

Somatosphere Presents

**A Book Forum: Reflections on Li Zhang's
*Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of
Psychotherapy***

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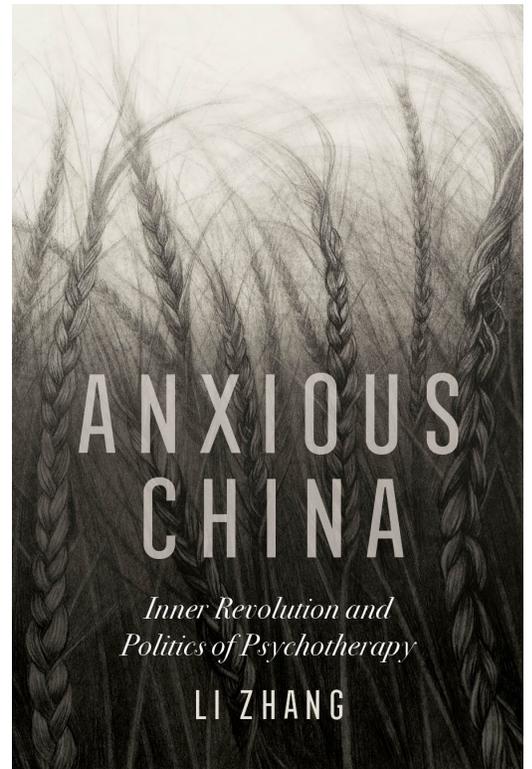
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And a reply from:

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Book Forum: Reflections on Li Zhang's *Anxious China*

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This book forum brings together eight anthropologists to discuss Li Zhang's *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy* (University of California Press 2020). Zhang examines the rise of psychotherapeutic practices in contemporary China, documenting how techniques for managing mental distress are intersecting with new forms of self-care and modes of governing in the context of tremendous politico-economic transformation. While grounded in the ethnographic specificities of middle-class Chinese urbanites, *Anxious China* offers powerful insights to scholars working on similar questions in diverse regions of the world.

Drawing on her own extensive experience researching Chinese self-cultivation and healing practices, [Nancy N. Chen contemplates](#) how the psychotherapeutic models of care discussed in Zhang's book have become the new platform for managing wellbeing in contemporary China. She engages with Zhang's concept of *bentuhua* to consider how the localization of psychotherapy offers possibilities for creating new breathing spaces for ordinary people grappling with anxiety and distress.

[Junko Kitanaka focuses](#) on Zhang's exploration of the "inner revolution," highlighting the power of ethnography in exploring interiority at the intersection of anthropology and psychotherapy (which she herself probes so deftly in Japanese contexts). Yet Kitanaka also tempers this optimistic reading by questioning how this new psychotherapeutic space works with or against growing digital surveillance.

[Dominique Béhague examines](#) the ambivalent tactics of therapeutic governing that lie at the heart of Zhang's book. Drawing on her own research in Brazil, Béhague underscores the generative tensions among state-controlled psy work, conflicting forms of expertise, and the possibilities of dialogic praxis that Zhang's ethnography brings out.

Holding out Western psychotherapeutic work as history and foil, [Rebecca Lester notes](#) that the perennial question is whether psy practices are politically conservative or potentially liberatory. Lester shows that Zhang offers a powerful alternative to this oversimplified debate by demonstrating how Chinese adaptations of Western psy practices enable multiple culturally relevant models of personhood and the self.

Reflecting on her own personal and professional experiences as a partial insider to the psy fever gripping contemporary China, [Zhiying Ma considers](#) Zhang's analysis of the rise of psychology as a scientific discipline and as a tool for governance. Ma questions whether and how these emergent psy practices fulfill quests for meaning and transform actual family lives and intimate ethics.

Writing in the form of a personal letter, [Tomas Matza offers](#) a heartfelt response to Zhang's book in the context of his own anguish and loss. Matza calls attention to Zhang's careful efforts to resist homogenizing binaries and highlights the shifting assemblages and human stories at the center of her book.

[Li Zhang concludes](#) the book forum by offering her own reflections on these interlocutors' notes and queries. As the contributors of this book forum reveal, reading the affective landscape of China during this global pandemic takes on heightened significance in the turbulence of worldwide distress and suffering. Although Zhang completed her research long before the first cases of COVID-19 were diagnosed, the wide-ranging conversations sparked by her poignant ethnography showcase the enduring relevance of her work to the pressing concerns of our anxious era.

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Recasting Therapeutic Models of Care Before and During the Pandemic

Nancy N. Chen

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The deep impacts of China's economic reforms at a "breathless" pace over the past three decades have wrought profound economic and social transformations. Mental health concerns continue to illuminate the intersections of selfhood, social life, and state governance in postsocialist China. This timely monograph examines the "inner revolution" taking place across 21st century China via the recent growth in psychotherapeutic practices and cultures. While anxiety might be a global condition of the 21st century, Zhang argues that the category and range of experiences can be read as part of the affective landscape of contemporary China. Through the lenses of anxiety and distress for a range of actors, readers may understand how psychological counseling became the platform for managing wellbeing and the indigenization of therapeutic interventions.

