harriet Evans (2012) suggests, of decades of state directives coming to be absorbed by individuals in society—as with Luna's spectre of the *strong woman*. Ms. Wu ran a family therapy practice which had branches

in Chengdu and in Dujiangyan, a nearby town. She was a franchisee of Shu Xin, and was also a mistress dispeller. She offered a compelling frame through which to understand how a patriarchal and heteronormative understanding of family structures could come to be policed. Explicitly, in her role as a mistress dispeller, she pitched herself against the hypersexualised "entrepreneurial" *strong women* who were taking advantage of China's sexual economy (Wu and Dong 2019). These women, according to Ms. Wu, often young and attractive, leverage their sexuality to disrupt monogamous couplings by engaging in illicit affairs with men who provide for them.

Shu Xin hires qualified psychological counsellors like Ms. Wu to become mistress dispellers because he believes that their psychological knowledge is useful in the endeavour. As this thesis argues, a quirk of the MOLSS qualification is that it created a huge cohort of psychological counsellors who could not fully support themselves through their counselling alone due to the market conditions of the industry (see chapter 3). In the liminal space created by having this vague qualification and a market that is yet to refine its understanding of psychology and the appropriate use of therapeutic technologies, entrepreneurs like Shu Xin are able to carve out businesses like mistress dispelling. His website[41] claims he has personally served over 26,000 clients in his 19 years in the industry[42]. In his telling mistresses are a risk to happy families. They can be dispelled with the help of cleverly targeted psychological techniques and, when that fails, cold hard cash. The cost to dispel a mistress starts at 300,000rmb, and in his talk Shu Xin would occasionally mention jobs he had completed for sums in the millions (see also Fan 2017).

According to Shu Xin there are three types of 'little 3s'; those who love money, those who love sex, and those who are in love. The latter are obviously the hardest to remove, but the first can be

[41] http://www.weiqing120.com

[42] Crunching the numbers, and assuming he worked every day for these 19 years, he would have helped 3.7 clients a day, which is a pretty superhuman feat given he also gave lectures and had time to buy Gucci loafers.

easily bought off or convinced to leave their lover for another partner. Mistresses are only able to take a man away from their wife because wives have failed in their "3 musts"—must be a good person *hui zuoren* 会做人, must do things *hui zuoshi* 会做事, must make love 会做爱. To pull apart his triangulated logic somewhat, mistresses appear to have agency over their desires (whether for money, sex or love), whereas wives have somehow forfeited their agency in these domains and instead have to shoulder a series of things they must do in order to maintain the affections of their husbands. The husbands in all of this were laughably absent. In adopting the Shu Xin method, Ms. Wu was implicitly buying into the dynamics that he identified.

I met Ms. Wu at Shu Xin's introductory seminar, and we agreed to meet up later that week. We met in an old tea house in the centre of the Daci Monastery, a short walk away from Brother Bing's apartment where I was staying. She had just come from a meeting with a person who worked in the media. They were thinking of collaborating together with the local Bureau of Civil Affairs 民政局 in Chengdu to create a Saving Marriages Service Centre 婚姻家庭挽救中心. For Ms. Wu almost all marriages could be saved. "At least 80 to 90%... it is very rare that I cannot help a marriage repair itself 复婚." The reason that marriages failed were numerous—"sometimes two people's cultural level is not compatible, or their desires and mentalities are diverging. This is often the case when two people come from largely different family backgrounds." To fix a marriage requires precise analysis of what the couple's original intentions were for entering into the relationship and then where exactly in the intervening years the reality of their situation diverged from the dreams that had underpinned it.

I was interested in why the Civil Affairs Bureau would be open to discussing collaborating in the future. "At the present moment, all they are empowered to do is separate couples 分散 by law. They just adjudicate whether or not a couple should divorce. That is it, stay or leave. That is all they adjudicate. We want to offer a service to help save the marriage itself." Here is where she sees

the value in all of her psychological training; in being able to attend to the affective realm of relationships that the Civil Affairs Bureau is not equipped to handle. Her argument is a narrow reading of what has actually been taking place in Chinese civil courts in regard to divorce. While she is right that the Civil Affairs Bureau ultimately only has limited legal powers to grant or prevent divorces, in recent years the national government in Beijing has become increasingly worried about escalating divorce rates. In 2016 4.2 million couples divorced (Zhang 2019). In a speech announcing these figures, Zhou Qiang, the president of the Supreme People's Court, noted that roughly 74 per cent of divorces in China are initiated by women (Zhang 2019).

This trend shows that women are growing more willing to leave marriages that are stifling and do not serve them, and they do so despite a strong cultural bias against divorcée women remarrying. However, to slow this tide Beijing has passed controversial new rulings that make divorce a more costly procedure. In 2011 the Supreme Court ruled that property bought before marriage should revert to the buyer after a divorce, which significantly disadvantages women in a country where there is a cultural tendency for property to be bequeathed to male heirs (Fan 2017). This means that for many women leaving a marriage potentially means also losing a claim to their home and the majority of their assets, which are usually accounted in their husbands name. Some smaller courts on a local level have also started to insist on mediation or a "cooling off" period between divorce proceedings being filed and them actually being processed, in the hope that in the intervening period the couple will manage to repair their relationship.

The national government is leaning on families to shoulder the risks of an increasingly precarious economic environment and social burdens like elderly care (Yang 2017: 196). Therefore, it was not unsurprising to hear Ms. Wu use government catch-phrases like *harmony* 和谐 and *social stability* 社会稳定 as ways to describe the social function and importance of her work. For her, and for the national government, stable families are a cornerstone for a Confucian society. As Jie Yang (2017:

186) has noted in her ethnographic work, Confucian societies are built on a foundation of "if one cultivates the moral self, manages family unity, and governs the nation, peace will prevail in the universe 修身、齐家、治国、平天下 ". It is only by balancing the self within a stable family unit that society more generally can prosper. This is the philosophical girding for a practical consideration by the government which feels itself unable to properly care for a rapidly aging society, has huge debt burdens and a crumbling healthcare system that is already stretched to breaking point (Orr 2019).

This can only happen however if marriages are solid. In a situation in which there is one divorce for every two marriages, as there was in Beijing in 2017 (Qin 2019), the foundations of a nation predicated on stable families are unsure. What Ms. Wu represents therefore is a market-based solution for the bind that the national government has found itself in.

> "Let me tell you about a recent intervention that I made. I recently had a client in Wenquan. I arrived at the house and saw the woman sweeping, but as I came towards the house the woman looked at me blankly with dead eyes and no feeling. As a psychologist I knew something was very wrong. It turned out the woman had just been a stay-at-home mum and had spent her whole life at home. She invested fully into this relationship and it was now broken. Her husband had a little 3. This woman had ocd tendencies; the house was so incredibly spotless you could eat off the floors, but she was still cleaning. She would not tell me exactly what had happened, beyond the fact that her husband was cheating on her. So, I went and spoke with the neighbours to discover the situation. It turns out that the husband had hired a secretary straight out of school. She was young and beautiful, but utterly unsuited for the job. His intention had obviously been to sleep with her. He bought her an apartment in town. She had a boyfriend she was planning to marry, and she was hiding the affair."

Ms. Wu, having discovered through the neighbours what exactly the issue was, decides upon a plan to break up the affair. As dictated by Shuxin, there are, according to his method, only three

things a mistress wants; sex, love and/or money. In this context Ms. Wu inferred that because she had a boyfriend she was intending to marry that she was probably not in this relationship for love. However, the wife did not have a surfeit of money with which to buy the mistress off. So Ms. Wu had to get creative.

> In situations like this one must leverage the social connections of the mistress to isolate her. In this context I found her parents, who also lived in town and I took the evidence to them of the affair. At first, they did not believe me; they were convinced that her daughter was just a good employee and that was why she had been bought an apartment. I showed them the price of the apartment online and after they had seen that I asked them why it was that a recent graduate from college would be bought such a luxurious property. Only then did they believe me and intervened on my behalf to end the relationship.

There are many things to infer from this case. First, the power of social networks in China is so strong, and cultural norms around privacy so weak, that Ms. Wu's immediate reaction was to visit the neighbours to get the torrid details. With these in hand, she then felt unabashed to visit the parents of the mistress and confront them with evidence of the affair, so that their pressure would help to bring it to a close. Ms. Wu essentially used a social pincer move to isolate the mistress, starving her of the freedom to continue her tryst. Second, the husband recedes from view in this whole procedure. Ms. Wu did not say explicitly whether this was the case, but the way she presented the story made it seem as if the husband was completely unaware that any of this had happened at all. One day he would have just found out that his mistress was no longer in the apartment, and no longer returning his calls. He would then be left wondering what had happened, without ever intuiting the subtle hand Ms. Wu had had in changing this course of events.

New Yorker writer Fan Jiayang (2017) has also profiled Shu Xin for the magazine. At one point she interviews a woman who has used his services. Why spend so much money to stay in a broken marriage? the writer asks. "You know, for a while, I also asked myself the same question," the

woman tells her. "I realized it's because I've sacrificed too much for this marriage. It's like a house I've given my life to construct, but that effort is hardly felt by people on the outside. Then, one day, he decides he wants to kick me out because he feels like it—how can I let him?"

Ms. Wu's decision to become a mistress dispeller was not a calculated choice. It did not seem that she had weighed up a number of options and arrived at it practically. Rather, mistress dispelling sat at the perfect intersection of her personal history and her religious beliefs. At a certain point in our conversation we had to pause because she started crying. I had asked her if there was something in her past that she felt had pushed her towards becoming a mistress dispeller. She told me that her father had left her and her mother when she was 14. This had completely destroyed her family and cast her into society, where she had had to start working while still a teenager. Wiping a tear from her eye, she said she had wished there had been someone who could have intervened to help them.

Ms. Wu was also a devoted Christian and attended regular Sunday services in Dujiangyan. Sichuan province has a relatively robust Christian community (see Johnson 2017) and she would occasionally pepper her conversation with bible quotes. At one point she said that one of her reasons for Mistress Dispelling was that God gave Eve to Adam. And only Eve. "He did not give him a second woman." 不给第二个女人. Ms. Wu was a complicated character. Her profession in essence was guarding an incredibly specific heteronormative understanding of love and marriages that did not sit particularly well with the fluid society that was rapidly changing around her. Her justifications for doing so were multiple; on an individual level there was her personal history and her desire that things had worked out better for her family. On a societal level her work dovetailed neatly with the desires of a government which is scared of rising divorce rates and wants harmonised families to shoulder the burdens that a patchy social security net isn't capable of. And then on a spiritual level she found solace in a rigid reading of the bible that saw adultery

as a universally recognised sin. In this way, she forms something of a problematic to Leta Hong Fincher's (2019) argument about patriarchal authoritarianism. While Fincher is certainly not wrong about the government retrenching on women's rights, it is also the case, as we see with Ms. Wu, that the drivers of the patriarchy are multiple.

For Ms. Wu, she believed that she understood, both from her personal experience as a child and also from her years as a psychologist, that the rational calculation the *strong women* who chose to become mistresses were making was based on a faulty accounting. While they focused on their narrow self-interest, she could see that the cascading implications of their actions and the hurt they caused to the wives and families they were disrupting. She chose to intervene to redress a situation in which she felt not enough care was being spent to acknowledge the emotional and spiritual implications of relationships beyond the cold hypergamy of China's sexual economy (Zurndofer 2016). This was a way of her enacting agency to try and rebalance a system she felt was unjust. She had arrived at this point through her years as a psychological counsellor which had given her time and a repertoire of tools with which to try and bend the social world towards her vision of justice. But yet, while all of these forces aligned within Ms. Wu to turn her into a successful mistress dispeller, she herself struggled in her marriage. When I asked her what her dream was for her career, she said she wished her husband would work with her. "I think men and women work best together," she said, "and in this career having a man on board to help me to deal with the husbands would be extremely beneficial." But he wasn't willing to come on board. He was a taxi driver, and he liked his life. I imagine he probably enjoyed the autonomy and the freedom of the road. "I am quite strong 强势"she said. "We fight a lot." It was ironic that Ms. Wu, despite all that she knew and her years of psychological counselling, was still bound by these patriarchal norms. Even she was haunted by the spectre of the strong woman.

4.3. The Dragging Toy

Yujia doesn't want to have children. In her mid-30s, she's already a very successful literary translator living in Chengdu. She has translated Pulitzer-prize winning books and was recently nominated for a national prize for her work. She was the youngest nominee by over a decade. Crucially, she has translated books on mental health that have been popular amongst participants in the psy-boom, and she credits this work with helping her to better understand herself and her decision to not have children. Though she was not at the lecture on family therapy, she is still, through her translation work, a participant in the wider psy-boom at large. When she smiles you can see each one of her teeth, almost up to the molars. She is often smiling. For most of the year that I knew her in Chengdu her profile photo on the social media application Wechat was a black square with white text in English: *if you don't have children your thirties is just your twenties, except you have money.*

Yujia, smile and books. That is how I think of her, the lasting impression that she left on me. Yujia has had over 34 of her translated books published. One of the titles she has translated is *A Beginner's Guide to Losing Your Mind* by Emily Reynolds (2017). Reynolds is a young writer in the UK who worked for the counter-cultural magazine *Vice*[43]. The book is part memoir, part practical guide for those dealing with anxiety and depression and for their loved ones. She offers a vantage point to see how the language of the psy-boom ends up filtering through to the daily life of regular people.

She described herself as *dingke* 丁克 the Chinese transliteration of the English acronym DINK Dual Income No Kids. "I am not actually just a *dingke*," she said to me, "I am actually a *tieding* 铁

[43] I have also worked for this publication, both the London and New York offices as a freelancer and the China bureau which has now closed as a features writer

丁". *Tieding*[44], an *iron dingke*. In other words, she was completely sold on the idea that she would not have children. This idea was burnished, solid. There was no choice. Yujia's decision, to not have children despite being married in a heterosexual partnership puts her outside the mainstream of Chinese society. While the phenomenon of *dingke* is increasing (see Qin 2019), it is still fairly rare. Even more rare is to find someone who is voluble and committed to their choice. For other families there are perhaps biological reasons that they cannot have a child, or the decision is a quiet and subtle one. For Yuijia this choice was explicit, as evidenced by her choice of Wechat profile picture.

"A few years ago, I was in a bad accident," she said. "I was on crutches and everyone would point at me and call me pitiful 可怜. But I would think, no, I am not pitiful. I do not need your affirmation[45]." After the accident she left a career in the media to focus on translation. After translating the book on mental health, she looked back at her time working and could see that she had been depressed. But she remembered how when she had suffered after her accident, she had found an inner strength that allowed her to not be influenced by others. Drawing on this inner resource she built a sense of self that was resilient. To know herself was to know what she wanted. And she knew that she did not want children. To have a child would be to subject herself to a life that was not the one she dreamed of and would risk her falling into a similar depression to one she had had when she had worked a job that had not suited her. This was what she had gained from her translation and engagement with texts on mental health, an ability to pinpoint her desires and to be strong in affirming what she did not want.

[44] *Tieding* is also a homophone for 铁定 which means to be resolute.

[45] A comment which is almost word-for-word the same as the article that Winter wrote for the Wechat account *Know Yourself,* which I analysed in chapter 3 and shows the resonances between the psy-boom and popular discourse

In her own words, there were many reasons why she decided not to have a child:

> Having a child in China today is too hard. I do not know a single person who has a child and is happy. If they appear that way on *douyin*[46] I know they are lying. The reality is awful. The second you are pregnant you have to schedule medical appointments and get a bed in the hospital for delivery. The second you give birth you have to go to a kindergarten to get them accepted for nursery. Then you only have 3 years to get registered for kindergarten 小学. It never ends, the pressure. Then there are the exams the child must take. I am very free and open minded, but I cannot guarantee I would be able to maintain that posture for my child when competition is so incredibly great. There will be 700,000 high school graduates this year from Sichuan province alone. China only has a handful of good universities, so imagine the pressure. How can I be carefree and let my child live as they wish when those are the odds?

On top of the pressures that face the child, there is the real risk of tragedy befalling them. "In China there are too many stories of children dying," she said, referencing the poison milk scandal and the Wenquan earthquake. Though the One Child Policy has been relaxed somewhat, scholars have noted that one of the policy's more dubious legacies is that it has created a society in which single children become the "only hope" of their parents (Fong 2004). Even with the policy relaxed such that Yujia and her husband could have two children (as they are both only children themselves), the mentality that the policy has fostered is hard to shake off.

The frighteningly small odds that any child has of gaining acceptance into one of China's top universities and guaranteeing their future social status in a harshly competitive society is

[46] Chinese tiktok, a social media application

complicated by the fact that, as Yujia argues, "the biggest problem is that there is such a rigid conception of what success is. Our biggest problem is a very narrow set of values 单一价值观". Her fears therefore were similar to those of Luna, though where Luna had a child and tried to leverage psychotherapeutic ideas to subtly influence them to a broader idea of success, Yujia drew on these ideas to support her decision to opt out of the normative value system altogether. Without an expansive notion of what success might be for a child, for example that a successful child is a happy one or that a successful child is one who has a lot of friends or a robust set of interests, then the few societally recognised markers of success become so maniacally prized that they become virtually impossible to attain for anyone.

This fact can make China feel sometimes like a society of broken dreams. China is the only country in which I have met people well into their middle age, sometimes twenty or thirty years removed from their college entrance exam, who are still keenly aware of their grade. I can barely remember what subjects I took for my A levels, and it was only a decade ago. Dujiang, one of the male reading group members, couldn't look me in the eyes as he told me that the reason he had not read for a degree in psychology at university was that he failed his college entrance exams. This was why he attended Ms. Liu's night classes. Yujia, who managed to get grades good enough to attend a prestigious university in Beijing, said that she still has nightmares about taking her exams. Brother Bing's daughter, Yuanyuan, whose apartment I lived in while I conducted my fieldwork, had missed out on the opportunity to attend the Sichuan Fine Arts Academy by a single point on the Gaokao and had ended up at a mediocre university in the Qingcheng mountains. This single point on the exam was a piece of family lore that was often wistfully conjured when Brother Bing would allow himself to muse on all the other things that his daughter could have become. One point on one exam was what had separated her from her dreams. Luna is anxious precisely because she is aware of this fact and paralysed by her knowledge that pushing her son towards top grades might harm his psychological health and affective qualities in relationships.

