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Building the skill of happiness: WeChat's role in the promotion of mental health in China

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Abstract: China is in the midst of a “psy-boom” as the use of psychological services and interest in psychology and psychologically informed personal development tools are seeing a meteoric rise. One of the key drivers of this trend has been the innovative use of social media tools like WeChat by psychological service providers to both attract consumers and deliver products. This paper argues that online psychological service provision via WeChat constitutes a very literal “technology of the self” in the way that the content published explicitly tells consumers that a better, healthier and happier self is within reach. For a fee these companies help provide people with psychological toolkits that they use to shape their understanding of the ways they can heal themselves and others.

Keywords: anthropology; China; mental health; technology; WeChat

“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* and *Jiandan Xinli*. Cumulatively the companies behind them have received millions of dollars in venture capital funding. The largest of them in terms of audience, *Know Yourself*, has a following of over 9mn people.

This article seeks to achieve two main 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 and contribute to the rapidly

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developing mental health industry in China. It will be argued that a platform like WeChat creates the necessary digital 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. As such, the idea of mental health being itself a kind of commodity is 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.

Secondly, having started with a view from within these companies, looking at their aims, 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, the CEO of *Know Yourself*, said when we spoke, “happiness is a skill; I want to help people develop the skill of happiness”.¹ This article wants to take seriously this claim and to ask 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. The existence of a psy-boom² in China is well documented³ 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 experiences of people in China, they constitute a new subjective frame through which people come to understand their lives, their sorrows, and their psychic obligations. 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. It is also less explored in the literature because it is a recent phenomenon of the last five years.

In general, the content of these online psychological service providers suggests that the moral symptomology of suffering in China has shifted in the post-reform period, as I explore in more detail below. By suggesting that suffering is not a fact of life that must be endured, but a bump in the road that impedes smooth passage,⁴ people are encouraged to manage their own suffering—to turn inwards,

¹ Qian Zhuang, personal interview, 15.5.2019.

² Consistent with Bram (2020, 2021) I choose the term psy-boom over psycho-boom as some other scholars prefer. See Bram (2020) for discussion.

³ Zhang (2016), Yang (2015).

⁴ Bram (2021).

to develop psychotherapeutic tools and a robust concept of the self. In this telling, suffering is the result of not having the correct toolkit to navigate life. This is not to try and adjudicate whether 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 there is less. Rather, what is important 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”.⁵ 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”.⁶ 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.⁷

Building on the work of scholars such as Ann Swidler⁸ and her concept of “strategies of action” and Lauren Ahearn’s⁹ notion of agency as a “socially mediated capacity to act” I seek to show how the psy-boom, and in the context of this paper, 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 paper, 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

⁵ Miller and Rose (1994: 36).

⁶ Pupavac (2001: 362).

⁷ Pupavac (2001), Miller and Rose (1994).

⁸ Swidler (1986: 273).

⁹ Ahearn (2001: 112).

expected to be better able to heal themselves and to sit better with the anxieties and doubts that characterize modern life.

Foucault wrote at length about technologies of the self.¹⁰ As Foucault 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”.¹¹ These technologies 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.¹² Could there not be 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 which sees people implored to take charge of their mental health by adopting psychological tools to manage suffering. 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.

The notion that the psy-boom in China is creating a change in people’s subjectivity is an important one. Kleinman and his collaborators have made clear 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.¹³ The role of subjectivity in the psy-boom has also been explored by scholars such as Teresa Kuan, in the case of mothering,¹⁴ Gil Hizi¹⁵ in the way that personal development is a gendered practice, Jie Yang¹⁶ in her work on the unemployed and Li Zhang¹⁷ in her work on therapeutic selves. An area in which this work lacks however is to extend that analysis online. Huang Hsuan-Ying¹⁸ has written about WeChat accounts, in particular *jiandan xinli*, but his work focuses on the development of the platform and how it succeeded given the context of psychological counselling in China. I seek to build on his work, and the other scholars of the psy-boom, to extend the analysis of subjectivity online.

¹⁰ Foucault (1983: 208, 1988: 18).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² ibid.

¹³ Kleinman et al. (2011).

¹⁴ Kuan (2015).

¹⁵ Hizi (2018).

¹⁶ Yang (2015).

¹⁷ Zhang (2018).

¹⁸ Huang (2017).

This paper is based on my interviews with key figures in the company *Know Yourself*, 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with therapists and self-identified ‘psychology hobbyists’ who use these services in Chengdu, Sichuan, and months of my own consumption of the product offerings of these three companies; including taking online courses, listening to podcasts, using *Know Yourself*’s mindful meditation app, and reading the articles posted daily. These interviews were conducted for my Dphil thesis, which was awarded in 2022 at the University of Oxford. The fieldwork period for this project lasted from 2018 to 2019. The focus of this project was to conduct ethnographic fieldwork into psychological counselling and mental healthcare offered outside of the medical system 体制外. The decision to conduct fieldwork in Chengdu was related to exploring the development of this social phenomenon in a large affluent urban environment, but away from the coastal and more internationalised cities like Shenzhen or Shanghai, or the capital, Beijing. The interviews were conducted in Chinese (simplified) and the research was granted CUREC2 ethical approval.¹⁹ Sources are anonymized except for Qian Zhuang since she would be identifiable by her job title. She agreed to appear in the research without being anonymized.