Zhang highlights how psychotherapy might be made uniquely Chinese through the engagement of *bentuhua* – "the creative 'fitting'" or "culturing" of practices such that they become localized as part of everyday contexts. In many ways, this ethnography follows up on some of the social and cultural dynamics that contributed to the popularity of Chinese breathing, self-cultivation, and healing practices during the late 1980s referred to as *qigong* fever. Zhang illuminates how therapeutic models of care may become recast with multiple inflections of cultural meaning and ethics that include familial and social networks, Zen Buddhism and Daoism, socialist thought work and other interpretative models. Her examination of branding further offers wonderful insights on how a therapeutic model no longer in use elsewhere, can become bundled as a relevant business model for franchises.

Reading this book both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and then re-reading it during the ongoing global public health moment has facilitated different insights. My initial reading queried whether the utilization of psychological counseling and language beyond the clinic in work contexts might help to de-medicalize the work of therapy or would the incorporation of such techniques instead enable the full engagement of mind/body into the post-socialist work context. Zhang's examination of military, police, and state enterprise uses of psychological counseling for screening suggests how such practices might extend the medical/clinical gaze into different spaces. Rather than assume top-down hierarchical engagements, however, she suggests that the implementation of psychology and psychotherapy reflect certain notions of *guan'ai* or therapeutic governance and care that may transcend institutions. Zhang offers the

thoughtful insight by a fellow sand play therapy workshop participant, who happens to be a police detective, on two notions of self (*ziwo*) – one that is embedded within social relations while the other is detached from family, kin, or networks. Together the two versions complete the sense of being human for him.

As COVID-19 cases rise worldwide, access to mental health care is understood to be all the more critical as essential forms of care and recovery. With these frameworks, it is possible to comprehend the embrace of psychology and psychotherapy in China over the past decade as the profound journeys of ordinary persons seeking lifelines to address deeply felt concerns and create breathing spaces.

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Self-Exploration in the Age of Digital Surveillance

Junko Kitanaka

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In reading this exquisitely beautiful book by Li Zhang, on the emergence of a new psychotherapeutic space in China, I was deeply struck by her notion of the “inner revolution.” This is an evocative term that not only points to the fundamental revolutions that the Chinese state has gone through over the course of a century, but also the ways in which citizens have experienced, adopted, and transformed themselves. As psychiatric experts of wars and natural disasters know all too well, the true effect of such collective psychological suffering is belated, felt only after a certain time has passed (this might include the current pandemic: Zeavin 2020). Such trauma often remains long unexpressed, unknown (even to those who experience it), and thus unshared. And it is the collective, often generational, nature of the trauma that Chinese are now seeming to confront in their ardent exploration of their inner selves in this “inner revolution.”

The inner revolution has taken place in the context of the tremendous changes that Chinese psychiatry has gone through over half a century. Recently, Stefan Ecks, Harry Wu and I worked on a project to compare psychiatric attitudes toward depression in Myanmar, China, and Japan. We were particularly struck by the fundamental shifts in China: from Soviet-era psychiatry (when it was denounced as a bourgeois pseudoscience), to the state campaign to reexamine the Cultural Revolution (which encouraged people to share their stories of sociopolitical suffering using the psychiatric idiom of “neurasthenia”), to the current commercialization of psychological care and people’s embracing of anything psychologically-therapeutic. *Anxious China* is unique in that Li provides a testimonial on some of these historical events via her own experience of growing up with families deeply affected by the Cultural Revolution, who witnessed the rise of the neurasthenia discourse firsthand. As a native anthropologist who routinely goes home to investigate and participate in the current psy fever, Li is able to weave together different perspectives across generations and across different strata of society while being firmly grounded in a local sense of place, her own hometown. She thus gives us rare and invaluable insight into how Chinese have survived these tremendous historical transformations over the years and how they are now beginning to explore their effects on their psyche.

This gives Li’s book a special strength as she investigates the emergent psychological space with genuine curiosity about the potential that these new forms of care of the self might have. In so doing, she does justice to the main source of her conceptual inspiration, which is

Foucault's work on the care and the technologies of the self. His later work was notable for its shift in tone from his investigations of oppressive means of governance to the study of self-care that ancient philosophers adopted for themselves in their search for truth. Zhang's account of people searching for ways to interpret their lives radiates with the same sense of hopefulness, optimism, and creative energy. In parallel with their Japanese counterparts, Chinese psychiatrists and psychotherapists draw on rich cultural traditions of introspection and self-cultivation such as meditation, breathing exercises, calligraphy, and copy-printing of sacred texts, among others (the rather curious fascination with Jungian psychology is another common trait between Chinese and Japanese milieu that merits further examination). These "indigenous" forms of psychological care have apparently survived despite decades of political turbulence, where people's interiority was often thoroughly and sometimes brutally interrogated, scrutinized and modified through "thought education" and other forms of political censorship, persuasion and coercion. Their passion for a sense of liberty and self-knowledge is profoundly moving, particularly as Li is able to go beyond stereotypical analysis by drawing out surprisingly tender, self-agonizing and self-transformative narratives from different classes of people, including a housewife, an entrepreneur, a soldier, and a police officer. This reminds me once again the power of ethnographic encounters in exploring interiority well beyond cultural stereotypes at the crossroads of anthropology and psychotherapy, as we have learned from the classics like Vincent Crapanzano (1985)'s *Tuhami*.