"So, you can see why I cannot have a child," Yujia told me, "because ultimately I believe it would bring out the worst in me." For her, the risk of having a child is that she cannot guarantee that she could maintain the composure she has spent a lifetime creating. That smile, those books. They are the marker of a life that she has struggled hard to create. She has fought to build a successful career that is rooted in her passions and that helps to build bridges between societies. She has a dedicated fanbase online. While I knew her in Chengdu friends from all over China that she knew only online would sometimes message her and arrange to meet her as they passed through Chengdu. She had created a beautiful circle that spanned the whole country, and beyond. She was very close with the foreign authors of some of the books she had translated. She translated the food writer Fuschia Dunlop's (2011) memoir about learning to make Sichuanese cuisine and they subsequently travelled around Sichuan together eating. She has managed to find a liberal and urbane friendship group, and a loving husband so devoted to her that he is willing to forego having children just to be with her.

But this decision is not made in isolation. Her choice not to have a child comes at a real social cost to her mother. It was the pressure of her mother that Yujia had to fight most strongly against. She had managed, by and large, to avoid the pressure of the wider society by crafting a liberal friendship group and a career that was not based in an office or a workplace in which her decision would be questioned. Still, her mother was a real force to be reckoned with. "My mum is a stereotypical *strong woman* of the previous generation," she said. Her father died when she was three years old. At the time the One Child Policy meant that her mother would not be able to have another child. As a widow in her thirties with a child this meant that she was an especially poor prospect to get remarried in China's harsh hypergamous marriage market, and she thus ended up alone. In this sense she was not the kind of hypersexualised *strong woman* that Ms. Wu was worried about but was still the kind of dominant woman that caused men to feel threatened (Wu and Dong 2019: 9). That

she ended up alone is a reflection of the patriarchal dynamics that govern China's marriage market (Zurndofer 2016). Yujia felt that she was a "dragging toy" 拖油品 that trailed behind her mother as she fought for their survival. "I ruined her," she said. To survive, Yujia's mother became a *strong woman*. She worked incredibly hard and developed a masculine affect. She did no housework. She was cold and abrupt. But she was undeniably good at her job as a teacher. She became a sought-after pedagogue in Sichuan. She brought in plenty of money and the family prospered. She managed to get Yujia into a top university in Beijing and then on to graduate studies in Hong Kong. She was successful, but she was also strong.

For Yujia to not have a child is to reject the normative trappings of success that Yujia's mother fought so hard for her to get. It is the final piece in the puzzle, now that career and marriage have been settled successfully. But yet between them were two competing visions of strength. "I am not a *strong woman*," argued Yujia, waving her hand at the wall of yarn and books behind her. "I am very feminine in all of the stereotypical ways that society expects. I love to cook; my house is impeccable. I work with books." Her mother on the other hand had rejected those trappings of feminine success once she had had to become the sole breadwinner in her home. She became a *strong woman* to survive. However, despite her feminine attributes, Yujia was leveraging her inner strength to not subscribe to the normative trappings of success that society defined for her. Her choice to not have a child was one that took enormous strength. It required her to recommit to it daily in the face of the pressure she received from her mother. Her mother was influenced by the women around her who had grandchildren and would constantly ask her when she would join them as one. She channelled the social pressure from her milieu to conform to their vision of a successful retirement into relentlessly pestering her daughter to have a child. Having succeeded in everything else in her life at tremendous cost, this was not something she wanted to fail at.

Here we can see two visions of strength competing with each other to define their own vision of the good life. For Yujia's mother, she had to become a grandmother to feel complete and settled in her milieu. Without grandchildren she worried about the future of her family. Who would support them into old age? Her methods, blunt and cold, were the same strong tactics she had used to succeed in her career. But Yujia had, through her engagement with texts in the psy-boom and her translation work, come to an understanding of herself that would not allow her to compromise on this one thing. She did not want to find herself in the kind of bind that caused Luna so much anxiety. She had been lucky to find a good husband who supported her decision and would not cast her off into a brutal marriage market so harsh it required policing by people like Ms. Wu. An immovable object meeting an unstoppable force. They had arrived at an impasse, but one which Yujia felt confident in winning. Her strength was more subtle than that of her mother. "In a few years," she said, "I will be able to tell my mother that the medical risk is too high. She wants me to have a child, but she doesn't want to stop being a mother."

4.4. Conclusion

The psy-boom is a gendered phenomenon and this chapter has sought to investigate the ways that gender intersects with the rise of psychology in China today. As these three vignettes have shown, the psy-boom offers a space for women to better understand themselves and push towards their vision of the good life. However, the psy-boom is providing this space that women can use at the same time that gender inequality is rising. The government is pushing a regressive and patriarchal understanding of gender roles. Women feel a 'double burden' (Pimentel 2000: 32) of creating meaningful careers while also shouldering the majority of the responsibilities at home. Feminism is a politically charged term with negative connotations. Whereas the psy-boom's benefits are experienced in a linear fashion for male participants who see obvious applications for

psychological training in their careers or as a way to make money, the rewards of the psy-boom are less obvious for women.

For someone like Luna, participation in the psy-boom is a way to balance her career success and prevent her from being perceived as a *strong woman*. For Ms. Wu, the psy-boom fits into her wider spiritual belief system and has offered her a toolkit to help her forge a career bringing families back together. This aligns with her personal history and is lucrative in a context in which moves by the national government have created material incentives for women to stay in failing marriages beyond the affective desire to rescue a waning love. For Yujia, it allowed her to draw on her inner resources to make a resolute decision to seek her joy outside of motherhood.

Ultimately, the psy-boom functions for each of the women by providing them a sense of control in a situation in which many of their actions and desires are otherwise constrained by the wider system. In an earlier draft of this chapter I wondered whether the psy-boom might not function as 'feminism by other means.' I thought that perhaps, considering that the government was cracking down so harshly on explicit feminist organising, that the psy-boom could take up some of that discursive space and provide a venue for women to organise. Instead, after sitting with this material for some time, I see that the strategies these women adopted do not fit neatly into a category we might term "resistance." Instead, they were articulating a set of sometimes contradictory desires in the face of ambiguous circumstances. Success for each of these women was a complex idea. Would Luna feel successful if her son had a girlfriend, or would she regret it if he did not get top exam results? Would Ms. Wu feel better if her husband joined her in her work, even if to do so would require her to moderate precisely the qualities that made her excel at her job? Would Yujia feel better if she was able to conform to society and have a kid, or was she content to wait out her mother and hope she understood that decision in the long run? In all of these cases the psy-boom had created a venue through which these often competing desires could

co-exist. There was no clear answer, ultimately. As Ms. Liu had said when discussing the apocryphal story of the donkey, what mattered in the end was that the women could sit with whatever decision they made.

As this thesis has argued, the psy-boom is a heterogenous phenomenon that intersects with other social forces. In chapter 2 I showed how distinct generations exist in the psy-boom and how the context in which a counsellor qualified affected their practice of psychological counselling. In this chapter I have sought to explain why women were so overly represented in the trainings and workshops I attended in Chengdu, and why they are so present in the online spaces of the psy-boom, as we saw in the previous chapter. I have shown the way that gendered expectations are thought through by participants in the psy-boom and the diverse uses that women apply psychotherapy to as they try to seek a good life for themselves and their loved ones. The psy-boom however is not a world apart from the wider society, and thus the gendered dynamics that people turn to psychological counselling for are also present within the practice of counselling itself, as we saw with the way that men experienced the psy-boom differently to these women. It however would be reductive to dismiss these women's pursuit of counselling or engagement with psychological concepts as simply a way for them to accord themselves to the patriarchal context they find themselves in. Instead, as I have argued, it provides them a tool kit and an affective repertoire to articulate often competing desires that are complicated by their experience of gender.

It is worth returning to Ms. Liu's invocation that we can only change ourselves. Given the patriarchal context of China and the myriad forces that act upon these women, it is worth asking the extent to which these dynamics end up proving Ms. Liu right. In the case of Luna, she feels compelled by her material success to work on her affective qualities as a hedge against being perceived as a strong woman. She has changed herself in light of the gendered reality she faces. Yet, what she is most worried about is her son, who she knows she cannot really change. Even

with all the affective work she has done, she can merely guide him, but she knows that ultimately his life will pan out in the way that it does—it won't be her sitting the exams, nor will it be her awkwardly going on a first date. Ms. Wu became a psychological counsellor to heal the wounds of her past and try to redress the sexual dynamics she has felt so unfair in her society. While she has fashioned herself into a successful mistress dispeller, she is torn by the fact she can't change her husband to make him see how much better their life would be if they worked together. Yujia has made a radical choice to not have a child and has fashioned a life around that decision. Yet she can't change her mother—she can only wait till she ages out of becoming a mother, so her fate is sealed. In all of these cases these women have faced gendered dynamics and the autonomy of their close kin as things that they are not able to change. They have all leant on psychological tools to change themselves, even though this has not provided a neat solution to any of their problems. What does the rapid expansion of psychology and psychological services in China imply for social change? Does it turn people inwards and away from the extant sources of their distress? Or is there a way in which giving voice to negative sentiments and building communities of fellow suffers might amount to something greater? I turn to this question in the next chapter.

I asked Yujia, given all that she had told me, whether there was an argument for her having a child because that newborn could be the change that she wants to see in the world. She was unconvinced by my argument. "Maybe I would raise him to be a nice person, but there are already enough nice people in the world. And the world is, as I have said, not a nice place." While it is easy, given all the problems they face, to argue that women in China suffer from a "no win" situation (Zurndofer 2016: 16), this elides all of the very real small wins they craft for themselves on a daily basis. To choose to engage with the psy-boom and to craft themselves in the light of their social reality is an act that does not neatly align with either compliance or resistance but is an action alive with agency. They are choosing to make their world better, in the way they know how.

CHAPTER 5: FREELY FLOWING EMOTIONS[47]

Ms. Liu believes that emotions should freely flow. Emotions, she argues, can become blocked, and cause trouble for people. Emotions need to flow. But they shouldn't spill over; a free flow should not imply a flood. Emotions need to be channelled. How do people come to understand their emotions in the psy-boom, and what is the role of emotions in social change in China? This thesis deals with the rise of psychological counselling in China. Importantly, this chapter explores the linguistic framing of emotional difficulties in the context of the psy-boom, in particular the phrase "psychological troubles" (心理困扰/困惑) which I first described in chapter 3 in relation to its use by online psychological service providers on Wechat. I argue that for participants of the psy-boom, their engagement with psychological concepts and use of psychological services provides them with a language to explore negative sentiments about contemporary life. This language sits in-between medical and social discourses of distress. For the society at large, this discourse broadens the concept of mental health and expands the market of psychological services, while becoming a new venue in which to discuss social problems.

This chapter takes as its focus specific speech acts within the psy-boom as participants try to vocalise their distress and move towards healing. In the introduction to this thesis and in subsequent chapters (1 and 3) it has been shown that psychological counselling in China is targeted at mental health rather than serious mental illness, which is supposed to be dealt with by the medical establishment as a result of the clarification of the National Mental Health Law of 2013. This chapter therefore looks at the kind of issues that are felt to be within the purview of

[47]A version of this chapter will appear in a forthcoming special section of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* on the politics of negative affects in post-reform China.

psychological counselling, in particular looking at how social problems come to be understood as the cause of "psychological troubles" (心理困扰/困惑). As chapter 1 of this thesis showed, the framing of mental health in China has undergone dramatic shifts, and this is important to recognise because of the way that it shapes treatment modalities and the understanding of personal responsibility for mental health. Building on these ideas, this chapter looks at how counsellors like Ms. Liu try to frame social phenomena as problems that can be dealt with using the psychological tools and services that they are able to offer. In this chapter, the way in which counsellors and their clients try to navigate complex social issues in times of dynamic change is used to open a deeper question about the role of healing in this context. Does the turn inwards that psychological counsellors offer their clients as a way of dealing with their "psychological troubles" amount to turning away from the external causes of distress, individualising them and leaving people atomised? Or does it actually constitute a discourse through which social problems can be discussed in a non-political and non-medicalised language that provides participants with a sense of agency and control over their own healing? This draws the chapter into the broader discussion of agency that has been a theme of this thesis.

In this thesis I have explored the concept of "considered action" as a way of understanding the forms of agency that participants in the psy-boom are attempting to cultivate. As I have shown, the ability to make choices and to turn inwards and draw on psychological resources is a highly conditioned process that requires significant shifts in personal subjectivity. In this chapter, I show how the language of the psy-boom, particularly negative affects like "psychological troubles" and popular terms like involution 内卷化, can be understood as negative affects. These negative affects also shape personal subjectivity, by providing people a frame to understand their distress and to build coping strategies around. Focusing on language in this chapter therefore helps us to connect affect to subjectivity, both of which then come to shape the forms of agency that people experience in the context of healing. As I argue in this chapter, psychological concepts and the

framing of negative affects in the psy-boom provide a language for subjects to advocate for their needs. As Eva Illouz (2019: 217) has argued, "needs are not fixed, but emerge through emotional ontologies—psychological discourses and narratives." The discourse of "psychological troubles" in China enables people to advocate for their emotional needs in a language that is socially recognized. In a similar sense, Pritzker and Duncan (2019: 42) have argued that engagement with the language used by psychological services "provides a tool for clients to make sense of previously hidden or cloudy inner "subjects" by bringing them out into the world". This ability to provide a name for what people are feeling and to share these affects in communities of mutual recognition in the venues of the psy-boom, amounts to a subjective shift for the participants therein. This subjectivity can be understood as empowering on an individual level, as we saw in the previous chapter with the way that women were able to feel a sense of agency over their lives as a result of their engagement with the psy-boom.

As we saw in the previous chapter, engagement with the psy-boom created a sense of agency among the women I profiled. However, while they were able to feel a sense of control in the face of patriarchal constraints in their lives, the kind of agency that these women exercised did not enable them to fundamentally change the systems that governed their lives. In this chapter I seek to expand beyond gender and ask the question of whether the ways in which people expressed their frustrations and challenges in the venues of the psy-boom amount to social critique and potentially to a broader set of political demands. To acknowledge, as the participants in the psy-boom frequently do, that life does not always go according to plan and that people experience immense suffering, could be destabilising to a regime that sees the provision of a better life for their citizens as a keystone of their legitimacy (see Zhang, Kleinman, Tu 2006 and Chen 1997). However, as I argue, for the conversations of the psyboom to be a destabilising force in society the negative sentiments that people expressed would need to gain greater traction in the wider

society beyond the consultancy rooms, reading groups and websites that provide the venues and idioms of the psy-boom itself.

The tools that people cultivate through the psy-boom, by catering not to curing illnesses but rather to acknowledging and serving affective needs, are forcing a consideration of the importance of emotions in China and East Asia (Yang 2014). As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, this change is happening at the same time that Western scholarship generally is undergoing an "affective turn" and similarly acknowledges the role of emotions in social change (Ahmed 2013, Mussel 2017, Clough 2008, Hardt 2007). In this chapter I see affects as largely synonymous with emotions, though I acknowledge the scholarship that defines affect as the "supra-rational, bodily, material and visceral layers that prefigure experience, those features that register their effects on us before and even beyond our conscious engagement" (Mussel 2017: 26). I focus instead on the literature that sees affects as proxies for emotions. An important finding from this scholarship is the potential for "affective contagion", an idea put forth by Sara Ahmed (2013) to describe the ways in which emotion acts as an aura surrounding individuals and objects that ties them into broader social, economic and political processes[48]. The aim of Ahmed's (2013: 4) project is to "track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they "stick" as well as move." As she notes, by doing so one can see the way that "emotions flow or are blocked take[s] us back to fundamental social and political questions about how spaces are organised around certain bodies" (Ahmed 2013: 225). This chapter therefore is an ethnography of how emotions come to be "stuck" within persons when understood as "psychological troubles" that prevent the free flowing of emotions. It is also about how emotions come to be "stuck" within social groups or attached to

[48] This work builds on a long-standing interest in the social power of emotions which can be traced back at least as far as Durkheim (see Barnwell 2018: 21 for discussion)

particular social movements or causes, in the sense of affective contagion, and how in China government suppression of civil society forecloses the potential of the negative affects discussed in the psy-boom to "stick" to wider social movements. The negative affects therefore flow within the venues of the psy-boom itself, binding the participants to each other and within its auspices. In this chapter emotions can be understood to "stick" in two ways—either within persons as "psychological troubles" or as collectively recognised affects that are able to tie individual sentiments into broader issues of social justice.

5.1. Defining Troubles

In 2019 the psychological service provider *Jiandan Xinli* published a large-scale study of its users (Jiandan Xinli 2019). We first encountered *Jiandan Xinli* in chapter 3 of this thesis. The majority of its users are female (70%), between 18-35 in age, come from 1st-2nd tier cities and most have at least an undergraduate degree. Their main reason for using the service was their "psychological troubles" (Jiandan Xinli 2019, see also Bram 2019). What the *Jiandan Xinli* study offers is a comprehensive breakdown of how the company itself defines "psychological troubles" and how these are expressed by the users of their services. *Jiandan Xinli,* as we saw in chapter 3, is one of the largest digital psychological service providers in China. The way that it chooses to define "psychological troubles" is therefore important to understand because it functions as a framing device that highlights the kind of treatment modalities that they themselves offer, as we have seen in chapter 1.

In the study, "psychological troubles" are divided into three categories. The first category is "emotional troubles" such as feelings of emptiness, social isolation, loneliness and mania. The second category of troubles is related to personal development; finding oneself, understanding what one is passionate about, feelings of self-worth and what one values. The final category of

troubles is related to relationships; workplace, family, lovers, friends etc. The report notes that different generations put different emphasis on these categories. Those born after the 90s were likely to be more concerned by personal development troubles. Those born in the 80s or before found that relationship troubles were the most prevalent. This makes sense because it is likely that those born after the 90s are still at an earlier stage in their careers and are just at the cusp of starting families, whereas those born in the 80s or before are likely to be more settled and further along in their family lives and more likely to be burdened with the pressures of looking after elderly relatives. The difference may also reflect a more individualistic shift in society at large, as questions of the self become more pertinent (see Yan 2010, Kleinman et al 2011).