1 WeChat as infrastructure

In 2011 WeChat was founded by Tencent, one of the three tech-giants,²⁰ that form the backbone of the Chinese internet. Within 433 days of launching, WeChat had amassed over 100 million users.²¹ 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*.²² In Chinese it is often referred to by the term “eco-system” 生态. Huang Hsuan-Ying, writing about *Jiandan Xinli*, has noted that it is an example of “infrastructural entrepreneurship” in the way that it built out a system for connecting people with therapists.²³ I would contest 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. Because WeChat has such an incredible range of functionality and makes

¹⁹ No: R59118/RE001.

²⁰ 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).

²¹ Lu (2018).

²² Plantin and de Seta (2019).

²³ Huang (2017: 30).

commodifying services within its platform so easy, it has helped these online psychological service providers easily 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, whether in person or conducted purely online. It has payment functions, messaging functions, a social-feed function like Twitter or Facebook, small-apps which makes it operate almost like an operating system, and 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 1 rmb, and also to pay for my rent each month. WeChat is also integrated into government services with over 20 million government affiliated public accounts.²⁴ One group of scholars have referred to WeChat as "super-sticky"²⁵ for the way it has now become an intractable fact of digital life in China, its stickiness related to the fact that its omnipresence and deeply embedded functionality makes it impossible to delete.

Given that WeChat is now a cornerstone of the Chinese online life 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 suggest the possible actions that can be undertaken with it.²⁶ 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

24 广州日报 (2017).

25 Chen et al. (2018).

26 Gibson (1966); see also Norman 2013's updated term "action possibilities".

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?”.²⁷ The article is a review of the show, published under the by-line *shudan* 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”.²⁸ 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.²⁹

As you can see, the affordances of WeChat, by merging social, payment and media functions, creates 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. For example, 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 slightly 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 Zhian” 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’ 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

27 书单 (2019).

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

Psychotherapy Institute. It requires 10 h 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 41,200 rmb.³⁰ 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.

Another key aspect of these accounts is that they offer online booking services to help clients arrange counselling services 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-Ying³¹ has shown, 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, as pointed out by Michael Philips of the Shanghai Mental Health Project.³² 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 Huang³³ notes in his article on *Jiandan Xinli* as an example of infrastructural entrepreneurship, 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.

A recent article in *Forbes* looking at the demand for mental health treatment in China speaks of their being "at least 180 million potential customers, 4.3 million of them in desperate need".³⁴ 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.

³⁰ \$6,127usd as of 20.6.2022. For reference, the average monthly salary in Chengdu at the time was less than 6,000 rmb, \$896usd.

³¹ Huang (2017).

³² Michael Philips, personal interview, 22.3.2019.

³³ Huang (2017: 30).

³⁴ Chen (2016).

What is the actual content offering of these companies? Where do these companies sit within the wider psy-boom in China? Considering that the decoupling of mental health from mental illness is core to the business models of these companies and is helping to raise broader psychotherapeutic consciousness in China, it does constitute 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. At its best, the WeChat model of psychological care provides a destigmatizing and less medicalized platform for the general population to address mental distress.³⁵

2 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).

"I Don't Need to Prove Myself to Anyone" 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

³⁵ See Bram (2021) for discussion of demedicalised language used by psychological counsellors both online and offline.

towards the close of the film is she able to reflect on the person she 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. Articles such as these 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”.³⁶ 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 Western psychological understandings 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 psychotherapeutically informed media companies. They manage to skillfully 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, the founder of *Know Yourself*, the average user of her service is 18–35, from a first or second tier city, has a university

36 *Know Yourself* (2019b).

education—40% of users have a master's degree—and over 70% are female.³⁷ 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 group.

When I ask Qian Zhuang why she believes her audience is overwhelmingly female she notes that men tend to somatise their distress and to not admit to its psychological aspect.³⁸ She also argues that family life and relationships tend to be the preserve of women.³⁹ 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 distress—what he terms 心理困扰 *xinli kunrao*.⁴⁰ He distinguishes between *kunrao* and more severe mental illness that could be considered bio-medical and for which more serious treatment might be sought. The point he is making is that *kunrao* is something that men might brush off and not consider important, while women take *kunrao* more seriously and are willing to seek advice and accordingly make lifestyle adjustments.