While Li's account focuses on the emergent aspects of a tenderly creative, innovative, and optimistic space for introspection, I wonder how this coexists—or works against—the increasing digital surveillance that China seems to champion. How does this new psychological space stand in relation to the new digital space of surveillance of the population? Does the first represent the sense of interiority, depth and wholeness, whereas the latter is something assembled through the datafication of personal traits, movements, and utterances (cf. Greene 2020, Lupton 2020)? Does this psychotherapeutic space have the potential of developing into an independent space of private reflection, a kind of secret interiority that nurtures critical perspectives? Or does it simply become a platform of producing socially adaptive and well-adjusted self-entrepreneurs, individuals for whom self-cultivation is merely a means of self-promotion and social advancement? Will this psychological space be further incorporated into surveillance of the collective psyche, similar to what Li describes when pointing out the parallels between cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and the Communist Party's method of thought-correction? In one of the book's many fascinating details, Li illuminates a phenomenon where people go looking for a license to practice as a psychotherapist with the aim of naked self-advancement, but end up inadvertently gaining so much more, as they come away with a sense of genuine curiosity and desire for self-cultivation and enlightenment. This

is the duality of psychological care that increasingly theorists of digital therapy point to, where remote therapy is opening up surprisingly intimate spaces, even as it creates ambiguities about the nature (and ownership) of one's inner life (Zeavin 2020; cf. Kitanaka 2015). How might Chinese, who have been so adept at cultivating techniques of protecting the sense of their inner selves despite political turbulence, adopt and shape this new psychological space?

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The Ambivalent Tactics of Therapeutic Governing

Dominique Béhague

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Li Zhang has captured a fascinating moment in the social and political transformation of psychotherapy in China. There is much to say about this exquisite book. While grounded in the particularities of postsocialist China, Zhang situates her analysis in dialogue with much broader questions relating to globalization, governmentality, and grassroots practices. Her book will undoubtedly stimulate rich dialogue with scholars working on similar questions in diverse regions of the world.

What most caught my attention was one of Zhang's three core concepts, "therapeutic governing." Drawing on the works of Nikolas Rose and James Nolan, Zhang explores how the recent rise of "psy fever," a popular and widely-shared desire for therapeutic fixes, has been co-produced with the emergence of a new cadre of middle-class "grassroots counselors." In the context of a rapidly changing society, therapists and clients are coming together to produce new tactics and ways of knowing that render subjects "governable." There are manifold contradictions and ambiguities in how grassroots counselors and clients are engaged in therapeutic governing. Some tactics of governing, Zhang writes, "are flourishing... while others meet subversion" (27). Counselors sometimes work to unsettle core values of the "ideal citizen" of postsocialist China, while they sometimes also subdue the resistances and confrontations of an anxious and skeptical workforce.

On the one hand, there are strong ideological and state-controlled dynamics at play. Therapeutic techniques are being used by government and state-owned enterprises to improve the management of work force, and importantly, the military and police (chapter 7). Counselors are being asked to run screening tests in order to add to the *dangan*, the personnel file, which can have ramifications for an individual's livelihood. Clients seek psychotherapy to cope with "hierarchical" and "masculine" environments of the workplace and with the growing demands to increase performance in a context of limited resources. Psy work is revamping postsocialist governing at a time when socialist "thought work," a form of grassroots campaigning that worked to align the values and ethics of individuals' with those of the party-state, is no longer effective. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has undergone *bentuhua*, the process of making Western technologies fit in Chinese norms and values, and there are striking similarities between a transformed CBT and thought work. Both are simultaneously political and personal, social and intimate. CBT entails not a process of private retreat into the self nor indeed the search for freedom as in "the West." Rather, CBT reworks

the individual's relationship to the social realm. Clients who feel worn out, overworked, and stuck in a harmful workplace learn that even though they cannot change their reality, "they still have control over how to respond" to their reality (165).

On the other hand, grassroots counselors are escaping from and sometimes pushing up against the control of government. With training from decentralized entities that provide short-term certificates, they have grown to massive numbers in a short period of time. Though contracted by state institutions, they also work in a loosely regulated private economy for fee-paying individuals. This new class of counselors are criticized by established psy-elite (academics and hospital-based psychiatrists) for having poor quality training and lack of credentials, and counselors do not withhold from criticizing this very elite for being "arm-chair therapists with minimal real-life experience" (40).

Counselors are privy to a great deal of social tension and resistance to the institutionalization of life. Zhang quotes a human resources manager in a state-owned enterprise explaining that counselors are being brought in because employees are, in his words, "irritable, grumpy, [and] defiant towards... authority" (165). When Xiao Wang, a mid-level technician in cigarette production company is strongly encouraged to participate in a group counselling session, he becomes resistant and cynical, claiming the "psychological work" is merely one more way for authorities to "brainwash" the population. While he ultimately finds the emotional work helpful and "soothing," he is not deluded regarding the "powerful structural forces shaping his life" (166-167). Counselors are keenly aware of their multiple and tenuous positions in society. One of Zhang's interlocutors, who was simultaneously a counselor in a police station, a police officer, and a member of Communist party, explained, "If I am not careful, I can easily become their instrument of control and lose the trust of the officers" (158).