It isn't immediately obvious how the distinctions between these three categories are drawn. Do emotional problems such as feelings of emptiness cause problems in relationships in the workplace, or vice-a-versa? How does family pressure impact on one's personal development goals? Does a feeling of emptiness pervade your social life and impact your career, or do you feel empty because of issues in your personal life and an inability to derive fulfilment from your work? The fuzzy boundaries of these categories serve to underscore the messiness of trying to pin down and conscientiously evaluate the issues that trouble us. It attempts to measure, using a rational scale, issues that are by nature affective.

This problem is reinforced when we delve deeper into the data that is offered. For example, the section on emotional stressors opens with the phrase, "we cannot escape our emotions. How to understand our emotions, how to solve our emotional issues and how to better manage our emotions to perform better at work or in our daily lives, this is an important issue faced by all contemporary people" (Jiandan Xinli 2019: 18). Below this phrase stand three pairs of figures, each one representing a different generation, and above them speech bubbles with key words to explain what their emotional troubles are. For the people born in the 90s or later, the concerns are stressors

such as "household registration[49]" "studying" "housing" "acclimating to work". For those born in the 1970s or before, the stressors are "daily struggles" "meaninglessness" "educating the children" and "looking after the elderly".

The irony here is that in a typology of emotional stressors emotions are not mentioned. The issues at hand here are pragmatic and often have extensive social and political contexts which need to be navigated. One of my interviewees in Chengdu was a woman in the post-90s generation called Rui Qi who we met briefly in chapter 3. She had seen a therapist for six months a few years prior to our interview and was an avid reader of the content on *Know Yourself* and *Jiandan Xinli*. We had met by chance and upon hearing about my research she had admitted that she had been considering training to become a counsellor herself and wanted my advice about how best to do this.

Rui Qi was only three years out of college, but she had already cycled through three different industries. She had gone to art school and had worked as a graphic designer for a time, then in an upscale concept restaurant and in an investment company that had offices in Chengdu and in Hong Kong. She was still unsure of what exactly she was looking for as a career. Her decision to see a therapist had come at a time when she was "feeling lost" 迷茫 in the midst of this rapid churn between careers. A friend whose foreign husband worked in a consulate in Chengdu had suggested that Rui Qi might find therapy useful, and she had used *Know Yourself* to book a reasonably priced counsellor in the city. She had found the process interesting; in an hour of conversation the therapist only asked her 3 or 4 questions and had mostly just listened. "Therapy worked because they listened without judgement," she said, "I couldn't have discussed these issues with a friend."

The famous psychologist Xu Kaiwen, who is a key member of the Chinese Psychological Association and a professor at Peking University, has said that a key stressor that faces Chinese people today is the movement from a "solid" society to one that is much looser (Xu quoted in Xu 2019). This is a movement from a society of fixed social relations, stable careers and solid families to one of migration, flexible work and more transient couplings. Xu describes this original society as one of "known" people 熟悉的人and "known" environments 熟悉的环境 (Xu quoted in Xu 2019). In this context what Rui Qi is facing is the liquification of the "known" society that Xu Kaiwen is referring to. In shifting careers three times in three years she has met with conflicting responsibilities, identities and life paths. She is not alone. This trend is a global one, as Zygmut Baumann (2000, 2005) has identified with his concept of "liquid modernity."

In the case of Rui Qi, the lack of solidity came to be considered an issue that required psychological counselling. As she notes, what she ultimately derived from her visits to the therapist and by reading the articles posted by *Know Yourself* and similar platforms was simply a non-judgemental ear. Part of what she got from the experience, as well, was a feeling that she was not alone and that these feelings were acceptable. "The problems that *Know Yourself* identifies have always existed, it's just that they are able to write them up and make them visible," she told me. She felt that people in China often chose to hide from their issues 逃避, and instead let them fester. By giving a name to her troubles she felt like they were being recognised and that she could start to find a way to move beyond them. This is the kind of emotional ontology that Eva Illouz (2019: 217) has referred to. By acknowledging her feelings, she could find the necessary tools to feel stable, even in a world that seemed to be melting around her. "One day," Rui Qi said, "I just suddenly felt like I was ok and that I wouldn't continue seeing my therapist. So, I stopped going."

5.2. Freely Flowing Emotions

For Rui Qi, the point of therapy and engaging with the content of companies like *Know Yourself* was that it provided her a space to discuss her issues that was not afforded her elsewhere in her life. She felt she could not discuss her issues with a friend because when she did her friends would tell her that her feelings were invalid. "But you're good looking, you have a good job and you went to a good school," one of Rui Qi's friends admonished her, "What reason do *you* have to feel anxious about anything?" There was a disconnect between the external sources of validation that should have made Rui Qi feel good about herself and which seemed obvious to those in her social circle, but that seemed hollow to Rui Qi herself. There is of course no linear relationship between someone's career success or their attractiveness and their own subjective experience of those things or their relationship to themselves. That she did feel anxious and lost regardless was compounded when she tried to discuss these feelings with people around her; the best they could offer was to tell her that she was wrong to feel this way. Therapy offered her a place to voice these feelings and not have them rejected. Instead, the therapist merely had to listen intently, and offer a few follow up questions, to provide Rui Qi with the space to feel validated. "Hearing myself, I thought, huh! So, this is how I'm actually feeling," Rui Qi said.

While therapy gave her a space to discuss her feelings the objective of the process was to be able to move past them so that they no longer presented an obstacle to her flourishing. *Jiandan Xinli* notes that for people in her generation emotional stressors include issues like household registration and property and assimilating into the workplace. The answer to these issues, according to the logic of these platforms, is not to try to change the workplace or the housing market or the political complexity of the household registration system. For Rui Qi finding a solid career and getting an apartment were some of the stresses causing her to feel so unmoored. Her therapist is not in a position to give her these things. Instead, they help her talk through her feelings and how she relates to these stressors. The point was to name the feelings that she was experiencing and to find psychological tools that might help her to overcome them. Once she felt

she had achieved this, she moved on from therapy though she still maintained a keen interest in reading about psychology and learning about psychological concepts.

In hearing herself speak about her pain, Rui Qi was able to reflect on how she was feeling in a non-judgmental space that she could not find elsewhere. What therapy provided for her therefore was a space to reflect upon the issues that were troubling her and structure her response. We can see this as an example of cultivating considered action. Rui Qi is in no position to change the reality of how precarious the job market is, nor is she able to change her friends' inability to listen to her without judgement. Instead, she sought therapy, which was something that she found empowering. In the therapeutic encounter she was able to reflect on the dynamics she could not control and how they made her feel, and shape responses accordingly. Instead of allowing herself to feel too paralysed to try and look for a new job or damage ties in her social circle by complaining too much, she allowed the quiet space of therapy to provide a sounding board for her troubles. In that space she found enough resonance to steel herself to continue on. She fostered an ability to move past her blocked feelings.

The capacity for therapy to help individuals move past their blocked feelings was also visible when I asked Ms. Liu to explain the term "psychological troubles" to me. Unlike *Jiandan Xinli* she did not try to break the term down into constituent parts. Instead, she explained it more generally, providing a phenomenology of stuckness. "Psychological troubles" 心理困扰 means being "stuck" she said, using the character *kun* 困 from *kunrao* 困扰 and using it in a new word; *kunzhu* 困住 which means to be blocked or stuck. For her, psychological troubles were times in which the usual flow of emotions and life suddenly became irrevocably halted or prevented from freely flowing. She offered me the following example; if I was dating someone happily for a few years and then suddenly one day that person broke up with me, it would almost certainly be a shock that would be difficult to quickly move past. That experience, of sudden rupture and heartbreak, would likely

precipitate deeper emotional problems to surface. Perhaps my self-worth might be knocked. Maybe I would start to feel anxious about meeting a new partner. Either way, this unexpected event and the shocks it caused to my psyche, would constitute a psychological trouble because my normal state had been altered and I was now stuck. Until I found a way to move past them, I was considered, in her eyes, to be troubled.

For Ms. Liu what is necessary for one to overcome one's troubles is to allow the free flowing of emotions. This echoes and builds upon prevailing ideas within traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) that argue that the excessive build-up of emotions such as anger can cause imbalances in *qi* 气 and manifest as physical problems in the body, though Ms. Liu focussed her discussion on the psychological component of free flowing[50]. Emotions shouldn't become "stuck." She had many techniques that she would employ to help someone get their emotions freely flowing again. One time in her office she held up a whiteboard. On one half was written 'things I have control over' and on the other was 'things I can't control'. This whiteboard, she said, had helped a client puzzle through his feelings after he had gone through a messy break up. One the side of things he could control; doing exercise, working harder, spending time with friends. One the side of things he couldn't control; her emotions, her different aspirations. At the bottom was the idiom *same bed, different dreams* (同床异梦). For Ms. Liu, focusing on his girlfriend's feelings was counterproductive,

[50] It is worth noting that the idea of flow is intimately tied into contexts of health beyond China. In pre-genocide Rwanda pathology was "depicted as blocked flow or hemorrhagic flow" (Taylor 1992: 75). In the West, there was a humoral understanding of health that existed prior to the birth of the modern clinic (Foucault 1997). This understanding of health dated from Galen and saw the flow of key humours, such as black bile, as intimately related to emotional states such as melancholia (Scull 2015: 15, Kleinman 1986: 39). There are of course plenty of other examples besides, but these are simply to show that the idea of flow as related to physical or mental health has antecedents in cultures beyond China.

as they were out of his control. He'd be marooned on an inscrutable archipelago, unable to progress out to the vast sea of possibility that could be his if he freed himself from his psychological troubles. This same thinking applies beyond sexual relationships. For example, if we take seriously the emotional stressors that *Jiandan Xinli* described, then it is fine for one to be concerned by the housing market, but if one is solely fixated on ones inability to get on the housing ladder then this could manifest itself into "psychological troubles." As the opening to the *Jiandan Xinli* reports section on emotional stressors states; "we cannot escape our emotions." As per Ms. Liu's suggestion, while we cannot escape them entirely, we can also choose to redirect them in such a way that we are not cloistered by them, by focusing on areas in which we can exercise control.

The idea that emotions can and should be controlled is pervasive within the psy-boom, both amongst practitioners like Ms. Liu, clients like Rui Qi, and in the articles published by services like *Jiandan Xinli*. When emotions spiral out of control, bad things can happen. A recent article on *Know Yourself* focused on the subject of what happens when people lose control of their emotions (Celia 2019). The article opens with the example of a motorcyclist who was caught in April driving the wrong way down a one-way street by the police. He threw his mobile phone on the floor and screamed at them, before collapsing to the ground in floods of tears. He smashed the phone because on the one hand he had his wife screaming at him to drive home and let her into the house as he'd forgotten to leave her a set of keys, and on the other his boss was forcing him to come back to the office immediately to complete a piece of work.

There are other examples in the article. There's the woman who slaps a man in the face after they scrape bumpers at a cross walk. He punches her. There's the boyfriend who fights with his girlfriend in the street, accidentally pushing her into oncoming traffic. She dies. The stories are egregious, and they get worse as the article goes along. The article is not imploring people to

become emotionless; the way it is written empathises with the people who have lost control of their emotions and in doing so have lost so much else besides. Instead, the article holds up these people as cautionary tales. The point is to ensure that you react in a way that is appropriate for the situation. You touch bumpers at a crosswalk, neither of you allows emotions to spill over to the extent that you resort to violence. You don't push your girlfriend into traffic. The article quotes the psychiatrist Judith Orloff, "how you react emotionally is a choice in any situation."

But as anthropology tells us, the notion of choice here is intimately related to the idea of habitus and disposition. As I showed in chapter 2 the psy-boom is embodied by practitioners and shapes their subjective understanding of the world and how to heal themselves and others. When these psychological service providers say that a person has choice over how they emotionally react in a given situation, this is because they have cultivated a repertoire of psychological coping mechanisms that allows them to have control over their automatic responses, and have a new set of "strategies of action" as I explored in the introduction to this thesis (Swidler 1986: 273). It is not axiomatic that you would be able to choose your emotional reaction in any given situation. The belief that one is able to achieve mastery over their emotions in such a way is a shift in personal subjectivity that comes only after spending a significant amount of time working on one's emotional self. Whether or not this state of mastery is actually achievable is another question altogether. However, the way that psychological service providers present themselves is such that they help users believe that it is possible to control ones emotions and that there are available resources to help them do so.

Another example of how people can overcome their emotional problems came from the platform *Yi Xinli*. It ran an article about a famous TV host who suffered from social anxiety—unexpected, given his line of work (Shu 2019). He said that he had suffered from a breakup early in his career and the experience had really affected him. He was wracked by doubts as he picked apart all of the

personal failings he perceived as having led to the break-up. Then finally one day a friend put a hand on his shoulder and told him, "you might have lost a tree, but that only means you now have a whole forest to explore." According to the TV host, this new way of thinking opened him up to the possibility of controlling his emotions so that he could be rational about the situation. There had obviously been many positive things about him that had allowed him to have a relationship in the first place. Rather than dwell on what he had lost, he could instead choose to focus his attention on what he stood to gain. Now he could "walk away freely from pain" and "cultivate happiness" (Shu 2019). This echoes the way that Ms. Liu had discussed emotional blockages; here the TV host had only to free himself from his negative emotions—to see the forest behind the tree——and he could become "unstuck."

The idea is not to become entirely free of emotions. That would be to become impassive and empty. An article on the popular social media platform *Douban* cautions about the rise of "plasticine people[51]" 橡皮人 (Tian 2011, see also Yang 2017: 93). These plasticine people "don't have an illness, it is just that their heart is tired" (Tian 2011). They have no suffering, no dreams, and no interests. They just have no feelings whatsoever 没有感觉 (Tian 2011). Along with plasticine people are *foxi*佛西—people who resemble the Buddha in their impassivity, lack of emotions and lack of desires (Shi 2017).

Participants in the psy-boom are not trying to become plasticine people or *foxi*. Nor does engagement with the psy-boom create docile subjects who are entirely free of negative emotions. Emotions are human and important. Impassivity is not desirable and nor is living a life that one feels is meaningless or hopeless. Counter to the traditional philosophy of the Zhuangzi[52] which

65 I take this translation from (Yang 2017: 93) but an equally valid translation would be "rubber people"

"advocates a life unperturbed by emotions, including even pleasurable, positive emotions such as joy or delight," (Fraser 2010: 98), the vision of emotions that emerges in the psy-boom is that they are an inevitable fact of life, but it is not inevitable that they interfere with life. They can be understood, logically examined and controlled. This is not something that is done automatically, rather it is a skill that must be cultivated. To become untroubled by our emotions, and to move freely towards joy, we have to be able to move past those moments where we feel "stuck." Here I have shown how emotions can be become "psychological troubles" by becoming blocked or stuck within individuals. The understanding of emotions here is related to a shift in personal subjectivity that entails a person to believe that emotions can be controlled, and to focus their energy on doing so in the face of the external social forces beyond their control. By focusing on what they can control, people can come to feel less blocked by their emotions. I have shown the types of resources and strategies that people are offered to try and get past these feelings of blockage so that their emotions can freely flow. This leads us to an important question. Where exactly are these emotions supposed to flow? How does the individual capacity to channel emotions meet the complex social reality of contemporary China?

5.3. Positive Energy

Juanjuan, who we briefly met in the last chapter, was one of the regular attendees of Ms. Liu's reading group. She worked for the Chengdu metro system, but she lived in Wenjiang, a neighbouring town which had at some point in the not-too-distant past been absorbed in Chengdu's exurban sprawl. It would take her over an hour to travel from there to the reading group and for the year that I attended she rarely missed any sessions. One evening we got noodles before the group started and I asked her what attracted her to the meetings. Aside from her general interest in psychology and some vague plans to maybe train as a counsellor, she just really enjoyed the group itself. "These guys have such positive energy *zhengnengliang* 正能量!" she told me.

Zhengnengliang is loosely translated as positive energy, but its origins are rooted in the study of physics, where the term was used to describe the power of magnetic fields[53] (Hird 2017: 131). It found its contemporary usage in 2012 when it shot to prominence online and became the translated title of a popular British self-help book, *Rip it Up* by Richard Wiseman (Hird 2017: 131). Not only does it therefore have associations with positive psychology generally, but in China it has been leveraged by the government in public service campaigns and thus has come to be conflated with political correctness (Yang 2013, Hird 2017). One group of scholars has gone so far as to label "positive energy" as a "discipline of happiness" (Chen and Wang 2019).

How does a group of people who focus on psychology and spend much of their time discussing their problems and those of others, end up being considered to have "positive energy?" Largely it comes from the fact that the group was facing up to the reality of "psychological troubles" and working to not be "blocked" by their emotions, in the way that Ms. Liu had suggested. For Juanjuan, who was clearly attuned to her emotions and had spent years studying psychology, reading books about different psychological concepts and attending meet-ups and training sessions like the reading group, it was clear that she found value in engaging with a community that had similar interests. As Pritzker and Duncan (2019: 42) have noted, the tools and language of psychology enables subjects to investigate their murky inner selves. Once this investigation is underway, it makes sense that people would want to share their findings with a community that is also conversant in the same language. As Nikolas Rose (1999) has observed, this is why despite the fact that the psy-disciplines so often constitute a "turn inwards" this move should not be considered a purely private one. Rather, it is highly social and conditioned by the society at large.