A key aspect of these companies is the decoupling of mental health from mental illness. In the case of *kunrao* this process is made explicit. 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.⁴¹ However, because these platforms are taking on 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 are filling 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, and should not be considered, capable of dealing with the severely mentally ill. The split between

³⁷ Qian Zhuang, personal interview, 15.5.2019.

³⁸ ibid.

³⁹ ibid.

⁴⁰ Winter 2019, personal interview, 9.5.2019.

⁴¹ Qian Zhuang, personal interview, 15.5.2019.

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 general *kunrao*. In those 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 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 technonationalist 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 of being held accountable 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. As discussed above, the audience that is most receptive to this at the present moment 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 third to fourth 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”.⁴²

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

⁴² Qian Zhuang, personal interview, 15.5.2019.

complexities of erectile dysfunction.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ They therefore end up reinforcing the stereotypes of the platform that lean towards specific audiences.

3 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 educative; 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 Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) trained chat-bot—i.e. they perform an educative function which helps to destigmatise mental illness and makes 'mental health' 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 framework⁴⁵ 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 as conceived within anthropology it is "the sense of one's self and one's place in the world".⁴⁶ Subjectivity is the historical and contextualised sensibility through which the self is understood and mediated. 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,⁴⁷ and rather to see the

⁴³ Zhi'er (2019a).

⁴⁴ Winter 2019, personal interview, 9.5.2019.

⁴⁵ This framework is not imported wholesale but through a process of localisation, as explored in depth by Li Zhang (2014).

⁴⁶ Biehl (2007: 129).

⁴⁷ Jie Yang (2017), Li Zhang (2014, 2016).

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-boom⁴⁸ that this article 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”.⁴⁹ 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 *kunrao* 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 their personal 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 phenomena 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 phenomenon⁵⁰ of working from 9 am to 9 pm 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,⁵¹ 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

⁴⁸ see Jie Yang (2015), Zhang li (2014), Jie Yang (2017).

⁴⁹ Biehl et al. (2007: 126).

⁵⁰ Zhi’er (2019b).

⁵¹ Rui 2019, personal interview, 25.10.2019.

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.⁵² 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. 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 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.

Here we see how psychological tools are offered as a way for people to feel in control of their emotions no matter the situation. Agency can be understood as the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act."⁵³ Here we see how a psychological

⁵² *Yi Xinli* (2019).

⁵³ Ahearn (2001: 112).

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. 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 bunch of "psychological assessments 测试" for 25.90 rmb (\$4 usd). 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) has argued 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*".⁵⁴ As such, the knowledge of self that is provided by doing a psychological assessment can also be come to be seen

⁵⁴ Illouz (2018: 7), emphasis in original.

as an emodity because it is both its own commodity and 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 fulfillment in relationships. As such, there is a hermeneutic relationship 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 Zhang⁵⁵ has referred to as the 'inner revolution.' As such, the desire by 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 is on track to be a US\$43.10bn industry by 2020.⁵⁶ Physical fitness also finds its expression through apps and digital interventions; one fitness app, *Keep*, had over 100 mn users in China as of 2017.⁵⁷ Dovetailing with companies in the mental health sphere, *Keep*'s audience is also predominately in first and second tier cities, and over 77% of them are under the age of 35.⁵⁸

If twenty-first 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 companies similarly targets the *kunrao* 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.⁵⁹ The scholar Jie Yang has written 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

55 2020: 54.

56 Holman (2018).

57 *ibid.*

58 *ibid.*

59 Qian Zhuang, personal interview, 15.5.2019.

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 to Prove Myself to Anyone” the top rated comment, with 2,513 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, 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.⁶⁰ 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 in 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.⁶¹ The market ends up forming the meta-context of this particular conception of wellbeing and health.

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. One scholar has argued 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”.⁶² 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

⁶⁰ See Bram (2021) for expanded discussion.

⁶¹ Illouz (2018: 7).

⁶² Lerner quoted in Aronson and Duportail (2018).

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 Perry⁶³ 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. When I lived with my host family in Chengdu, the patriarch, 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 and 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 be commanded 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.

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”⁶⁴ then what is the role of suffering in society? 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”.⁶⁵ 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 Kleinman in arguing that “the existential human condition is grounded in social suffering”.⁶⁶ While this is true,

⁶³ Perry (2002: 150).

⁶⁴ Westcott and Wang (2019).

⁶⁵ Feng Chen (1997: 22).

⁶⁶ Kleinman (2014: 132).

the frame through which suffering is understood can and does shift with its cultural, political and economic moment.

4 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 psychoboom manifests and sustains itself online through public WeChat accounts. 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. Online psychological service providers not only market individual counsellors or particular healing modalities, but they also market a psychological understanding of distress itself. As a literal "technology of the self"⁶⁷ it has been shown that it has the potential to change people's perceptions of agency over their healing and wellbeing.⁶⁸

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 paper 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. 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 paper 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.

67 Foucault (1983).

68 Swidler (1986), Ahearn (2001).

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