This is not an either/or situation. Zhang masterfully avoids binaries of all sorts: global/local, West/non-West, internal self/public self; these binaries do not frame the analysis. This allows Zhang to distance herself from the traps of a false consciousness analytic and hone in on the productive and generative tensions at play. Psychotherapy is fundamentally outward-looking in China, a means to reflect on society, and yet clients are also repeatedly told they need to adapt to their reality. Might this very tension, the modes of awareness that are brewing, turn into actions that challenge normative structures and ways of life? Where are the cracks in this current postsocialist therapeutic governing? How might discontinuities with the past break through and gain momentum?

In my reading, I was curious about two potential inroads. The first is the repeated claim, made by authorities, therapists, and clients, that grassroots counselors are “unqualified.” This may be true in a technical sense, for instance in terms of time devoted to formal training or breadth of texts used. But it is also the case that the authority to define what counts as qualification is currently being challenged in China. Where multiple and conflicting forms of expertise crystallize on the ground, novel therapeutics and forms of collective care and subjectivities can and often do emerge. User-led movements, citizen science and co-production have gained considerable traction at the grassroots level and in often juxtaposition to more formal modes of governance (Rose and Kalathil 2019). Many of the counselors Zhang met are in unique in-between positions: on the borders of different ways of knowing, navigating the space between institutions and the myriad of places that sit outside of sanctioned authority. Whether they constitute an emerging group of professionals whose practices are marked—precisely because they are able to unsettle the many practices that reproduce the figure of the “ideal citizen”—remains to be seen (Boyer and Lomnitz 2005). There does seem to be something distinctive about the intimate, public, and collectivizing ambiguities they inhabit, and the ways they are creating an ecological and always relational model of self and psychological experience (Kitanaka 2020).

The second inroad relates to Zhang’s reliance on Bakhtin’s notion of the “dialogic,” a process in which seemingly contradictory or opposing forces interact and mutually transform one another (Bakhtin 1981). Zhang explores dialogic processes in relation to global-local frictions, as well as to the fluid and hybrid practices she found taking place in clinical encounters. I wondered if Zhang found similar dialogic processes taking place at a meso-level, for instance between grassroots counselors and the elite psychiatric establishment in China, or between counselors (together with their grumpy and skeptical clients) and other bottom-up semi-organized popular movements? What is the potential here for praxis? Paulo Freire, also well known for theorizing the potential of dialogic openings in the pedagogic process, claimed that praxis—analysis via the attempt to intervene and modify one’s world—was integral to reflexivity and social change (Freire 2005 [1970]). In Brazil, colleagues and I found dialogic praxis taking place iteratively in multiple interconnected spaces: clinics, schools, families and in the less governable spaces of the street. Dialogic praxis allowed people to imagine different approaches to psychological life and to act on these imaginings, upholding a purposefully equivocal way of relating to others while also changing their worlds (Béhague 2009, Béhague 2020). Were grassroots counselors, given their unique placement in the meso-levels of therapeutic governing, engaged in any such enacted imaginings?

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The (Anti?)Politics of American Psy

Rebecca J. Lester

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To what extent—and in what ways—is psychotherapeutic work on the "self" necessarily a political project? If it is political, is it an inherently neoliberal endeavor? What are the ultimate aims of this focus on the self? Are psy practices functionally conservative, inducing people to adjust to existing circumstances? Or are they potentially liberatory, facilitating radical transformation of self and society? These are some of the provocative questions raised in Li Zhang's book *Anxious China*.

Psy practices and politics have long been uneasy and awkward bedfellows. From the [impact of anti-Semitism](#) on the development of Freudian psychoanalysis (Frosh 2004), to the "[quiet revolution](#)" of Carl Rogers' person-centered approaches (Rogers 1978), to the "[emancipatory aims of some contemporary intersubjectivist work](#)" (Brandchaft et al. 2010), the potential—or not—for transformative self-work to become socially transformative (and whether this should be an explicit goal or merely a collateral effect) has been hotly debated.

These questions have taken on a new urgency in recent years with the globalization of western psy practices, aided by such factors as the World Health Organization's [Mental Health Action Plan](#) (WHO 2013) and the explosion of the global psychopharmaceutical industry. Critical engagements with these developments have focused on two central and related components: (1) What kind of subject is cultivated through these practices? And (2) How does that view of the subject relate to questions of transformative political action?

Much has been written in recent years about how the subject of western psy practices is constituted and the degree to which the globalization of these practices constitutes a neo-colonialist project (see [Bemme and Kirmayer 2020](#) for an excellent overview). The prevailing argument is much of this literature that these interventions enfold a philosophy of the person based in values of individualism, independence, and self-determination, combined with an injunction to self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-responsibility. As a result, they cultivate a particular kind of "self" that aligns with neoliberal priorities. In this way, the incorporation of western psy practices in non-western contexts is often seen to be both an indicator of and a catalyst for a shift towards more stereotypical "western" modes of being and engaging in the world. While there is by no means consensus about how this shift happens or what (if anything) to do about it, most scholars of cross-cultural psy practices agree on this foundational point.