[53] Writing about a rural village in North Eastern China in the late 1980s, Andrew Kipnis (1997: 1, 10) has noted that relationships 关系 and the role of embodying human feeling 感情 are not just cultural traits but instead play an important role in subject formation in China. Drawing on the work of Sun Lung-Kee (1987) it is shown that 感情 "also define the boundaries (ever shifting) of the group of people whose 'magnetic fields of human feeling' 人情的磁力场 constitute individual heart/minds" (Kipnis 1997: 10). 30 years later in urban Chengdu, the magnetic quality of human relations were still highly relevant, even though the language that was being used was now drawn from state discourses and western psychotherapy

The social nature of the psy-boom came into focus at one of our sessions. The week before we had been tasked by Ms. Liu to keep a diary of our emotions for the week. This type of "homework" is quite typical for people engaging in courses of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which was the treatment modality we were studying at the time (see chapter 2 for more discussion). We were supposed to chart daily our ups and downs and then report the findings back to the group. One young woman had suffered a set-back at work that had caused her to feel very low for two days. A prison officer said that her happiest moment that week had come when she had managed to slip outside of her house for a few moments to catch some sun. One person said that they felt happiest when doing group activities and that they generally had a feeling of hope that week. This admission of the power of group activities met nods of approval; two members of the group said that their happiest moment of the week had been preparing for the reading group. "Studying can give you a sense of reward" noted Ms. Liu.

The point was that the group shared, to borrow Eva Illouz's (2019: 217) phrase, "emotional ontology." They could understand what had happened in the previous week by charting their emotions and they were comfortable to share these feelings with the group. Crucially, the group shared this language and were able to engage with the content of these feelings without dismissing them or not comprehending them. When the prison officer explained the sense of contentment that she felt in her moment in the sun, no-one criticised her for not working or not attending to matters in her house, and no-one questioned whether she should have been wearing sun protection. They took what she said at face value for its emotional content. She felt happy in that moment, and this was something to be celebrated.

When Qian Zhuang spoke of helping people to 'build the skill of happiness', as I explored in chapter 3, she did so in English. My other interviewees, speaking in Mandarin or in Sichuanese dialect, would use a range of terms that could be translated into the English word happiness. Some

of these terms track closer to the idea of a fleeting experience of happiness 高兴, or they would speak of happiness as a more constant state of mind or personality 我是挺快乐的. There was, however, one term for happiness they would often use that would not be so easily translated, *xingfu* 幸福. This term, as the anthropologist Becky Hsu has noted, is more than just 'happy' in a western sense. She argues it is more akin to a 'blessed happiness' grounded in harmonious social relations (Hsu 2019: 50). "Feeling is created interactively; it is not only that people have emotional responses to the actions of others but also that the definition of the situation and the accompanying feelings *emerge from* interactions" (Hsu 2019: 50). The interactions I observed in the reading group were often a way of trying to situate oneself better in all of the other social webs that entangled the participants. They were so enmeshed and so used to being bound into the lives of others that they sought solace in the company of like-minded strangers to work through their issues. In time, these bonds became new entanglements.

It is worth returning to Sara Ahmed's (2013) suggestion of the potential for "affective contagion." As I noted earlier, this theory attempts to capture the ways in which emotion acts as an aura surrounding individuals and objects that ties them into broader social, economic and political processes[54]. The fact that the group exuded "positive energy" can in itself be said to be a form of affective contagion. The etymological roots of the term, with its relation to magnetic fields, underscores this point. In deciding to engage with the reading group and the psy-boom at large they were channelling their energy towards the construction of what the anthropologist Li Zhang (2018) has called "therapeutic selves." This is a specific subjectivity that she sees as characterised by a belief that "it is possible to turn social problems and suffering into a technical matter of sound personal choice and self-management" (Zhang 2018: 54). As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, I am sceptical of the tendency within the anthropology of China to link subjective shifts to

tropes such as "desiring" selves or "therapeutic selves" (see pages x x of introduction). Therefore, when I draw on Zhang's framing, I seek also to extend it by saying that the psy-boom is not crafting therapeutic selves in isolation from other subjective shifts in society. Rather I am arguing that it becomes a venue in which the often-contradictory impulses and ambiguity of the reform period comes to be figured through. As I noted in the last chapter it is this space for articulating the self that I see as the true subjective shift of the psy-boom. It is this cultivating of a resilient subjectivity in the face of dynamic social change that I believe fosters the feeling of "positive energy" that Juanjuan identified in the group.

However, while the psy-boom helps to cultivate personal resilience and builds an aura of positive energy around certain individuals, it also invites them to seek answers from within rather than trying to challenge the systems and structures that might be causing them harm in the first place. Sara Ahmed's (2013) affective contagion is designed to explain how emotions can tie people into broader social, economic and political processes. What I was seeing in the reading group was that social issues were being absorbed by the group not as systemic problems that they had no control over, but as emotional stressors that they could respond to. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the face of heavily patriarchal norms women turned to psychological counselling and therapeutics to support their response to this gendered norm. In a context in which explicit feminist organizing is construed as a threat to the political stability of Communist Party rule and in which self-identifying as feminist is socially controversial, women choose to engage instead in the affective language of the psy-boom to help them build towards their vision of the good life.

One concerning aspect of *zhengnengliang* and the therapeutic subjectivity that Li Zhang has identified is the fact that it might prevent people from challenging more deeply some of the external forces which cause them emotional stress. By learning that feelings are there to be explored rationally and managed, the potential for negative affects to spark radical change might

be foreclosed. When Sara Ahmed speaks of 'affective contagion' she is referring not just to the way that affect might bind people together, as in the reading group, but to the potential for affect to launch broader movements for social justice (Ahmed 2013: 202). One could look for examples of how in the West, rage at the exposure of the historic pattern of sexual abuse and rape committed by the movie producer Harvey Weinstein sparked the #metoo movement, and with it a society-wide debate on issues of consent, sexual abuse and the insidious nature of patriarchal power. A similar movement in China, which used the homophonic characters for 'rice' *mi* and 'bunny' *tu* failed to gain significant traction (Zeng 2019). Even when Zhou Xiaozhuan, a former intern of China's most famous TV host, Zhu Jun, came out in 2019 and accused him of groping her at work and forcibly kissing her in a locked office, the case did not spark a meaningful social reckoning on a similar scale to that experienced in the West after the Weinstein allegations came to light. Instead, three years on and the courts have consistently failed to adjudicate the case, leaving Zhou Xiaozhuan in limbo (Deng 2021). Zhu Jun countersued his accuser for defamation, and the government has been swift to censor reporting on the case that might lead to broader calls for justice and the prevention of sexual abuse. Zhu Jun could have been a figure like Harvey Weinstein that drew out negative affect and helped bind people to advocate for stronger protections for women. Instead, the Chinese #mitu movement petered out in the face of intense government censorship and a wider context of increasingly patriarchal rule under Xi Jinping (see Fincher 2019). The #metoo movement was able to convert the negative affect of rage into a campaign for social justice precisely because it was able to "stick" this affect on the figure of Harvey Weinstein who then became a metaphor for a pervasive culture of sexual abuse. In China, authorities were able to ensure, through censorship and publishing counter-factual articles in state media, that the Chinese #mitu movement was unable to "stick" to anything. The reason that this is pertinent is because *zhengnengliang* and the cultivation of therapeutic selves can have the same potential to prevent negative affect from ever "sticking" to objects in the wider socio-political environment. It is notable that despite the heavy over-representation of women within the psy-boom, that none of

the major psychological service providers came out in explicit support of Zhou Xiaoxuan or wrote pointed critiques about the pervasive nature of sexual abuse in Chinese society. Instead, to the extent that there was engagement with the issues of #mitu in China, it was oblique and avoided using the hashtag or platforming activist voices. As we saw in the last chapter, rather than encouraging women to fight the patriarchal norms of their society, the psy-boom instead helps them to sit with the compromised choices they make in the face of these gendered norms.

A similar situation happened with the case of Li Hongyuan. He was a Tsinghua graduate who was employed by Huawei and then found himself detained with no trial for nearly a year after accusing his employer of creating a toxic work environment. When I lived in Chengdu this case was briefly prominent on social media and discussed amongst people in my social circle, but the government was swift in deleting the most pointed references to the case from the internet. Here was one of the chosen ones; a graduate from a top university who had managed to get a job with a state champion, and even he couldn't catch a break. The inequity was compounded when news reports and commentary on social media started to get deleted by censors. Regular people felt doubly aggrieved. Not only could they see how bad the system was, but they were reminded that they didn't have any ability to even speak on it. If someone like Li Hongyuan could fall so easily from grace, then what for the average person? Again, this was another case in which a figure who could have served as a metaphor for wider issues in society—in this case toxic work environments and the fact that no matter how successful you are there is no social protection (which thus renders all of the competition and involution everyone else feels that much more tragic)—was unable to become the spark for greater societal shift due to the intense and sophisticated government censorship apparatus. The rage and anger that the case generated was not able to "stick" itself onto the figure of Li Hongyuan for long enough for it to become more than just a quickly passing storm.

The visible gains of four decades of record-setting economic growth also serves to underpin regime legitimacy and foreclose dissent. While women are still constrained by patriarchal norms, they are also freer than they have ever been in the marketplace to choose their own jobs, sexual partners and lifestyles. It is easy therefore for their claims to be dismissed by the party-state and masculine society. To borrow Ahmed's (2013) terminology, given this reality, where else, except in the realm of their own personal feelings, were people supposed to "stick" these affects? Without being able to channel their emotions into social movements that might challenge prevailing social norms, it is logical that instead people choose to focus instead on their own capacity to feel unblocked. Here we see the complexity of the psy-boom as it plays out in the context of Xi Jinping's increasingly authoritarian China. The free-flowing of emotions within individual persons is not allowed to become an outpouring that might challenge the regime. As I noted in the methodology section of this thesis, had I been in China during the coronavirus pandemic this would have been a fascinating time to witness some of these dynamics as they played out amongst participants in the psy-boom. Where would they have been channelling their emotions? How would their feelings of fear and anxiety connect them to each other and to the wider pandemic?

If issues came up in the reading group that were connected to wider political considerations, people would normally shrug and note that these were "big things" 大事, which were the realm of politics and the state, and all they could do was manage "little things" 小事 that they had direct control of. As Li Zhang has shown in her work on cultivating therapeutic selves, this division comes to be represented in people in the context of small and big selves, which belies the fact that "there is no purely private self without any social embeddedness" (Zhang 2018: 50). Not only were my interviewees embedded in their reading group, but they were also embedded in their families, their workplaces and their nation. What was evident however was that while these relationships could cause emotional stress, the members of the group believed it was their own responsibility to not let these passing psychological troubles get in the way of them achieving fulfilment or joy. Instead

of being resigned to their social reality, they focused on the narrow range of options they had within their control.

5.5. Trouble in the workplace

The fusing of "positive energy" and the therapeutic subjectivity that Li Zhang has identified provides participants in the psy-boom with a language that allows them to not have to tackle head-on the "big things" which cause them emotional stress. By learning that feelings are there to be explored rationally and managed, the potential for negative affects to spark radical change might be foreclosed. When Sara Ahmed speaks of "affective contagion" she is referring to the potential for affect to create social justice, because "the objects of emotions slide and stick, and they join the intimate histories of bodies with the public domain of justice and injustice" (Ahmed 2013: 202). The psy-boom creates a space of affective contagion within its own parameters, which allows participants to socialise and talk about their problems in life. In this space people could puzzle through their emotions without being drawn into a politicized framing of such troubles. In this way the psy-boom performs a social function of preventing negative affect from ever "sticking," either within bodies as blockages to freely flowing emotions, or to objects in the wider socio-political environment—what my informants referred to as "big things."

A pertinent example of this is how online psychological service providers talk about the issue of workplace stress and burnout[55]. This is a common topic of discussion on the platforms and is a hot topic in the society at large. At the time when I was in Chengdu there was a lot of debate around the phrase 996 which referred to people who worked from 9am to 9pm 6 days a week.

[55] The importance of managing emotions in the workplace has been well explored with Arlie Russel Hoschchild's (2003) *The Managed Heart* a classic on the topic.

Some people I knew joked that 996 would be a relief—thanks to Wechat and the need to always be on call they worked 007, i.e. 24/7.

The magazine *Sanlian Lifeweek* (三联生活周刊)[56] dedicated an entire issue in 2019 to the psy-boom and the rise of psychological counselling. Tellingly, almost every single article at some point mentioned workplace stress, and there were actually two stand-alone articles that dealt with the psychological pressures of Chinese work culture (Bo 2019a, Bo 2019b)—the most of any other issue dealt with in the publication[57]. This shows the intertwined nature of workplace stress as a key driver that is contributing to interest in the psy-boom and demand for the services it offers.

In an article on the 996-phenomenon posted by *Know Yourself* the thrust of the argument is about how to balance relationships in such a difficult work environment. "My boyfriend was waiting for me at the entrance to my office building, but I chose work," laments one of the interviewees in the article. Another one, a tech analyst in his 30s explains that the reason he feels able to work so hard is because he hasn't got a partner, but also that he is cripplingly lonely (Zhi'er 2019). As *Jiandan Xinli's* study found, people in the post-90s generation were most concerned with issues of personal development. Part of that undoubtedly is the extremely difficult choices that people are forced to make between building personal relationships or concentrating on their careers. Rui Qi noted in our interview that competition is so fierce for jobs that you can't rest. "Not even for a minute," she said, "because if you step away there are a hundred people who would fill your spot immediately." This competition starts earlier, of course, as we saw in the last chapter with how Luna feared for her son's future should he not work as hard as possible on his exams, and which lead to Yujia deciding to opt out of the competition altogether by not having a child. Tripping up on any of the stages on the extremely narrow path towards socially recognised success can

foreclose that possibility forever, as with Brother Bing's daughter Yuanyuan and the single mark she missed on her Gaokao.

Competition is at the heart of the pervasive sense of "involution" 内卷化 that people are experiencing in society. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, involution is the feeling that people are competing for nothing——that no matter how hard they work or how intensely they compete, there are scant rewards for their efforts (Xiang quoted in Ji 2020). For those who already work a 996 week, it is hard to imagine how they are able to find time to think of an alternative lifestyle for themselves beyond work. 996 easily blurs into 007. But the difference between working almost all of the time to genuinely working all of the time is not met by significant returns. The reality of the marketplace in China is that there is always a surplus of labour, which means there are little incentives for employers to properly reward the herculean efforts of their employees. It is economically expedient to burn them out and replace them. There is almost always someone waiting to fill the role.

This competition contributed to Rui Qi's feelings that she had no-one to turn to when she felt overwhelmed. "I feel like the competition means our values are very constrained," she said, "it is so hard to get a good job that if you have one then you aren't allowed to feel unhappy." For Rui Qi, her relative success meant that she was an object of envy. To admit that she was struggling and did not actually want the things that people told her she should be grateful for drew her further away from them. This made her feel isolated. Turning to a therapist gave her a space to voice these feelings without judgement. She was paying, effectively, to be heard out that she was having difficulties within the rigid confines of success that society was laying out for her.

This intense competition means that people like Rui Qi feel like there are few spaces outside of the psy-boom where they can talk about these issues. In the articles on the Wechat platforms, there

are very real concerns presented about work and the ethical treatment of employees. A work culture so intense that managers fall asleep on their office floors or that employees crash their cars in fear of text messages – as reported in *Sanlian Lifeweek* (2019) – does not seem like an equitable or particularly rational one. But work culture is not a "small thing" as my interviewees would see it. It's a huge, complex, socio-cultural issue. It combines critiques of capitalism, of the narrowing potential for social mobility in China, political corruption, nepotism, and the stark inequalities in society that make young people feel like they have to choose between their lovers and their work. The lack of any kind of reasonable social safety net compounds all of these issues, as does the knowledge that workers will be responsible for their elderly relatives and their own children should they have any (Hsu 2019). But this is not how such an issue is explained to readers by these large online psychological service providers.

Know Yourself ends its 996 article by saying that work is simply an "independent variable" (自变量) for love (Zhi'er 2019). The article uses a term from mathematics to show how rational calculation can be used to manage emotions and control feelings. There is no critique here, because to do so would be to draw the platform and the author into a politically charged conversation that could see them censored or worse. There is no question of 996 becoming a metaphor for wider social injustice. Cases like the Li Hongyuan one, which is a perfect example of inequity in the workplace, are avoided because of the political sensitivity of the topic. Zhu Jun's groping of a female employee is an example of workplace sexual harassment that one would expect to be written about extensively in psychological platforms targeted at the anxieties of modern women who have similar aspirations of flourishing careers within patriarchal workplaces that put them at equal risk of being the next Zhou Xiaoxuan. Yet these platforms have to tread an extremely delicate line if they want to continue to thrive in China's authoritarian digital sphere. In avoiding mentioning these cases, and instead in speaking in generalities and offering people tools to turn inwards, there is no surface

for negative affect to "stick" on. The rage that one might feel at their keyboard, having to tell their boyfriend waiting downstairs to go home, is not directed anywhere except within.

For someone like Rui Qi, this is probably better than nothing. As she noted, she valued *Know Yourself* for giving voice to her feelings. I'm sure that she, currently looking for her fourth career and not in a stable relationship, could see much of her experience reflected in the article. She also now had a community of fellow readers she could engage with in a shared language of emotions and feelings. In contemporary China, where the space for civic society and the "public square" has been greatly curtailed under Xi Jinping, perhaps this is as good as it gets. There is very little chance or potential for collective action to lobby for greater social justice. Instead of allowing "big things" to trouble them, perhaps psy-boom participants are being rational in concentrating on the "small things" within their control.

5.6. Conclusion

In light of this observation, we can return to the issues that have guided this thesis. The negative affects of the psy-boom and the discourses of mental health and psychological troubles that circulate amongst participants provide them with a language through which sometimes contradictory visions of the good life are articulated and puzzled through. This language is couched in empowering terms that invite people to take responsibility for channelling their emotions and focusing on the things in their life that they can control. This constitutes a shift in personal subjectivity that helps them to feel that they have agency even in situations in which external conditions would have otherwise made them feel powerless. For Rui Qi, despite the social reality of a precarious work environment and intense competition, her engagement with therapy gave her a space to voice her anxieties and troubles that she could not find elsewhere. This allowed her to feel seen and that her worries were not unfounded. The ability to speak out her troubles was key

to preventing her from feeling blocked or involuted. To borrow Ms. Liu's terminology, her emotions could freely flow once again, and Rui Qi was able to throw herself into finding a new job.