Where they tend to disagree is on whether this subject formation is a politically conservative or politically liberatory endeavor. Critical perspectives maintain that this kind of intensive self-work diverts clients' attention away from very real structural and social problems for which experiencing distress may be an entirely appropriate response. The history of psychiatry is riddled with examples: American housewives in the 1960s were [medicated out of "female malaise" and into more compliant forms of domesticity](#) (Ussher 2011), African American men in the U.S. have been disproportionately [institutionalized for their "uncontrollable" rage](#) (Metzl 2011), and children in foster care are prescribed psychotropic medication at rates [nine times higher than other children](#) (Franklin, 2014). Viewed from this perspective, psy practices certainly seem to function as a mechanism of discipline and domestication, keeping individuals docile and compliant and pathologizing disruption and dissent.

Writing from a very different perspective, however, other theorists argue that a focus on the self can, in fact, be liberatory, allowing individuals to build capacities and resources for change. [Liberation Psychology](#) for example, specifically aims to understand and address the needs of oppressed individuals in order to promote social change (Martín-Baró 1996). Drawing on liberation philosophy, Marxist, feminist and decolonial thought, and critical theory, this orientation focuses on consciousness-raising, empowerment, and linking individual trauma healing to larger ethical social transformation.

So, we are left with the question: are psy-practices conservative or liberatory? Well-reasoned opinions sustain both sides of the debate, and so it continues.

What Zhang brings to these discussions in *Anxious China* is a much-needed corrective. Grounding her analysis in a deep engagement with China's historical, political, and social specificity, she acknowledges the neoliberalizing potential of western psy practices, but stresses that they take on significantly different meanings in China. And not just in the sense of dressing up western ideas in local garb. She discusses, for example, the parallels between cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and communist thought work. Thought work utilized strategies similar to CBT, not to concretize the individual, but to further embed the experience of the self in social and relational worlds. So while CBT in China certainly has political connotations, we cannot simply categorize it as a neoliberal project, or at least not in the sense of an imported philosophy of self that becomes unproblematically inculcated in clients through the enactment of CBT practices.

Instead of simply imposing western views of the person, Zhang argues, western psy practices in China seems to offer people tools for navigating multiple culturally relevant models of the person, the self, and the goals of transformation that coexist in the wake of post-communist developments. While one might observe that this, in and of itself, might be interpreted as a rather neoliberal project, Zhang shows convincingly that it is not, or at least not entirely. Western psy practices may carry with them a great deal of cultural material, but they are not strands of DNA transmitting unadulterated self-philosophies that are simply implanted in new contexts. They are engaged by living people in living contexts with complex histories and presents. How and when and in what ways such practices take root depends on whether they resonate with prevailing social concerns, whether people find them useful, and how they are adapted to local frameworks of meaning. Those concerns, that utility, and those frameworks can be—and often are—very different from the ones that gave birth the intervention.

While Zhang does not come down explicitly on the question of whether psy practices are inherently conservative or potentially liberatory, her book challenges us to step back and reconsider the foundations of that distinction. Indeed, the question itself enfolds a view of self and society that is deeply culturally inflected, presuming that there is a "natural" tension between the individual and the collective, and that benefit to one only comes at a cost to the other. In considering how western psy practices are engaged in China, Zhang recenters the question away from how these practices might be colonizing the emerging Chinese mental health industry, towards how they seem to enable Chinese practitioners and clients alike to work towards culturally meaningful goals that may be very different than those in western contexts. This, she says, has become increasingly important in contemporary China, whose conditions, as she so persuasively demonstrates, is increasingly anxious.

[Rebecca J. Lester](#) is Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis with research interests in mental health, gender, sexuality, and religion. She is also a practicing psychotherapist specializing in eating disorders, trauma, personality disorders, mood disorders, and gender/sexuality issues. Her most recent book, *Famished: Eating Disorders and Failed Care in America* (2019) was awarded a Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing. She is currently Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* and president of the Society for Psychological Anthropology.

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The Empty Hearts and Kinship Correlates of China's Psy Fever

Zhiying Ma
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In her new book *Anxious China*, Li Zhang documents the rise of "psy fever" in the 21st-century China, as manifested in the widespread use of psychotherapeutic knowledge and techniques by the country's middle-class citizens to understand and remake themselves. Traversing diverse spaces ranging from clinics to companies, from universities to militaries, Zhang shows us that psychotherapies, though imported from Western countries, have undergone much "culturing" or *bentuhua* by adopting the language of Chinese philosophies, invoking key social relationships such as family ties, and addressing people's deep anxieties amid rapid social change. As such, they allow people to disentangle themselves from and re-embed themselves in the social, to search for happiness and a secularized spirituality, while also enabling and transforming the post-socialist state's governance. This is a fascinating book, and I would like to offer some thoughts as a partial insider and as a researcher of related phenomena.

I studied psychology for my undergraduate degree at a top Chinese university during the mid-2000s, right around the time when the psy fever took shape. I had chosen psychology with the naive imagination that it would help me find meanings of life. However, the psychology I was taught fashioned itself as a cognitive science, which allowed for the management of thoughts and emotions, but which largely stayed clear from discussions of meaning. (The disappointment led me to philosophy for my double major and to anthropology for my Ph.D.) Therefore, I found myself nodding vigorously to Zhang's argument that the versions of happiness as articulated by therapeutic discussions in China "are oriented toward how to foster a sense of feeling good (often fleeting), but lack a further attempt to search for deeper meaning or self-empowerment crucial to the cultivation of a long-lasting form of well-being" (148). In other words, the scientifically-looking psychology/psychotherapy might be empty-hearted.

Interestingly, in recent years, quite a few Chinese psychotherapists have become vocal cultural critics. For example, Dr. Xu Kaiwen has famously asserted that many Chinese youths suffer from an "empty-heart illness" or *kongxinbing* because they lack guiding values of life. I thus wondered whether Xu or any of the therapists studied by Zhang has attempted to fill the void, what meanings and values they use for the filling, and how those attempts are received by the public. I am also curious about how the therapists' approaches to meaning are affected by their positions in the ideological state apparatus, especially under the Xi Jinping regime which seeks

to reclaim certain socialist values, as well as how the quest of meaning (or the lack thereof) shapes psychology as a scientific discipline and as a tool for governance in China.

As an anthropologist, I have spent the last decade studying something complementary to the psy fever: the largely institution-based care and management of people diagnosed with serious mental illnesses, a group that is still heavily stigmatized. My fieldwork shows that the family—both as an idea and as a set of relationships—is routinely mobilized by professionals and state officials to justify and enact psychiatric interventions, and that these processes in turn have transformed actual family lives and intimate ethics. In other words, the state’s mental health governance has its kinship correlates (Ma 2020).

I was thus particularly drawn to the various ways in which the family shows up in Zhang’s ethnography: therapies that center the role of the family in shaping the person—such as the Satir family therapy—tend to be successful in China because they resonate with Confucian and popular understandings (52); in fact, therapeutic techniques that were initially designed for families—such as family sculpting and restructuring—have been adapted for use on other social roles, like company employees and schoolteachers (100). Moreover, some people turn to psychotherapy because they are frustrated by family conflicts and fragilities (115); yet, despite the family’s importance, most therapists can only work with the individual, and they find it hard to get other family members involved (83). These intricacies prompt me to ask: how do psychotherapists theorize the family as a symbol of the Chinese culture? Given the uneven access that therapists have to different family members’ time (and minds), how do therapies transform family relations? Do these transformations fall along particular gender and generational lines? How does the generalized use of family-based therapeutic techniques and languages shape people’s senses of social belonging and, perhaps indirectly, their political imaginations? All in all, how might the inner revolution, psychosociality, and therapeutic governance that come with the psy fever be mediated by family?

Of course, each set of questions probably deserves a book in its own right, and this is exactly the power of Zhang’s book: its multi-layered approach is combined with a meticulous attention to ethnographic details; its generous understanding of the nascent field goes hand in hand with a sharp cultural critique; all these make the book a wellspring of inspirations for students and scholars of global psy fevers.

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A Letter to Li

Tomas Matza

University of Pittsburgh

Dear Li,

In a previous book forum, Angela Garcia wrote her response to Lisa Stevenson's *Life Beyond Itself* [in the form of a letter](#). I loved her approach for the way it revealed the sociality that often nurtures our work. Letters also involve a special kind of intimacy, as Laurence Ralph shows in his recent book—that of one person telling something important to someone else in particular. You and I have known each other a decade now, and we have talked more times than I can count about the anthropology of psychotherapy (and postsocialisms). I thought a letter would be a great way to continue our conversation.

*

You start your book with an experience that occupies just a few pages, but I imagine it must have loomed large in this project: the death of your mother and the anxiety that followed you after it. As I read those pages, I identified with the profound experience you described; my father passed away just two weeks ago. Reading *Anxious China* at this time in my life created a new bridge into your work. What I saw as I crossed it was less the topics we have discussed in the past—the link between psy and government; subjectivation; psychology and the (re)production of social difference (e.g. class and gender)—and more your attempt to keep your interlocutors' experiences of mental suffering front and center. Perhaps in loss one appreciates more fully the importance of the support of others. This is what oriented my reading of China's "inner revolution."

In particular, I appreciate your efforts to resist the binaries that cast a singular, homogenizing suspicion on what is a very nuanced phenomenon: power/resistance; public/private; West/rest. You avoid the notion that psychotherapy is only a top-down technique of government intended to recast structural inequities as psychological problems. There is that aspect, you note, but you also show how people turn to psychotherapy on their own accord and for lots of reasons: cultivating happiness, becoming more mindful, overcoming anxiety and depression. You also nuance psy vis-à-vis selfhood. You show how people in China turn (in)to psychotherapists in order to find ways to dis-embed and re-embed the self in their social worlds. Finally, you avoid the West vs. rest binary by attending carefully to the "culturing," or *bentuhua*, of different psychological theories and approaches. Chinese practitioners draw together idioms from Daoism, Confucianism, and even socialist thought work to create locally legible and meaningful therapeutic modalities. These are not imposed imports.