However, while this individual achievement of unblocking emotions is important on a personal level, it is worthwhile to ask what becomes of this free flow of emotions. As this chapter has argued, there is a disconnect between the ability to prevent emotions from becoming stuck within individual persons and the social reality of China where strict authoritarian controls prevent these negative affects from becoming "stuck" to greater issues of social justice that could see the psy-boom as a vehicle for dynamic social change. This chapter therefore has presented an ethnography of the ways in which emotions come to be stuck, both within individual persons and to broader social issues, and the specific ways in which these processes do and do not happen in contemporary China in the context of the psy-boom.

The reform period in China has been characterized by marketization. A key facet of all market economics is choice. With choice comes opportunity costs and doubts. The persistent sense of anxiety in reform-era China is intimately related to the ways in which society has changed to meet this social reality. The reform era has also been characterized by spiralling inequality and stark competition to secure what might be understood as the normative good life. This inequity is compounded by the sense that not attaining a good life is not related to harsh social realities but rather to personal failings. These are precisely the kind of "troubles" that motivate the psy-boom. The capacity to choose comes with it the experience of feeling as if one has made the wrong choice. Rather than becoming wracked by doubts and emotionally blocked, people turn to psychological counselling and the concepts that are offered in the psy-boom at large to help them foster resilience as they make choices that they know will greatly impact their life. As Ms. Liu said in the previous chapter, psychology is not supposed to tell people which is the right choice, but it is designed to

help people feel settled with whatever choices they do make. It is also there to help them break the paralysis that sometimes prevents a choice being made in the first place. When Rui Qi was stuck, her engagement with psychological counselling was enough to allow her to move on with her life.

Writing in the context of US Latinos and Euro-Americans, the anthropologist Janis Hunter Jenkins (1997, 16) argued that "a culture provides its members with an available repertoire of affective and behavioural responses to the human condition." This chapter has shown how in the context of China the repertoire of affective responses is created not solely by the party state but by an intersection of socio-economic, cultural and individual experiences that interplay in dizzying kaleidoscopic fashion. In the vibrant marketplace of the psy-boom there is an expansive language to discuss negative affect and the ways in which life sometimes does not meet expectations. Psychology in this context is offering people a repertoire for how to respond to the human condition. Qian Zhuang's skill of happiness, drawing on the language of psychology, is a treatment modality that draws from the language of psychology to provide participants a sense of agency over their emotions and a community within which to discuss what ails them. The psy-boom therefore provides a window into the lived experience of its participants and a more genuine portrayal of how their lives are playing out—the ups and the downs—than could be accessible in other venues where critique would be, by its very nature, more pointedly political in nature.

As this thesis argues, the ability to turn inwards is not something that exists a priori of significant discursive and subjective shifts that reorient perceptions of agency and control for individuals. In China's psy-boom, the "inner revolution" (Zhang 2020) is couched in psychotherapeutic idioms that invite people to take control of their emotions. In doing so they are able to better sit with the compromised choices that they are forced to make to live in contemporary Chinese society. If psychological counselling provides for someone an ability to get through an intense workday or to

recover from a bad break-up, it seems unfair to dismiss the liberatory potential of this phenomenon on an individual level. But it is worth tracing where the negative affects that are spoken out in the psy-boom are able to travel, and the broader social questions that might be given voice in the spaces of the psy-boom. As this chapter has shown, building on the work of the chapter before, the reality of contemporary China under Xi Jinping means that these negative affects are often prevented from drawing people into substantive social critique or activism that might prove destabilising to the prevailing regime or norms of society. It would be wrong however to dismiss the psy-boom as a phenomenon that is happening on a purely individual level or that merely psychologizes social problems. As this chapter has shown there is a diverse and engaged social milieu that has been brought together by their shared interest in psychology and mental health. How this community develops and the forms of mutuality and healing that they will offer for each other should be of continued interest to any scholar engaging with the psy-boom in the coming years.

CONCLUSION

What does it mean for someone to provide counselling? Who are the persons drawn into the profession of psychological counselling, and who seeks their counsel? Ms. Liu spent years adrift, divorced and inert. Finally, she decided to turn this personal trauma into something of value for people. She went on her own healing journey and eventually trained to become a psychological counsellor. By the time I encountered her, she was the centre of a vibrant milieu of psychological counsellors, hobbyists and had plenty of clients to keep her busy. Her years of professional experience and the intimate contours of her life lead her to believe that you can't change others, but you can change yourself. In the face of even the most insurmountable traumas, there is always, at last, the self that can be returned to. This was the terrain of Ms. Zhou's "key of ten thousand uses" —designed to unlock the answers that rested within the individual. How are we to understand Ms. Liu's idea, however, when we know that many of the causes of personal trauma are social? How do we reconcile a vision of healing that is focused on the self in the face of suffering that is intersubjective and social structures that are antithetical to human flourishing?

This thesis has focused on the rise of psychological counselling in China and the attendant psy-boom that it is part of. As I have shown, China's psy-boom has created a dynamic marketplace for psychological services and is precipitating an "inner revolution" for its participants (Zhang 2020). The psy-boom is more than just a phenomenon related to a shift in the clinical reality of mental healthcare. It is a society-based popular movement that eschews more stigmatised understandings of mental illness in favour of an expansive concept of mental health. In doing so it reshapes personal subjectivity and provides for people a sense of agency—that even if they can't change others, they can change themselves.

There are four core contributions of this thesis. The first is that it provides an ethnographically grounded account of psychological counselling in China in the late reform period. It has sketched the history of the phenomenon, shown its generational dimensions and given accounts of the life stories and therapeutic practices of specific counsellors. It has shown how psychological counselling is a key aspect of China's psy-boom, which is a significant social force in China today. The thesis has shown that the psy-boom is taking place in multiple kinds of venues throughout society, for instance, in workshops, reading groups (chapters 2, 4), workplaces (chapter 5), families (chapter 4) and online (chapter 3). The second contribution is to show the diversity of ideas within the psy-boom as it existed in Chengdu at the time of the ethnography, and how it intersected with other social phenomena. These have included gender (chapter 4), class (chapter 5), economic precarity (chapter 5), and the rise of digital technologies (chapter 3). The third contribution is to explore the affective dimension and subjective shifts that constitute the psy-boom and how these inform people's perception of agency. Building on the observation of how the psy-boom intersects with other phenomenon, I have sought to show how people interpret the structural and social causes of personal trauma and how they shape their responses to these. This brings this project in conversation with long-standing debates within anthropology about structure and agency. The inner revolution that people experience through their engagement with psychological concepts and services is a process that allows people to puzzle through the often-contradictory desires that arise in the reform period. It helps them to make choices that move them towards their vision of the good life. I have created the etic term "considered action" to explain this process of rearticulation and the forms of agency that it creates for people as they seek healing. This process is constituted by the psy-boom and the social forces that this is a response to and is constitutive of particular ways of being in the world. The final contribution of this thesis is to ask how this process and the wider phenomenon of the psy-boom can become a vehicle for social change in China. I turn to each of these contributions now.

Psychological Counselling in China

Here, I return to a quote from the author Yu Hua (2014) that I drew on in the introduction to this thesis. "Considering the CCP is a communist party following market economics, and all the ambiguity that exists in this, then you can expect a lot of ambiguity in the popular response." One such ambiguous response is the MOLSS qualification and the turn towards psychology and psychological counselling amongst educated urbanites. For scholars of mental health or medical anthropology, this study offers an account of a society-based form of psychological counselling in China. The MOLSS qualification is a quirk that arose when a government that still sought to create vocational qualifications for as many conceivable professions as it could manage tried to acknowledge that the mental health burden in the country had to be dealt with by market-based solutions. These were assumed to be able to respond more dynamically than the medical system itself. Through this qualification, the state hoped to create a professional class of counsellors to generate employment and meet societal needs. In practice, though, the training content has always been vague and eclectic. As a result, these counsellors have competed with each other about what counselling is in practice (chapter 2). This has created an extremely dynamic market for psychological services that has been spurred by the advent of digital technologies (chapter 3). However, all of this has also contributed to the field of psychological counselling feeling extremely "chaotic," as Luna noted in chapter 4, both for counsellors and service users themselves.

In the end, the ambiguous nature of this phenomenon led the government to step away from the qualification regime altogether, ceding control to as-yet unempowered professional organisations or online psychological service providers (chapter 2, Bram 2020). Still, the existence of the MOLSS qualification in society, and the million or so people who were qualified when it existed, acknowledges that there is a whole realm of quotidian trauma that is not best served by the medical system but that equally cannot be ignored altogether. Psychological counselling has found itself

cast as a popular response to mental health, as enshrined in the 2013 National Mental Health Law, and thus legally distinguished from psychotherapy practised in clinical settings.

This is not merely a reflection of the government's desire to try and protect the public from some of the less-scrupulous practices and cowboy-practioners that were inevitable when so many people were qualified to a poor standard in such a short space of time. This division also speaks to long-standing cultural tendencies in China that heavily stigmatise mental illness. People who seek counselling in China therefore have an alternative idiom through which to seek mental healthcare and discuss their trauma without engaging with the medical system and risking diagnoses that may be stigmatising. This plurality of forms of healing is welcome to the extent that it expands the range of care on offer and may help people who would otherwise not seek any care at all. However, there are also real risks that people with more serious conditions end up not having their needs met by these services. As we saw with the experience of Ms. Wen seeing three patients with suicidal ideation in a single day (chapter 3), the boundaries between psychological counselling and psychotherapy or what might need significant psychiatric intervention are never clear in practice. These issues present real problems for psychological service providers themselves, as we saw with Qian Zhuang, the CEO of *Know Yourself*, seriously worrying about the risk of the service being blamed in case someone who used it ended up completing suicide[58] (chapter 3).

The issues that are present in drawing distinctions between when psychiatric intervention might be necessary versus psychotherapy or counselling are not unique to China. As TM Luhrmann (2001) showed in America, in her beautiful ethnography *Of Two Minds,* the split between biomedical psychiatry and psychodynamic therapy was less of a natural divide than the result of significant tug

[58] This is a comment she repeated in a recent documentary by Vice News, see Vice (2021) "China's Psycho-Boom from Life in Lockdown" *Vice News* June 29 2021, accessed 19.7.21 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCEEU3Nxji0

between academics, the medical establishment and ultimately the sheer economic force of insurance companies. "As managed care companies began to take control over insurance reimbursements, the ideological tension between the psychopharmacological and psychoanalytic looked as if it presented a choice, and the psychopharmacological approaches seemed cheaper and more like the rest of medicine." (Luhrmann 2001: 203). The prevailing model of care offered was shaped by the economic realities of America's healthcare system. This in turn privileged a biomedical understanding of distress and has contributed to cementing a "neurochemical" understanding of the self (Rose 2007: 211). This process has also served to further medicalize distress, to the extent that one group of scholars have argued that this represents "the loss of sadness" (Horwitz and Wakefield 2007). They found "diagnostic inflation based on a relatively new definition of depressive disorder that is flawed and that, combined with other developments in society, has dramatically expanded the domain of presumed disorder," to the extent that US patients have suffered intensely from the over prescription of psychoactive substances (Horwitz and Wakefield 2007: 7). It has also helped to further increase the discursive power of biomedical frames of distress, as encapsulated by Nikolas Rose's argument that we have already arrived in "our psychiatric future" (Rose 2019).

As we can see from the work of US-situated researchers, the somewhat problematic notion of there being an either-or tension between biomedical psychiatry and psychodynamic therapy has had clear real-world consequences. This happened as one side of this debate became empowered over the other due to the expediencies that this care offered in the context of America's lack of universal or single-payer healthcare. In China, the rise of psychological counselling and the form of care that it provides is similarly constituted by the realities of the medical system, government policies and prevailing cultural attitudes. As I showed in chapter 1, the state's "retreat from health" (Duckett 2010: 1) and the push towards citizens taking responsibility for both their physical and mental health, as represented by the Healthy China 2030 project, are also helping to shape the

forms of mental healthcare that exist in China today. While in the US the biomedical frame of distress largely won out[59], this debate in China is still ongoing as the countervailing force of stigma, culture and the significant profile of psychological service providers promoting a more psychodynamic vision of the self have significant purchase for the average user of psy-services.

There is significant investment by big pharmaceutical companies in China to promote psychoactive substances, so it may well be the case that there may be further medicalisation of distress in the years to come (see Geyer & Wang 2019). However, as Ma Zhiying (2012) has shown in her study of patients in a psychiatric facility, even when patients had clear biomedical diagnoses and were receiving in-patient treatment, they complimented this form of care with indigenous healing modalities like drinking bone broth and engaging in TCM practices. Similarly, Everett Zhang (2015: 18) showed that patients taking Viagra for impotence felt that the pill was merely a salve for the clearest symptom of their condition—their lack of erection—but did nothing for the underlying issue they felt most keenly—their lack of potency. It may well be the case therefore that, as this thesis has shown, the realm of everyday distress in China continues to be a fuzzy space in which multiple idioms and discourses coalesce.

This is an important point to consider because this shapes the practice of psychological counsellors. As I showed in chapter 2, the context in which counsellors trained and the prevailing understandings of distress at the time in which they developed had significant observable differences in the way they understood the object of their care (for example the ways in which they described their help-seekers/callers/clients or the extent to which they believed it was possible to "cure" homosexuality) and their therapeutic practice. This is the value of the ethnographic method. By spending time with counsellors in Chengdu within the context of their milieu, these subtle

[59] This is not to say that this debate is finished. Recent developments in psychedelic treatment for example are likely to recast many of the assumptions in the biomedical model (see Pollan 2018)

differences become observable in a way that would be impossible through less experience-near methods of investigation. Beyond simply describing discourses of distress as they circulated in Chengdu at the time or sketching the contours of psychological counselling as a profession, I have been able to provide detailed ethnographic vignettes drawn from the lives of counsellors. This provides a far richer and more complex understanding of psychological counselling in China than would be available otherwise.

In the hazy realm of the psy-boom non-medicalised definitions of distress are met with psychological tools, culturally sensitive localisations of prevailing psychological theories and practical advice repurposed to have a psychological sheen. In this space there are blurred boundaries between spirituality, indigenous folk wisdom, life-coaching and culturally mediated takes on the medicalised vision of mental health popular in the west. Counsellors have to figure their way through this extremely complex field to shape their own vision of healing. This is why so many people I encountered eschewed favouring a particular school of psychological practice and would offer a variant of "what works, works" (chapter 2).

Importantly, despite the complexity and diversity of this phenomenon there is one key point upon which all the counsellors and their milieu agreed. For them, suffering was no longer simply a fact of life. While it was inevitable that suffering would occur in the life course—and in fact, almost everyone I met could point to instances of severe personal trauma in their life that had brought them into the psy-boom in the first place—suffering was not an end in itself. Suffering could be managed, and psychology provided a framework to understand it and tools to combat it. This is a significant discursive shift in the understanding of suffering from the Mao era, as I argued in chapter 3, where suffering and eating bitterness were considered to be necessary elements of socialist society. Suffering in that context was part of class struggle. Individual suffering was not prioritised in the face of the collective needs of permanent revolution. In a similar way to how the

moral symptomology of impotence changed with the unlocking of desire in the reform period (Zhang 2015), so too has the moral symptomology of suffering changed with the arrival of market reforms and the individualization of society (Yan 2010).

That the psy-boom has arisen in this particular moment in China is not surprising given the incredibly huge social changes that have occurred during the reform period. As this thesis has argued, the rise of psychological services is both *representative of* and a *response to* the ambiguous nature of the reforms themselves[60]. It makes sense that as society has had to reckon with a significant change in the moral symptomology of suffering post-Mao, that a popular form of healing has arisen to meet the needs of a population that can afford to try and buy their way out of suffering. The marketing of the psy-boom, as I argued in chapter 3, tells people that psychology can help them understand themselves, improve their relationships with others and become better workers/lovers/friends etc. It also tells them that no matter how bad they are feeling there are tools that can help them transcend this suffering.

Suffering is a social experience (Kleinman, Das et al., 1997). The change in the moral symptomology of suffering in China is related to changes in the discursive frame through which suffering is understood, as I explored in chapter 1, which impacts the subjective and intersubjective perceptions of suffering. As the Kleinmans (1997: 2) have argued, "collective modes of experience shape individual perceptions and expressions. Those collective modes are visible patterns of how to undergo troubles, and they are taught and learned, sometimes openly, often indirectly." In

[60] This paper is now, in hindsight, bracketed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Future scholars will have to address how the dynamics I have identified here related to that particular moment of Chinese modernity and how the pandemic has changed them (or not). As I have noted throughout this thesis, the uses and understandings of psychology and the nature of psychological services are constantly shifting in relation to the society they find themselves in. As Chinese society changes to accommodate the global reality of the pandemic and the legacy of public health policies such as lockdowns and curbs on movement (both domestic and international), so too will the psy-boom shift to accommodate these realities and best meet the psychological burdens they have created for people.

chapter 5 I showed how the psy-boom has brought with it the discourse of "psychological troubles" which becomes a literal expression of how people understand the causes of their distress and the tools they should marshal as they "undergo troubles." The psy-boom therefore is both a subjective and intersubjective process, as collective discourses end up forming individual responses to and perceptions of suffering.

Importantly, this thesis pushes back against the critical tendency to view the rise of psychotherapy as an insular phenomenon that is purely self-centred. One scholar has argued that the rise of psychological training in China, means that "by teaching emotional management and self-regulation, these workshop and seminars contribute to the widespread process of the privatization of social suffering where resentment towards the state is redirected back to the individual" (Iskra 2020: 15, for a similar line of critique in the West see Hari 2017, Purser 2019: 8, Ecclestone and Hayes 2008). While it is true that the psy-boom is not a venue for substantive social critique or organized opposition to the regime or prevailing social norms (as I argued in chapter 4 and 5) it is also a glib reading that dismisses the complexity of the processes involved by claiming that they constitute the "privatisation" of social suffering.