As a result of your careful analysis, we learn that China’s “inner revolution” is in fact a varied and unpredictable phenomenon—a shifting assemblage. And, to return to my earlier point about shared human suffering, this analysis allows us, your readers, to stay in close contact with the human stories at the center of psychotherapeutic work. While you identify a number of potential negative directions “therapeutic governance” may take, you resist drawing a neat boundary around them all. (I liked how your chapters did not end with “conclusions,” but, rather, with “reflections.”)

If I had one question for you, it would be about the question of psy, class and gender. (And here I come back to our earlier conversations.) I noticed that you touched on these topics briefly in the text, often in the reflections portion of each chapter. As a way of continuing our now-many-years-long dialogue, it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on how, as standards of practice become more decentralized (and presumably marketized) in China, you think the “inner revolution” may amplify social inequities along the lines of class, gender, and also ethnicity. What, also, might that amplification mean for the experience of anxiety, not to mention the circulation of stigma? And finally, how might you craft a similarly nuanced account of suffering and care in the face of potentially clearer indications of psy’s implication in inequity? The answer to this last question bears directly on how we as scholars navigate analytically between dark anthropologies, anthropologies of the good, and decolonial/abolitionist critiques of fixes.

In closing this letter, Li, I just want to congratulate you on this book. It is a wonderful result of many years of research. It is a gift to those of us who think about the politics, ethics and lived experiences of mental health, and a fascinating lens onto everyday worlds in contemporary China. I enjoyed reading it and look forward to our next chat.

Warmly,
Tomas

[Tomas Matza](#) is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia (Duke UP 2018), featured in a [recent Somatosphere book forum](#). He is also a co-editor with Kevin Lewis O’Neill of a special issue of Social Text, entitled Politically Unwilling (Fall 2014). More recently, he has written about the politics of transnational intervention in El Salvador.

A Response Letter

Li Zhang

University of California, Davis

Dear Interlocutors:

I am too inspired by the letter form to communicate directly with you all, as Tomas has done. I find this format more intimate, candid, and effective.

As I write this response, the world is deep in the frightening pandemic as COVID-19 infection and death cases continue to climb rapidly. Even though the vaccines are on the way, which gives us a glimpse of hope, the widespread uncertainty and suffering caused by COVID-19 is unlikely to end soon. Meanwhile, the United States is facing unprecedented political turmoil in the aftermath of violent Trump supporters storming Capitol Hill and assaulting democracy. In such turbulent and desolate times, it is not exaggerating to say that anxiety—the theme of my book—captures not only the mood of China but also the general state of being of the contemporary world at this moment. How to live through such an unsettling and difficult time? How to take care of our individual and collective well-being? How to find hope and resilience in the midst of political, economic, and public health crises? These questions become even more pressing for all of us to ponder and grapple with.

Let me first express my profound gratitude for your careful reading of my book and your deep and constructive engagement with my work. It is most gratifying to see how my research has sparked new questions, curiosity, debates, and creative interpretations among you. Obviously, I cannot address all of your good questions and insights in this short letter, but I would like to respond to one or two issues from each of you (in random order) that resonate with me in the deepest way or ignite my further thinking.

Tomas: I so appreciate that you took the time to write to me even when you were in the middle of your own grieving for the loss of your father. And I am so happy to know that my own story echoed with your personal experience and somehow reached you beyond the level of intellectual exchange. Needless to say, *Anxious China* is a very personal project to me. From the very beginning I hoped that I would be able to integrate some of my own encounters and family experiences with troubled moods in the writing, and share with readers my journey to search for healing, meaning, and well-being. I am well aware that such self-disclosure (especially on mental health) carries certain risk. But I also know that it can be very helpful to many readers. In the end, I found that this is one of the most gratifying parts of my fieldwork

and writing. Through my own struggle with anguish and loss, I have found a more candid and authentic way to connect with not only the people who appear in my book but also numerous readers who are drawn to the human dimension (as the case with you). I am also very delighted to see that you appreciate my effort to resist all sorts of binaries because this effort is not merely an intellectual exercise but reflects what the therapists and clients I studied attempt to do. Such bricolage and boundary-crossing efforts in my view are what make the Chinese psy practice fascinating and distinct.

Junko: I love your interpretation and reflection on my key notion of “inner revolution” by situating it in the broader historical context of China, especially against the backdrop of the traumatic socialist years. I also appreciate your comparative insights by bringing in your rich research on Japanese psychiatry. It is always so rewarding to compare notes with you about our findings on Japan and China over the years because of the many striking similarities found between the two societies. Here I would like to address your question about what the newly emerging psychotherapeutic space can do for Chinese people. Although I will not rule out the possibility that some people might nurture critical perspectives on life and even challenge the status quo through therapeutic work, my sense is that the overwhelming trend points to the emergence of self-adjusted individuals who aspire to live a more balanced life, find some happiness and meaning in a fiercely competitive society. In recent years, there has emerged a popular term called *neijuan* (involution) in the Chinese news media to describe a mode of existence facing most Chinese today, especially the younger generations: They are locked in a life marked by relentless competition without a sense of purpose or meaning, yet they are not allowed to exit or unable to escape. In such an involution or impasse, the new psychosocial space can perhaps provide a refuge, but I am not optimistic about its potential for fostering macro-level societal transformations.