As I have noted throughout this thesis, the psy-boom is driven forward by its actively engaged participants. These are not just counsellors and their clients but encompass a huge spectrum of people caught up in the dynamic marketplace for psychological services. In this thesis alone I have interviewed hobbyists (Juanjuan, chapter 5), writers (Winter, chapter 3), tech entrepreneurs (Qian Zhuang, chapter 3), and translators (Yujia, chapter 4). As scholars have already noted, in China and in other countries like Russia and Mexico, there is a "psy-sociality" cultivated by engaging in collective psychological training activities (see Pritzker and Duncan 2019, Duncan 2018, Matza 2018). As I argued throughout this thesis, part of the reason that people engaged with the psy-boom was that it helped them to foster "emotional ontology" (Illouz 2018). As I have argued,

following Illouz, this is a shared register of affect through which to articulate subjective experiences such as the self, desires and trauma. The social aspect of the psy-boom makes it not merely a subjective phenomenon, but also an intersubjective one. It seems unfair to speak of its privatising aspect without giving sufficient weight to the collective forces that are so crucial to its unfolding.

This process has been conditioned by the state's acknowledgement that there was a mental health burden in the country, as we saw in chapter 1, and the decision to launch the MOLSS qualification. The dynamic marketplace for psychological services that has developed in the proceeding decades is heavily shaped not just by market dynamics but also the political context of the reform period. The 2013 National Mental Health law and the choice to define psychological counselling as inherently non-medical has shaped the practice of counsellors, as has the decision in 2017 by the government to stop the qualification regime altogether (see Huang 2018, Bram 2020). For the moral symptomology around suffering to change in China has taken more than simply the privatisation of social suffering—rather it has required an extremely complex interpersonal process of redefining suffering as a technical matter than can be overcome with psychological tools, rather than viewing it as a simple fact of life that must be endured.

Heterogeneity in the psy-boom

There is a core constituency of the psy-boom; educated, affluent, urban females (chapter 3, 4). However, by engaging in ethnography, I have shown that within that subsection of Chinese society there is incredible diversity in terms of how they first encountered the psy-boom, why they chose to engage in psychological counselling or use psychological services, and the uses to which they applied psychological concepts. That one can easily encounter people as starkly different as Ms. Wu and Yujia within the same context (chapter 4) speaks to the diversity of this phenomenon. Beyond merely describing this phenomenon in the present, I have sought to show that the psy-

boom should not be considered a static phenomenon, or one that is universally experienced. As I showed in chapter 2, the social context that people chose to train to become a psychological counsellor heavily informed their practice and understanding of healing. The phenomenon is dynamic and is heavily influenced by the mode of transmission, as with TCM (Hsu 1999), which is an important insight to consider when new technologies such as Wechat are becoming an increasingly important site for the marketing of psychological concepts and services (chapter 3). I have shown that the specific technological architecture of Wechat creates affordances which shape psychological service provision. I have also argued that for many people Wechat is the way they initially access the psy-boom, and therefore has implications for how they understand psychological services generally. It will be important for future scholars to keep abreast of digital technologies to see how these continue to shape the practice of psychotherapy in China.

As this thesis has shown, the psy-boom is not happening in isolation from other trends in Chinese society. As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, and in various chapters throughout, contemporary China, while increasingly affluent, is also economically precarious, starkly unequal and at the time of this ethnography was experiencing inert social mobility in which the vanishingly few avenues to the normative good life were ever more restricted. While the constituency that I encountered in my research for this thesis were comparatively privileged, middle-class, and educated, these advantages had not buffered them from the intense competition that is synonymous with Chinese society in the late reform period. Everyone I met was intensely anxious as a result. They were anxious because of the amount of work they knew was required to simply remain in the same class position. This is to say nothing of what it would take to rise in this incredibly harsh economy. As we saw with Luna (chapter 4), these feelings did not stop with the individual, but were expressed to close-kin as well. Luna was deeply troubled by the idea that her son might not become successful if he did not pass his exams. Yujia, resigned to the fact that

competition was so incredibly fraught, decided to opt out of having children altogether so as not to perpetuate this cycle.

This sense of constant competition was expressed through the concept of involution 内卷化 (chapter 5). No matter how much effort people expended, they felt like they were grinding themselves deeper into the mud rather than pushing themselves onwards. It is ironic that despite the fact that the psy-boom is driven in part because people turn towards psychological concepts and services as a way to understand and heal themselves from the trauma of perpetual competition, that the same dynamics of intense competition are highly visible within the profession of counselling and amongst psychological service providers (chapter 3). The psy-boom is a social phenomenon *constituted by* and *constitutive of* the society in which it has developed.

The vocational qualification for psychological counselling, as both a retrograde form of socialist planning (in the sense that it represented the state's desire to regulate and control as many forms of possible careers as possible), and a market-based solution to the burden of mental health in society, is both a response to and reflection of the often partial and disjointed nature of the reform period. As we saw in the history of Ms. Liu (introduction), who despite forging her own path as a psychological counsellor still lived in the same apartment provided to her by her work unit, there is much of the past still in the present. As ethnographic materials from other contexts have shown, for example Matza's (2009) work on psychological talk shows in post-Soviet Russia, the rise of psy-services in contexts of stark social reform creates space for people to refashion the self in the face of such dizzying change. In neo-liberal Chile, as Clara Han (2012: 4) has shown, the legacy of the Pinochet regime's violence casts an incredibly long-shadow on contemporary society, and this "past-continuous" scar still significantly shapes understandings of care and healing. Similarly, in this thesis, I have shown how psychological counselling and the diverse uses to which this particular form of healing are put towards cannot be understood without understanding the

dynamic social forces that both give rise to this social phenomenon and also drive people towards it.

One of the key social dynamics of the reform period that finds expression in the psy-boom is the burden of choice. Marketization is intimately related to the expansion of consumer choice. As anthropologists of China have noted, the reform period has expanded desire (Rofel 2007) and individualized society (Yan 2010). These two trends together, when considered in light of rapid social change that has massively expanded the range of choices available for the average person, ends up a psychological problematic. To choose, in a dynamic marketplace, is to also have opportunity costs. This is compounded by how incredibly harsh the market-system is in China, with intense competition and scant safety net. The burden of choice therefore is increased as people know that making the wrong choice could potentially have serious consequences. This is a key contributing factor to the pervasive anxiety in Chinese society. As I argued in chapter 2, counsellors in China find themselves having to disavow their clients of the belief that they can help them make choices. As Ms. Liu and Ms. Wen were quick to point out, they are not life coaches. For Ms. Liu, she was there to help people sit with the choices they make—and not be paralysed and unable to make choices at all—rather than able in any capacity to tell people what the right choices may or may not be.

As young women like Rui Qi (chapters 3 and 5) try and steel themselves to choose love, fulfilling careers and a sense of purpose despite intense competition for each of these things, the quiet space of therapy becomes a place in which they can speak-out the trauma of endless competition. In other contexts where she might confide with a friend, a lover or kin, she finds that they are unable to listen without judgement due to her perceived status as a winner. This contributes to her sense of isolation and hopelessness. This is compounded by the nagging sense that whatever she chooses may not be the right choice in the end. A miss-step in her career path could leave her unemployed

or squandering the advantages she has had to that point. Counselling provided her with a place to voice her feelings and have them recognised. This was an experience that she found validating. After counselling she was able to re-engage with her social world and continue at its frenetic pace.

Rui Qi's experience with counselling aligns with recent ethnographies of China that have focused on the anxieties and struggles of elites. *Anxious Wealth,* John Osburg's (2013), ethnography of masculine socialising in Chengdu, showed the moral compromises that elite men had to make to succeed and the emotional toll that this caused them. Bregnbaek's (2016) *Fragile Elites* explores the existential drift of students at Tsinghua University in Beijing, long considered one of China's top institutions (and the alma mater of Xi Jinping). Despite their success in gaining admission despite frightening odds[61], the experience of the students Bregnbaek followed was somehow hollow. Standing in a train station with one of the students, she quotes him as staring at the mass of people moving along the station concourse before turning to her and saying, "we are on a train that is going fast, leaving the past, speeding towards the future, but nobody seems to stop and reflect on where the train is going" (Bregnbaek 2016: 4). This chimes with the work of Xu Kaiwen, one of China's most famous psychologists, who has coined the term "empty heart sickness" 空心病 to describe the malaise of students he would see in his practice at Peking University, another elite university in Beijing. What we learn through Rui Qi's experience is a way that someone has tried to make sense of and escape the fraught and often disappointing experience of being elite. Osburg's businessmen, Bregnbaek's students and Rui Qi are connected by their relative success compared to the rest of society. They are also connected by the fact that despite having achieved many facets of the normative good life—in the case of Rui Qi, graduating from a good college, being considered attractive and having multiple career options—these accoutrements somehow

[61] in 2020 there were 22 million high school graduates and less than 4,000 undergraduate admissions to Tsinghua

did not connect to provide a sense of wholeness. Psychological counselling allowed her to rearticulate herself to her social world and move past these feelings.

As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, the reform period has prompted the return of class in China. China has moved from class struggle to a highly stratified class system in the space of less than two generations (Yu Hua 2014, see also Goodman 2014). Much of the anxiety that was present in Chengdu at the time of my study could be attributed to this social reality. The psy-boom is a phenomenon that has largely touched affluent urbanites (though as we saw in chapter 3, Qian Zhuang is actively trying to reach beyond this demographic to other communities in need). Despite their relatively successful class position, this community clearly experiences significant enough anxiety to engage with psychological services. As Rui Qi noted, she felt that she could not stop striving for even a second because there were so many people waiting to take her place. The privileged therefore never feel settled in their class position and thus experience anxiety and burnout in their attempt to try and better themselves (or even to just remain in place). With little in the way of a social safety net should they fail, the elite are aware that should they stumble, they will fall extremely far and hard.

Even for the most privileged amongst the participants of the psy-boom, like Luna, who may not necessarily fear losing their class position because of how large a buffer of financial resources they have, they are not immune from other anxieties that success might bring. As we saw in chapter 4, the spectre of being perceived as a "strong woman" who had mortgaged her feminine attributes to achieve material success complicated her ability to sit with what she had achieved. While the men that I encountered participating in Ms. Liu's reading group had no issues with success—beyond wanting more of it—the women I encountered were constantly trying to balance their material successes with their affective needs. For Kong Ziran and Dujiang (chapter 4), material success confirmed their masculinity, and thus they experienced success as a linear path. More

success meant being more of a man, which would confer greater status and only ever spur them on to better things. They turned to the psy-boom to help them become more successful in their jobs, and in the case of Dujiang, because it also presented its own financial opportunities. For Luna however, her gender meant that she worried that her success rendered her unfeminine. She turned to the psy-boom to bolster her affective abilities as a hedge against the unfair perception that her success would render her a bad mother or an uncompromising "strong woman."

The psy-boom is a gendered phenomenon. However, it would be reductive to claim that the psy-boom merely perpetuates existing gender dynamics. It was possible, as I showed through the experiences of Ms. Wu and Yujia (chapter 4), to find people using psy-tools to secure gender norms and also to challenge them. This could happen within a single individual—as we saw with Luna, who simultaneously subscribed to gendered understandings of success but who also was trying to subtly influence her son to be more emotionally attuned and a better future partner. Recording the complexity of lives as they are experienced is one of the benefits of ethnography. It is what separates the fruits of the ethnographer from those of other social scientists. A less experience-near investigation could have easily glossed over the nuance of the dynamics that were present in the psy-boom and argued that it was a conservative force or a purely individualizing one. Rather, as this thesis argues, the psy-boom is an incredibly diverse social phenomenon. Heterogeneous ideas are put to diverse uses.

While there is a range of ideas present in the psy-boom, and the particularities of individual lives as lived means that these ideas find their expression in novel ways, this is not to argue that the psy-boom is a phenomenon diffuse to the point of being irrelevant. Rather, as this thesis argues, this diversity is intimately related to political, cultural and social forces. There is no single understanding of psychology, the mind, or healing from which counsellors or hobbyists are drawing from. There is also a process of "localisation" as counsellors indigenize Western psychotherapeutic concepts

to make them better suit their client's needs and societal expectations (Zhang 2014). Political decisions, like the launching of the MOLSS qualification or the 2013 National Mental Health law have also significantly shaped psychological service provision. Finally, the intersection with other social phenomenon in China today also significantly shapes the uses and understandings of psychological concepts and services.

This final point has been a key theme of this thesis. Class (introduction), gender (chapter 4), precarity (introduction), competition (chapter 5), the social context of economic reforms (chapter 2), the social idioms of distress in society at large (chapter 1), ideas of the normative good life (chapter 4), LGBTQ+ issues (chapter 2), shifting family dynamics (chapter 4) and more besides, all intersect with the psy-boom and within individual lives to shape the role and function of the practice of psychological counselling. An important contention of this thesis is that the psy-boom operates as a space through which these complex processes are figured through by participants. It allows people to step away from their world momentarily, either in a literal sense by attending a workshop like Ms. Liu's reading group or entering the digital world of *Know Yourself*, or in a more ambient way by having cultivated a set of psychological tools that allow them to reflect on situations in their social world and respond accordingly. What I argue in this thesis is that the psy-boom therefore functions to mediate between the macrosocial contexts people find themselves in and the microcontext of their lives as lived.

This could for example be seen clearly in the lives of the three counsellors that I profiled in chapter 2. Ms. Zhou, Ms. Liu and Ms. Wen were all psychological counsellors working in Chengdu at the time of my study, but yet, as I showed in that chapter, each of them had their own professional habitus that was influenced by the social context within which they had qualified to become a counsellor (or what amounted to being qualified at the time, as was the case with Ms. Zhou). As I argued in that chapter, this is more than simply the method of transmission, as with TCM (see

Hsu 1999), but also related to the level of psychological understanding in society at large, the social recognition of psychological problems, the level of economic development, the understanding of what constituted a problem (as in the case of LGBTQ+ issues), and the general sophistication of society. As could be seen in the lives of these counsellors, macrosocial forces ended up embodied in the microcontext of their therapeutic practice—the way that each referred to their respective "help-seekers" "callers" or "clients," how comfortable they felt in providing general life advice, the extent to which they understood LGBTQ+ desires as "curable," or the locations that they could be found operating. This observation is important from an anthropological perspective because of what this contributes to long-standing debates in the field about structure and agency, to which I now turn.

Considered Action

In this thesis I have tried to connect the themes of affect, subjectivity and agency. As I have argued, the psy-boom in China is an affective force, as it relates intimately to people's capacity to influence and be influenced by others—to be affected. I have also argued that *affects* can be understood as emotional categories (chapter 5), and that the rhetoric of the psy-boom, which affirms the importance of emotional states and provides users with tools to help them control their emotions, also makes it an affective force. As I argued in chapter 5 people in the psy-boom create "emotional ontologies" a term I borrow from Eva Illouz (2019: 214), in which shared understandings of emotions become a basis "for raising claims, for displaying a specific form of competence in formulating expectations and provid[e] social scripts for interactions." As I argue, this changes personal subjectivity, as people come to view themselves as capable of controlling their emotions and feel better able to manage their personal relationships. This subjective shift is playing out alongside intersubjective shifts in the moral symptomology of suffering in China, in which suffering is no longer something which is endured but is considered an issue of technical

management. The tools offered in the psy-boom are designed to meet these needs. Finally, these subjective and intersubjective dynamics comingle to shape understandings of agency. To view suffering as no longer a fact of life but rather something that can be overcome with recourse to certain psychological tools or technologies is to refashion understandings of agency.

As I showed in the section above, the psy-boom is playing out alongside significant social shifts in China. It is both reflective of these shifts as well as representative of them. This could be seen for example in the fact that people turn to the psy-boom to try and make sense of the intense social competition they experience in their lives, as with the example of Rui Qi. The psy-boom however is also characterized by intense competition itself, as we saw in chapter 3 with the extremely precarious situation for psychological counsellors themselves as they struggle to make a living. The fact that the psy-boom sits at the intersection of social forces such as these means it is an important phenomenon to understand the lived experience of people in China. As I have argued in this thesis, issues like class, gender, and economic precarity, to name just a few, are overarching social phenomenon that intersect with the psy-boom.

What I argue in this thesis is that the psy-boom acts as a mediator between these social forces, providing a space and affective repertoire in which social issues can be expressed by participants as psychological stresses and foster responses in the form of psychological tools. As I argued at various points in this thesis, following Ann Swidler (1986: 273) these tools form "strategies of action," or my own etic term, considered action. For Ms. Liu to say, "we can't change others, we can only change ourselves," represents an understanding of healing that is not passive. There is always something that can be done, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable external pressures—we can change ourselves. However, this notion of there being *something* that can be done, must come from *somewhere*. As I have argued in this thesis, the psy-boom helps people cultivate a particular understanding of agency, that is found in the way they apply psychological

tools to better understand themselves, to feel validated in their distress, and to rearticulate themselves in their social worlds.

As I argued in the latter two chapters of this thesis, social forces like gender and intense competition are structural issues that impede individual's pursuit of the normative good life. What the psy-boom provides for people is an ability to think through the often-contradictory desires that they might have in the face of such structural impediments. This could be seen in the *Jiandan Xinli* report on psychological stressors (chapter 5). That report listed issues like emptiness alongside problems in relationships at the workplace, giving a % score for each related to how prevalent they were amongst respondents. As I argued, it is not clear which way causality is supposed to operate according to this logic. Do you feel empty because of how badly you are performing at work, or does your emptiness make you perform badly? Later in that chapter I noted that *Know Yourself* published an article on workplace stress in which a female employee of a tech company refused to leave her desk for her boyfriend who was waiting for her downstairs at the entrance to her office. "I chose work," she says in the article. Here we see the often-ambiguous choices people are forced to make in pursuit of the normative good life, compounded by the social context of stark competition. Should you address your emptiness, or work on your relationships in the office? Should you go downstairs and be with your boyfriend, or should you keep working?

As Ms. Liu repeatedly told me—psychology is not there to provide the answers. It is there, however, to prevent people from being unable to make choices. This was Ms. Liu's theory of freely flowing emotions, which we encountered in chapter 5. It is in this context that I see the notion of considered action as a useful etic term to describe the form of agency that is being expressed in the psy-boom. In the face of such intensely complex structural forces, how do people make sense of the options that they have and manage to make choices, even if those choices are extremely compromised? Yujia's decision to not have a child was a choice that was heavily conditioned by

several key events—her accident, her choice to become a literary translator, and her engagement with psychological texts that she translated. Her engagement with those texts and the concepts within was what helped her form an understanding of herself as someone who did not need to listen to the criticisms of others, who could make her own choices, and could forge her own path.

Yujia's decision to not have a child is clearly a considered one. It is the product of deep introspection. This is not to argue that without the psy-boom such introspection would be impossible, but rather that psychological tools provide the idioms that help to structure the forms of introspection that people engage in and consequently the type of action that they feel they can take. As we saw with the *Yi Xinli* (chapter 3) article about "confirmation bias" the idea of texts such as these is that by identifying and giving name to certain social situations, that people will be able to identify them in their own lives and choose to act accordingly. Instead of potentially damaging their personal relationships by overly focusing on the ways their needs are not being met, a person who has read that article might stop for a moment and instead choose to focus on all the things that others do for them. This is an example of a considered action.

As I have argued in this thesis, social context shapes practice. In chapter 2 I delved more deeply into some of the anthropological literature that has been defined as "practice theory" (Ortner 2006). This literature is an attempt to move beyond the structure/agency dichotomy, to try to arrive at a more robust understanding of how both structure and agency are mutually constitutive of each and of wider social dynamics. Bourdieu (1977) proposed the habitus as a way to understand these dynamics, arguing (inelegantly) that it is comprised of "transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures." In the case of the professional counsellors that I profiled in that chapter, they had observably different professional habituses. At the same time however, the way that they had shaped their therapeutic practice as a response to the social context in which they had trained had created the conditions for the next generation

beneath them to exist. Without counsellors like Ms. Zhou laying the very foundations of the field and advocating for a psychological understanding of distress, perhaps there wouldn't have been people like Ms. Liu. Ms. Wen, even though she felt she was significantly better versed in academic psychology than Ms. Liu, still wanted access to her professional network. As such, their practice was constituted by social context, but also constituted their own form of social context that other counsellors had to respond to.

I am cautious, in the face of the intricate diversity of lived experience, to attempt to put an etic frame upon the forms of action that I saw playing out in the psy-boom. However, I believe that considered action is broad enough to encompass enough of what I was seeing to have theoretical relevance, without disempowering the people that I encountered. Considered action does not resolve the long-standing debate in anthropology between structure and agency any more than practice theory or any other attempt. However, I hope that it shows the way that the participants themselves went about trying to figure out what it was that they had a capacity to change. In the case of Ms. Liu this was clear. "We can't change others, we can only change ourselves." The way to do that was to foster a psychological toolkit that provided people with a sense that there were things within their control that they could manage, even in the face of much else that they could not. For others, they felt there was more that they could change. Ms. Wu (chapter 4) was happy to apply her psychological tools to try to fix broken marriages (and expel mistresses). Luna was attempting to use her psychological tools on her child to make him succeed in his exams without becoming an emotionless person who would struggle in his personal relationships. These actions that they have taken have been considered, and that consideration has been mediated by their engagement with the psy-boom.

The psy-boom is a subjective force. The way that participants decide what they can change and what they cannot is an intimate and discrete process. This thesis builds on the important work

focused on subjectivity that has been at the fore of China related anthropology for the last two decades (Kleinman et al 2011, Rofel 2007, Zhang 2018, Bregnbaek 2016). Scholars have done valuable work explaining how the dramatic social changes that have characterised Chinese society over the decades of the reform period become embodied and constitute substantive changes happening within the individual. Whether individualisation (Yan 2000, Kipnis 2011, Hansen 2015), the expansion of desire (Rofel 2007, Zhang 2015), or shifts in the understanding of an "adequate life" (Zhang, Kleinman, Tu 2011), the notion that Chinese people have experienced something in the decades of the reform period that operates beyond the surface of their lives is best captured by the metaphor of a "deep China" (Kleinman et al 2011). Inspired by this work, my study shows how dramatic shifts in the understanding of mental health are creating new social realities for participants within the psy-boom. These participants in turn are helping to expand the reach of a psychologised understanding of distress to a broader swathe of society.

This project has sought to go beyond a tendency in the anthropological literature of China which sometimes too neatly draws a line between specific social phenomenon and the creation of distinct "selves." As I argued in the introduction to this thesis there are plenty of examples available that illustrate this trend. There are, as I noted, Zhang and Ong's (2011) "entrepreneurial selves," Zhang's (2018) "therapeutic selves," Kleinman et al's (2011) "divided selves" and Rofel's (2007) "desiring selves," to name just a few. As I argued when I introduced these terms, I am somewhat sceptical of them because I feel they draw too neat a relationship between the subjectivity that is fostered and the social phenomenon that is said to have given rise to it. Rather, this thesis has tried to show that the psy-boom functions to articulate the many competing selves that might exist within an individual at any given time. Luna was clearly "entrepreneurial" in her career as a high-flying insurance broker, "desiring" in the sense that she wanted her son to get the best education possible, and "therapeutic" in the way she had invested heavily in training to become a psychological counsellor. All of these selves could be said to exist within her, and it seems reductive

to claim that any one of them would be able to account for the entirety of her being. Each of these selves that existed within her was cultivated as a response to dynamic social forces that shaped her life course. She was "entrepreneurial" during a time of intense marketization. She was "desiring" for her son in a time when educational achievement came to be a key determinant of future success. She was "therapeutic" because she was an educated, affluent, urbanite female who happened to live through the psy-boom and get caught up in it. She was a complex individual figuring through a complex set of problems in her pursuit of the good life for herself and her son, who she clearly loved dearly. To claim that there could be any one social force or any one subjectivity that could clearly define the multifaceted nature of this journey is to do a disservice to the complexity of her humanity.

Rather, I have tried to show, through the concept of considered action and the way that this thesis has engaged with the particular contours of the experiences that people shared with me, how people try to resolve the tensions they feel as humans with a capacity to act despite limited autonomy in the face of dynamic social change. I hope that this has helped this thesis to eschew the sometimes "trope[ish]" tendency in the literature of China-focused anthropology to reduce human experience to too-tightly defined subjectivities (Bregnbaek 2016: 423). Instead, I have tried to show the intersubjective process by which people have turned to psychological counselling and learnt psychological concepts as a way to shape their understanding of where they can exercise agency in their lives. As one scholar has argued, in China, which is both totalitarian and capitalist, it can be easy to draw on either of these paradigms and thus to label social phenomenon as either "forms of indoctrinated conformity or self-reliant adaptability" (Hizi 2021: 39). In this thesis agency and power have been reframed away from a too-simple binary that would place power solely in the hands of the state and leave resistance as the work of ordinary people (Kuan 2015: 21). Rather, I have argued that the participants in the psy-boom are situated actors, with varying degrees of complicity and disjuncture with their society and the political system. The psy-boom is

a space in which people rearticulate themselves to their social worlds, putting into practice the lessons they have learnt about themselves and their relationships to others.

Social Change

For scholars interested in the study of China, this project helps chart the rise of a popular form of healing as people grapple with the stark inequities and vicious competition that has come to define the later reform period. This phenomenon plays out against the backdrop of an increasingly precarious economic situation and the sharply authoritarian turn that Chinese governance has experienced since Xi Jinping took power. This thesis expands understandings of contemporary mental healthcare in the PRC and both draws on and contributes to a field of research pioneered and developed by scholars such as Arthur Kleinman (1986), Li Zhang (2020), Jie Yang (2017), and Huang Hsuan-Ying (2014) that shape the anthropological record of mental healthcare in China. This project is deeply indebted to works such as Zhang's (2020) and Yang's (2015) framing of the psy-boom as a phenomenon concerned with "therapeutic governance."

For Jie Yang (2015), therapeutic governance is a process that is intimately tied into the state's desire to manage suspect populations. In her ethnography of the laid-off workers of the Beibiao watch factory in Beijing, newly unemployed female workers trained by the state to work as "chat companions" 陪聊 are sent to talk to their disgruntled former employees. They are sent to mollify them and remind them of their "potential" 潜力, so that they focus on themselves and their emotions, rather than causing social instability by organising against the factory or the local government responsible for the loss of their jobs (Yang 2015: 5). As she argues, "in general, the psychologization trend in China is not a departure from authoritarian political rule; rather, it facilitates both economic development and political legitimacy, for example, through building a harmonious society for the state," (Yang 2015: 17). For Li Zhang (2020: 151), one of her prevailing

themes is "how and why has psychological intervention, often in the name of *guanai* (loving care), gradually become a valued tool of managing citizens and governing society in postsocialist times?" Her answer is that it is more effective to govern through happiness and care than it is through coercion. "The impact of this therapeutic turn goes even more deeply than the level of managerial styles because it inevitably entails the remaking of soldiers, police officers, and workers into new subjects through simultaneously being both governed and cared for. It is in this sense that I speak of 'therapeutic governing' to highlight how the 'psy-fever' not only reconfigures governing practices but also remakes postsocialist subjects," (Zhang 2020: 169).

Both Yang and Zhang therefore see the psy-boom as a process that is intimately tied into issues of governmentality and subjectification. I have also explored these themes in this thesis to some extent, giving an account of biopower and governmentality in chapter 1, and exploring Wechat as a literal "technology of the self," following Foucault (1988), in chapter 3. However, while I see a clear value in the line of reasoning that Yang and Zhang have followed, my project has moved in a different direction to theirs. This is due, in part, to the different settings of our ethnographies. Yang had access to a government programme managing a problematized population of unemployed factory workers. Zhang managed to get access to military institutions, police officers and government employees. While I was granted access to a lecture that Ms. Wen hosted in a local party branch, that I wrote about in the introduction, I was unable to do follow up research with them due to the coronavirus pandemic. My fieldwork was amongst people who were less dramatically tied into the apparatus of the state, which is likely due to my position as a white male foreign researcher.

What I saw therefore was how people who were "outside of the system[62]" 体制外 applied psychological tools in their daily lives. While I see a lot of value in the work that has been done by Yang and Zhang, I also think that it can sometimes limit the agency of the people that they are writing about. At one point in *Unknotting the Heart* Yang (2015: 200) argues that by making the unemployed workers care about their emotional health "this tactic seeks to prevent workers seeing their difficulties as structural and organizing for collective action. So long as workers remain divided along institutional and regional boundaries, it appears unlikely that any meaningful labor movement will arise at the national level." While that might have been the case for her informants, in the case of the people that I interviewed they were intimately aware of the structural issues that they faced. Yujia knew how bad the future might be for her child—so she chose not to have one. Rui Qi knew how stark competition was, that's why she sought out a therapist. Qian Zhuang was terrified the government might take action against her if someone who used her platform committed suicide, which is why she was so intent on policing the claims her service made to make it clear she was in no position to help the seriously mentally ill. Yichen knew he couldn't count on being a psychological counsellor alone to make money, so he relied on the social capital (and funding) he got as an anthropology phd candidate to make a viable living.

In all the cases I have listed, and the others that I have detailed elsewhere in this thesis, the structural issues were patently obvious to the people involved. However, their choice to focus on the things that they could control—not having children, or applying to a phd programme, were related to their belief that there was still agency available to them despite the structural forces that limited their options. The psy-boom, as I have shown in this thesis, serves to mediate between social forces and allows people to believe that they can make choices. When Yang says that focusing on emotions forecloses the potential for a substantive labour movement, it renders her

[62] Which here I am interpreting as both the medical system and the apparatus of the party-state

subjects as overly passive. Given what we know about the fate of labour organizing in China (or any form of social activism under Xi Jinping), it is an entirely rational choice to focus instead on emotions and the few things that one can control. The alternatives are surely worse; either to quixotically organize and risk everything, or to be rendered paralyzed, neither changing the system nor oneself.

As I argued in chapter 5, I agree that the psy-boom is unlikely to provoke the kind of substantive social change that Yang implies when she talks about labour organizing. As I argued in that chapter, the psy-boom is a strange phenomenon because while it is steeped in negative affects and features a robust sociality, this does not seem to amount to a potential for social activism or a push for large-scale social reform. Yang argues that this is because the phenomenon itself is a conservative one that atomizes individuals as they are invited to focus on themselves and not on the structural forces that harm them. Instead, I argued that the potential for social change is foreclosed because of the skill of the CCP to prevent the negative affects that circulate within the psy-boom from "sticking" anywhere in the wider social world through their incredibly sophisticated censorship apparatus. The fact that the psy-boom does not cause social unrest is not because of something inherent in psychology or in people's inability to see the systemic causes of their distress after engaging with psychotherapeutic concepts. Rather, social unrest is foreclosed by an intense surveillance apparatus and diverse tools of political repression which make such action largely unthinkable. The psy-boom exists within this context, and as with all the other social forces that I have discussed so far, is both reflective of this reality and is a response to it. By fostering considered action, it allows people to draw boundaries between themselves and the party-state, and to figure through what they can and cannot control in a context in which political action is tightly policed.

Given this reality, when we note that the largest psychological service provider in China lists politically induced traumas like the Hukou system as "emotional stressors" (chapter 5), are we

supposed to read this as the "privatisation of social suffering" (Iskra 2020: 15)? Or can we read it as something more impressively human—the fact that even in contexts of extreme political repression people will find idioms through which to discuss what troubles them? Moreover, not only did they share a language through which to discuss their distress, they shared a common belief that this could be overcome. The psy-boom provided these people with hope. The entire architecture of the psy-boom was predicated on the idea that people could change their lives. That happiness was possible. That there was a deep interiority that existed in each person to be explored. No-one I met who participated in it had completely given up yet, neither on themselves nor the world. This is not a trivial observation, given the vast and incalculable changes that each of these people had experienced in China's rapidly developing economy, and the personal traumas they had experienced along the way.

But I do not want to suggest that hope is always positive. I oscillated between whether the psy-boom was an example of Novas' (2006) "political economy of hope" or whether it represented Lauren Berlant's (2011) "cruel optimism". For Novas (2006), who researched patient's advocacy organisations, a political economy of hope was the identity formation and proactive lobbying that these groups did on behalf of those with rare or untreatable conditions. In identifying themselves as sufferers and aligning themselves with the scientific and medical communities, they could marshal resources—often through charitable donations—towards finding a cure. What he was focusing on was how hope could come to form an economic reality for these communities. At times the psy-boom seemed to tread similar lines. While I have argued (chapter 1, 3, and 5) that the psy-boom does not effectively destigmatise mental illness, I did see within it a community of people advocating for the affective realm. They were talking about their emotions and creating an architecture through which to express and advocate for them. It was an attempt to render their subjective interiority into something that had purchase in the world. They did this in shared spaces, whether physically as in Ms. Liu's reading group, or online in the vibrant comment sections under

the articles posted by platforms like *Know Yourself*. In this sense it seemed to constitute something of a political economy of hope.

For Berlant (2011: 1), a relation of cruel optimism "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." Berlant's point is that many of the things that we desire—she was writing of the contemporary USA—are predicated on outdated cultural scripts that still circumscribe the eye-line of our desires and prevent our flourishing given the material reality of the world as it is. The people that Berlant focuses on live in precarious, austere, hyper-competitive economies. They have little hope of getting onto the property ladder. They struggle to commit to relationships in a sexually fluid world. They work zero-hour contracts. Yet they still desire an apartment, a life-partner and a stable career[63]. The cruelty of their optimism is that in reaching for these things, despite how rare they are in contemporary society, they fail to notice the crappy reality around them. "The subjects of precarity" she argues, "have chosen primarily not to fight, but to get caught up in a circuit of adjustment and gestural transformation in order to stay in proximity to some aspirations that had gotten attached to the normative good life." (Berlant 2011: 249). These subjects also fail to collectivise and agitate for a better world. This reading chimes with Jie Yang's (2015: 200) observation and would suggest that the psy-boom helps to foster cruel optimism. However, Berlant's cruel optimism relates to the subjects of neo-liberal precarity who choose not to engage in activism in conditions where political organisation can be possible, i.e. in the US, where movements such as #metoo or #blacklivesmatter have had material effects on the political and social landscape in recent years[64]. In China, as I have argued, the cruelty is not related to the inability of individuals to grasp the systemic nature of their problems or the misaligned

[63] This is almost exactly the bind that Rui Qi found herself in, chapter 5

[64] Her argument was written in 2011, prior to these movements gaining mainstream popularity. Though she was writing in the wake of the #occupy movement and the anti-Iraq war protests, to name just a few examples. She is arguing, however, why movements such as these remained fringe even when the political system would allow for them

incentives that prevent them from acting against these systems, but the result of increasingly sophisticated authoritarian rule, surveillance, and censorship.

In believing that happiness or fulfilment was always just one course or mastering another theoretical tool away, I would argue that Chinese subjects of precarity have chosen in their own subtle way to fight. This fight is taking place on the subjective and intersubjective terrain of the self. That people were choosing to find ways to express their distress and seek out like-minded fellow sufferers is not something that should be dismissed, even if it does not always conform to ideas that we might have about agency or resistance. They had carved out a space, amidst gross political censorship and campaigns to foster "positive energy" 正能量 (chapter 5), to speak candidly about the ways in which their lives had not played out as they expected. To choose to heal is itself an action imbued with many forms of agency. Agency is not just related to a delimited self that acts on discrete objects (Bateson 2000: 318). As I have argued in this thesis, the turn inwards and forms of healing precipitated by the psy-boom are not merely determined by discrete selves but are the product of intensely interrelated social, cultural and political phenomenon, their interplay and response.

Moreover, I hope that this thesis is read with an understanding of healing that is holistic or enactive. Through these approaches, which chime closer to indigenous Chinese schools of thought such as Daoism, "the human mind is embodied in our entire organism and embedded in the world, and hence it is not reducible to structures inside the head. Meaning and experience are created by, or enacted through, the continuous reciprocal interaction of the brain, the body and the world" (Miller 2017: 113). This thesis is not about mind/body dualism and I do not have the neuroscientific background to offer a nuanced enough reading about the direction that the field is taking. However, as I saw through the experiences of the people I profiled in this thesis, healing for them was an embodied practice that was constituted by the social world they found themselves

in. It was a process happening in the microcontext of their quotidian lives as they sought better for themselves and the people they cared about, playing out in the macrosocial context of the dynamic and shifting society they lived in. That they sought healing at all, and the form that this healing journey took, was itself its own constituted process.