Rebecca: I am grateful that you have raised a fundamental question concerning many researchers in the field of psychotherapeutics, which I did not ask explicitly in the book: Are new psy practices and the remaking of the subject we witness in China politically conservative or liberatory? You rightly point out that the foundation of this question is based on a binary distinction itself that is problematic. This brings us back to an important observation made by Tomas about my intention to move beyond dichotomous thinking. In the case of China (and I imagine the same elsewhere), the answer to your question is not black and white or clear cut. Perhaps, my answer to Junko’s question above also speak to this question partially. There is liberatory potential in the new psychotherapeutic practices but this interpretation depends on a radical re-conceptualization of what constitutes “politics” or the “political.” Is the remaking of the self in everyday life outside the traditional or socialist box liberatory or revolutionary?

To me, the answer is yes because it constitutes a quiet inner revolution by engendering a deep level yet subtle social transformation. What is happening in China, as you point out, is not a one-way Western colonization of the Chinese mind and way of life, but instead a dialogic process in which new meanings and self are created by people based on their history, social condition, and aspiration for a better future.

Zhiying: As you have noted, you and I have long been working on two different yet related domains in the Chinese mental health field—psychological and psychiatric interventions. I enjoy reading your works because they provide rich and insightful accounts of the psychiatric world that I want to learn more. I very much agree with you on the persistent tension between the popular desire to search for meanings of life and the discipline of psychology as a scientific field devoid of the means to address heart/emotion related issues. In recent years, in addition to the widely found “empty heart illness” you mentioned, there has emerged another rubric of “*sang* culture” (closely related to the *neijuan* culture) to convey the mood of these young people (born in the 1990s and 2000s) who are facing staggering pressure to work hard to succeed and bear an overwhelming feeling of fatigue and dispirited. As a Chinese researcher Liu Xinting explains, “the basic meaning of *sang* is to lose something through death, and hence it is associated with mourning and related moods of dejection and depression.” Psychological counseling as practiced outside the hospital and academia seems to be partially fulfilling this growing need among the younger generations yet has a lot of limits as my book shows. I also appreciate your attention to the centrality of the family (a strong focus of your own research) in Chinese psychotherapeutic work and the many good questions you raised about how the family mediates gender and generational relations, therapeutic practice, and politics. This is an important area that I touched upon but deserves more systematic analysis and further theorization in my future research.

Dominique: Thank you for your thoughtful engagement with my book, especially with one of the core concepts, “therapeutic governing,” and the complex role of grassroots counselors by bringing in your own research insights on Brazil. Let me briefly respond to your two potential inroads. First, the claim that grassroots counselors are “unqualified” is a complicated one. On the one hand, there are indeed some or even many Chinese therapists who are inadequately trained and act like swindlers by cheating their clients and getting paid without being able to provide helpful service. Note that psychological counseling is a poorly regulated new field in China. On the other, you rightly point out the unequal power relations that give the authority and those with institutional backing the power to define who is qualified. Some of the grassroots therapists I met might have less formal education and credential but are at the frontline of doing much needed good work. Second, your point about dialogic work at a meso-

level is well taken. Like Brazil, there are also numerous sites (such as those psy training workshops I described) where dialogic praxis takes place in China where new meanings and imaginings are enacted. It would have been a very productive lens to analyze in greater detail some of these local encounters.

Nancy: I am so glad that you brought up the impact of COVID-19 on Chinese society and how this horrendous pandemic might have affected the psyche and mental well-being of Chinese people. This seems to be a perfect place to wrap up my response letter. My book was published in August 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, but the research and writing were done way before the arrival of COVID-19. Therefore, I did not have the chance to reflect on the relationship between anxiety, the role of psychotherapy and the pandemic. By now, ample evidence shows however that the pandemic has taken a significant toll on the mental condition of Chinese people. There has been a rapid rise of anxiety, depression, and other forms of distress across different social strata in China over the past twelve months. The pandemic has intensified the need for psychotherapeutic help in the population and also exposed the dire condition of mental and psychological services. When many distressed people urgently seek “lifelines” (using your word) to address their concerns and anguish, they realize that help is not there and there is a long way to go in order to find well-trained and trusted therapists and doctors. Perhaps, one silver lining of the pandemic is that it makes people realize clearly that mental distress is more widespread and needs to be confronted and destigmatized.

Once again, thank you all for the stimulating comments and questions. I see this forum as the beginning of a highly productive conversation and hope to continue this dialogue with you and *Somatosphere* readers in the future.

Warm wishes,

Li

Li Zhang (Ph.D. Cornell 1998) is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California-Davis. She is the author of two award-winning books: *Strangers in the City* (Stanford 2001) and *In Search of Paradise* (Cornell 2010), and the co-editor of *Privatizing China, Socialism from Afar* (Cornell 2008) and *Can Science and Technology Save China?* (Cornell 2019). Her most recent book is *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy* (UC Press 2020).