When suffering is no longer a fact of life, but an issue of technical management, it is worth asking what is gained and what is lost in this new social reality. For Ms. Liu, her belief in her ability to change herself had allowed her to build a vibrant life, full of purpose and a large community of people who respected what she had to teach. There are arguments that can be made that to view suffering in this way—as something to be overcome through particular techniques and continued effort—we lose the meaning of suffering as something to be endured. What becomes of transcendence in a time of technical management? What are the soteriological implications for this particular understanding of healing? These are important questions, and they will play out in China alongside wider questions about the role of spirituality that were beyond the purview of this thesis[65]. But to argue too strongly in this direction is to move away from the experience-near reality of suffering as a bleak, quotidian horror.

In the West-Moon tower, where Ms. Liu's reading group would meet each week, I encountered a group of people who came together to discuss what ailed them. They spoke of their heartbreaks and traumas, of issues political and prosaic. They were bound together by the idea that the texts they discussed had some healing qualities, and that there was always the potential, despite everything, for there to be better days ahead. In the group there was a former TV presenter who would attend every week. She had lost a child a few years ago and had left work and subsequently

[65] It should be noted however that I have been invited to participate in John Osburg's conference on "Spiritual Crisis" in China at the University of Rochester, to be held in November 2021 and chaired by Yan Yunxiang. I hope that following this conference I can situate my project more closely with work conducted by scholars more closely following various forms of spirituality in China as a potential future avenue of research that I did not manage to pursue in Chengdu.

drifted into a deep depression. She had been treated by Ms. Liu and eventually decided to become a counsellor herself, hence her appearance each Tuesday. She had achieved Level 3, but just weeks before her Level 2 exams the qualification was dropped. She was once again adrift, studying piecemeal on Tuesdays and reading in her spare time, waiting for whatever exam would be announced. I think about her often, about the way that the psy-boom had helped her to pick up the pieces of her life and drive herself onwards. One night she pointed at the three professional counsellors in the group and said, "you're all so advanced! You are the future!"

EPILOGUE

Ms. Liu would often tell me that we can only fix ourselves. Her choice to become a psychological counsellor came after several years of existential drift. She suffered, and then decided to become an agent of her own healing. Many of the people I have described in this thesis came to the psy-boom after an experience of personal trauma. Ms. Wen (chapter 2) suffered from terrible migraines and had been abandoned by her father as a young child. Ms. Zhou (chapter 2) had lost her father in the Cultural Revolution and been sent away to toil in the mountains. Rui Qi (chapter 5) had felt lost in the face of the dizzying choices and life paths that forked ahead of her in the competitive marketplace. Ms Wu's (chapter 4) father had taken a mistress and walked out of her life. Yujia (chapter 4) had been in a terrible accident that took years to recover from.

In almost all these cases I met the person years after the traumatic event that had befallen them. I encountered them healed or healing, leaning into a process that had already fundamentally changed their understanding of themselves and the way they related to the world around them. I do not want to claim that these traumas are the same as those who experience war, ethnic cleansing or the kind of horrors that humans are wont to mete out upon each other. As Paul Farmer (1997: 279) has argued, "the capacity to suffer is, clearly, part of being human. But not all suffering is equal." I do not pretend that the cases I have engaged with here are representative of the worst suffering of humankind. But this suffering was real for the people who shared their stories with me. In all of these cases these experiences had ruptured their lives. Their trauma had torn the fabric of their being such that they had turned to psychological services and the materials of the psy-boom to stitch themselves back together, or to pattern themselves anew.

At the same time that I was encountering these people, by chance I witnessed a huge personal tragedy befall the family that I lived with in the city. As I have described at various points in this

thesis, I lived in the city centre with a retired chef, Brother Bing, and his wife Sister Zhou. We were extremely close. I have also worked in kitchens as a chef[66], and I attended a culinary school in Chengdu part-time, so I would spend a few nights a week in the apartment cooking with Brother Bing. I learnt a lot from him. Their daughter, Yuanyuan, was at college in the Qingcheng mountains. On occasion Brother Bing would drive over there to deliver food he had prepared, and I would sometimes go and climb the mountain with him after. We would drink tea on the misty side of the mountain and invariably he would tell me about the hopes and dreams he had for his daughter. Over the course of the first six months of my fieldwork he managed, with the help of the son of his wife's best friend, to get Yuanyuan into a top university in Singapore. He was nervous about sending her abroad, and he would often ask me about how I found being so far away from my parents, in a radically different place, using a language I did not grow up speaking.

In the summer of my fieldwork year, I went to Berlin to visit my boyfriend. I ended up breaking my foot while cycling (I accidentally put my front wheel into an open tram track and went over the handlebars) and so my one-month trip bled into an entire summer. By the time I made it back to Chengdu something had shifted with the family I lived with. Brother Bing was now working in a restaurant and was never home. I barely saw Sister Zhou either. When I did, she seemed skittish. We didn't manage to hold a proper conversation before she would furtively duck into another room. From seeing them a few nights a week, I now went weeks without seeing them. I was surprised that Brother Bing, now 60, would decide to go back to working in a kitchen, given how often we'd talked about how Chinese cooking is such an intensely physical form of cooking 体力活. He told me, via text, that his decision was based on the fact that he had seen a restaurant advertising for older workers, and that such an opportunity was rare. "An enlightened boss," he said, "to provide opportunities for people like me."

[66] As I finish this thesis I am currently also employed as a chef in a restaurant in Soho, in central London.

The week before I left Chengdu, I received a text one evening from Sister Zhou asking me to come and speak with them. I told them I was not home and was planning to go to a nightclub. They told me they would wait up for me. Considering the hours they worked I knew that whatever they wanted to talk about was serious so I rushed home. When I arrived the apartment was dark, save the twinkling lights of the city beyond providing an ambient glow. They were sat on the sofa and asked me to take a seat opposite them.

"We wanted to tell you in case you saw the advert online," they said. "We have had to sell the apartment." The apartment had been inherited from Sister Zhou's parents and was the thing they were the proudest of. It had once been part of their work unit but had been sold to a developer who had renovated it and turned squat building into a 30-storey apartment block with offices on the first four floors. When the government sold the unit, they made the developer offer apartments to the former tenants of the work unit housing. Within the two decades they had lived there the apartment had increased in value exponentially as the city developed around it. Once the Tai Koo Li shopping centre opened just beneath it, the price of the apartment tripled overnight. Often Brother Bing would tell me in the kitchen that he had been able to provide almost nothing for his daughter. He felt uncultured because of his lack of formal education. He bitterly resented the fact she missed out on her dream school by a single mark on the Gaokao, which he attributed to his inability to help her with her homework at an earlier age. But he would often say that at least he could leave her the apartment, and with it guarantee a baseline for her future. For them to sell the apartment was something I never expected.

The family had been scammed out of their life savings. Sister Zhou's best friend's son, whom she had seen grow from a tiny infant—a boy who affectionately called her Zhou *ayi*—had managed to take them for everything they had. The school in Singapore that he had claimed to have

privileged access to was a fiction. Over the course of a year, he managed to get the family to pay for non-existent visas, for student cards to get access to libraries that didn't exist, to expedite documents that were filed nowhere, and vast sums to enrol in a school only existed in the glossy PowerPoint and fake website he created to lure them in. Brother Bing was an easy mark. He still smarted from Yuanyuan's Gaokao failure, and here was his chance to redress the faulty system of breakneck competition. Hadn't Bo Xilai sent his son to Oxford? Didn't Xi Jinping's daughter go to Harvard? The shortcut to success was abroad. Finally, he could make up for what he felt he'd never given her. Yuanyuan's future had shone brightly for an instant, then burned up against the harsh atmosphere of reality.

The scammer managed to entrap thirteen families, many of them close contacts. There is a term for what he did; "fleecing familiars" 宰熟. He leant on the affective bonds that he shared with the families to sell them on the wild scheme he had concocted. Brother Bing and Sister Zhou had kept borrowing money from the bank and then from grey market lenders and eventually from their friends to sustain them in trying to purchase Yuanyuan's future. In the end they owed over a million RMB. The apartment was the only way they could pay off their debts. When the scammer was eventually caught by the police en-route back to Singapore, they found only 30,000rmb, which was distributed evenly between the three families. Brother Bing was given less money than he had paid for the imaginary student card to the fake college he had hoped would change his daughter's life.

I have struggled in the year since leaving Chengdu with how to reconcile the story of Brother Bing's family with what I witnessed in the psy-boom. That I should have been witness to a great personal tragedy at a time that I was studying mental health and popular forms of therapy and healing did not seem like something I could avoid addressing in my thesis. I also believe that anthropologists (and writers) have an ethical responsibility to bear witness. However, it was also

not something that sat neatly with the rest of the material I had collected. Sister Zhou and Brother Bing had no interest in therapy or psychology. As I discussed in chapter 1 their understanding of mental health was still heavily informed by their childhoods in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. Their bookshelves did not contain any of the popular materials of the psy-boom (they did have a translation of a real estate textbook from Trump University, whose symbolic resonance and mysterious appearance in their life I still think about to this day). Brother Bing watched TV dramas and cooking shows. He barely read. Sister Zhou was more interested in reading about interior design, working as the receptionist at an architecture firm, than she was reading about the murky interior of the human mind.

When I returned to the UK, a few days after arriving, a friend sent me a message on Wechat. It was a link to a realtor's page. There was a virtual tour of the apartment online. I could walk around it in three dimensions, as if I was stood there. The real estate agent must have come and recorded the apartment before I'd moved out; I assumed a few days before Sister Zhou had sat me down and told me what had happened. I could see my coat on the back of a chair. My books were scattered on my desk. At least I had made my bed that day. It was not a big apartment, yet I spent a lot of time over the coming days virtually touring it. I'd walk through the living room, as I had so many times before. I'd imagine myself throwing my keys on the desk and walking over to the balcony to stare at the city beyond.

On my virtual tours I would feel a deep sadness. I felt like an ethereal presence, haunting the house. The feeling was not so much for the life I had left behind, but more for the crushing realisation that I was powerless to stop what was happening to the family. It felt like a metaphor, wandering around the apartment but unable to touch anything. Unable to move objects, or make my presence felt. The circumstances were what they were, and the dynamic market would soon see it disappear entirely into the hands of another family. Within a month the virtual tour stopped. I messaged

Brother Bing to ask how things were going. They'd sold it for slightly less than the total of their debts, but at least it was something, he said.

When Brother Bing drove me to the airport on my final day in Chengdu we didn't say much in the car. I asked how he was feeling about everything and he shrugged. "It's our fault," he kept repeating. I told him that I didn't think that was strictly true. They had been, for a variety of reasons, highly susceptible to a sophisticated scam. I was unsure if 'fault' was the correct way to think about their willingness to trust their best friend's son, who they had known since he was a child. Nor were they wrong to want the best for their daughter. "But if it is not our fault, then who is supposed to take responsibility for this?" It was a hard question to answer.

Brother Bing's family had been so easily fleeced because of a set of overlapping circumstances. Yuanyuan grew up in a time in which social mobility stagnated and competition for the few avenues to attain the normative good life became surreally intense. She had missed out on her dream place at university by a single point, in a culture where a single mark on an exam can truly alter the entire life course. She grew up in a value system that says educational achievement is the baseline from which anyone can rise, and thus in which failure is that much more potent. Brother Bing and Sister Zhou raised her in a time when inequality spiralled, and the powerful sent their children to elite institutions abroad. They were not blind to the many ways that the deck had been stacked against their daughter, and they were offered a chance to play a new set of cards. On top of all this is a cultural tendency to lean on patronage networks to get ahead. There is a willingness to believe in the ties that bind, even when this opens up the potential for "fleecing familiars." None of these are things that Brother Bing and Sister Zhou should be "responsible" for.

I sometimes struggled whenever people in the psy-boom would create a separation between the "big things" that troubled the nation 国家大事 (chapter 5), and their resolute decision to focus

on the small things in their own lives 家庭小事. To me there was no separation between them. To live in a nation, wherever that may be, is to live under a set of governing assumptions. It provides the metacontext of your society. It is, like the pollution that would sometimes make the sun perfectly visible to the naked eye, as pervasive as air. Brother Bing and Sister Zhou believed they were victims of their own stupidity. The evening they told me about the scam Sister Zhou wept into her hands telling me she was an idiot. Brother Bing shook his head and said he just could never have imagined someone they were so close to could be so evil. He wasn't to know, but he also truly felt himself to have not been smart enough to see the reality before it was too late.

But as I noted in the conclusion to the thesis, we should not discount the boundaries that people draw between themselves, their society, and the party state. The fact that people would distinguish between issues that troubled the nation and those which troubled themselves did not mean that they were not intimately aware of the structural problems around them. It is just that they chose to narrow their focus on the things within their control. However, this same tendency could also mean that for someone like Brother Bing he was quick to identify his own culpability and focus on the mistakes that he made, rather than question the social conditions that had created fertile ground for what had happened to him and his family.

The story of what befell Brother Bing's family intersects with many of the key themes of this thesis. As I argued in the introduction, the reform period has seen the most dramatic social change in any society in human history, with hundreds of millions lifted from poverty. However, these gains have not been distributed evenly due to corruption and the foibles of a poorly regulated market economy moving at breakneck speed. It has sparked intense social competition, to the extent that entire generations feel "involuted"内卷化 as they hurtle relentlessly in pursuit of the vanishingly few spots available to guarantee the normative good life. Yuanyuan missed her spot by a single point on the college entrance exam, an event whose cascading trauma would eventually come to

cost the family their home. The family have tragically come to represent how iniquity can compound itself in the life course, underscoring the cruel entropy of China's reform period.

They were lucky, in some sense, that they managed to sell their house in early January of 2020. By late January they were in lockdown as the pandemic response of the Chinese government saw strict restrictions imposed across the country for a period of at least three months. In the subsequent months, as the country reopened and economic activity began again, Yuanyuan graduated from college and started working in a popular bubble tea shop in Chengdu city centre. Sister Zhou took extra hours at her firm and Brother Bing went from the restaurant he had been working in to a different one, where he was a prep chef. He no longer did service. He did not stand before the heat of a wok and conjure dishes to order, but instead did all of the meticulous work that happens prior. He chopped vegetables, prepared sauces, measured portions and helped clean down the kitchen at night. Long hours, poor pay. As soon as restrictions lifted, they were out of their home, and started living in a place half the size.

I don't know if it is the role of the anthropologist to speculate on alternative futures. I am drawn to Luhrmann's (2001: 281) definition of an anthropologist as trying "simply to describe the world as she has found it." That is what I have done here in the case of Brother Bing and his family. To draw their story into conversation with all of the other stories that I collected during this project is to try and highlight the areas of convergence and divergence between different understandings of healing that co-existed in China at the time I conducted this research.

Brother Bing's family were not participants in the psy-boom despite the trauma they experienced. It is hard to reconcile their suffering with the rest of the material of this thesis. They did not turn to psy-services in the wake of this trauma to try to heal. They put their heads down and ploughed on. Even to mention it now, as an epilogue, is a decision that I have gone back and forth over

many times. But I include it here for a number of reasons, not least because without it being mentioned somewhere in the thesis would be to sidestep an event that has informed everything I have thought about my time in Chengdu and the role of the psy-boom in wider Chinese society.

A few months ago, Sister Zhou messaged me to tell me that the scammer had been given 14 years in prison. She was ambivalent about the verdict. The family received no money beyond the thirty thousand recovered from him and distributed amongst all the families affected. The verdict consequently did not change their material circumstances. It had at least allowed them to close the door on what had happened and get social acknowledgement that the actions that had befallen them had been criminal and serious in nature. Still, she felt for his parents, who had until the incident been her closest friends. On an empathetic level she could understand they were suffering, despite everything.

Ms. Liu said that we can only fix ourselves. When I think of Brother Bing and Sister Zhou, I am saddened by their suffering. For them to be "healed" would require a radical reordering of society. A society in which a single mark on an exam can brutally foreclose so much is not a society that we can consider "well." A justice system that only knows how to punish and not rehabilitate is not one that can provide closure for any of the families involved. A political-economy that provides such scant safety nets that a 60 year old goes back to the same kitchen role a 16 year old might be expected to do, for 15 hours a day, 6 days a week (with a half day on the 7th), is antithetical to an "adequate life" for all its people (Zhang, Kleinman, Tu 2011).

In the absence of broad social reform, the best we can expect is that one day Brother Bing will wake up and not feel so bad. Sister Zhou, sitting at her desk, realises she hasn't cried in a while. Yuanyuan finally finds a career rather than just a job, hangs up her bubble-tea apron and allows herself to breathe into her future. I worry that Brother Bing and his family have neither

soteriological or transcendent frames for their suffering, nor the psychological tools to feel they can manage it. Instead, they are left with the shame of what happened, and their self-blame. Time does heal. But it also leaves scars. I have no doubt that the family will, eventually, put these events behind them. And then life will come again. Be it a pandemic, or a war, an environmental catastrophe or some more prosaic, quotidian, trauma. They will be hurt again. We all will.

Perhaps what Ms. Liu means, in her invocation to heal ourselves, is that we try to take time into our own hands. Instead of being passive in the face of trauma, we do what we can to suture our wounds. It is this sense of control, whether actual or imagined, that is at the heart of her understanding of healing. Like Ms. Zhou reaching for Heidegger, or Ms. Wen choosing to heal others despite her shattering migraines, it is the choice to not simply wait for time to do its work that separates these people from Brother Bing and his family. I do not mean to suggest that these people are "healed" in any objective sense of that term. But they are on therapeutic journeys, orienting themselves towards a life that has less pain. They may never arrive, but they stand at the helm, in control of the rudder. Brother Bing is cast on a tempestuous sea, his sail tattered, riding waves that may never abate.

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