

**How Does China Handle Mental Health
Challenges Among its Citizens?**

Sydney Schauerhamer

Brigham Young University

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Intro

Throughout history, many countries have been concerned about the health of their citizens. They want to ensure that their population can develop and prosper to the greatest extent possible. Many countries have different policies and programs in place to help maintain and improve the overall health of their citizens. These policies focus on different sectors of public health such as maternal and newborn care, disease prevention, hygiene and sanitation, and life expectancy to name a few. One specific sector of effort that has gained much attention in recent years is the mental health sector. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a “state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”¹ Countries all over the world have recognized the need for and benefits of having better mental health services and policies available to the citizens in their countries and have invested greatly in the sector.

Among the countries that have recently become more invested and involved in the mental health of their citizens is China. The WHO estimates that 1 in every 8 people has a mental disorder; this means that of the 1.411 billion people that live in China 176,375,000 live with a mental disorder.² Mental disorders are defined as anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Schizophrenia, eating disorders, behavior disorders, and neurodevelopmental disorders.³ From this definition of mental health and mental disorders, one can gather that there is an incredibly large audience for services and policies to be created to benefit the population of China. This essay will begin by reviewing the history of mental health

¹*Mental Health*. World Health Organization. Retrieved November 12, 2024, from https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_1

²*Mental Disorders*. World Health Organization. Retrieved November 12, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>

³*Mental Disorders*. World Health Organization. Retrieved November 12, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>

services in China to increase the understanding of why specific policies and actions are being implemented in China today. This essay will then evaluate three different ways China and its government have invested and implemented money and policy in mental health throughout the country. These three points of interest are first, official government programs, policies, and agencies. Second, a social governance strategy known as “Therapeutic Governance,” and finally, the third point of interest is Mental Health research and studies. The paper will conclude by suggesting ways that China can move forward in its efforts to achieve better mental health services and policies for its citizens.

History

China is one of the oldest countries in the world. As such, it has records of basic mental health services dating back to almost 900 BC when a charity facility organized by monks created a refuge in which mentally ill people could go and be cared for.⁴ In more recent history in 1898, an American missionary in China established the “first western style psychiatric hospital for the homeless mentally ill.”⁵ Since that time there has been a slow but steady increase in the number of psychiatric hospitals and services built in the country. In 1949 the People’s Republic of China was established under the chairmanship of Mao Zedong.⁶ Under the leadership of Mao, many areas of society were subject to “brutal violence, the humiliation of intellectuals and political elites, and a descent in many regions onto the brink of anarchy.”⁷ Due to this, many

⁴ Liu, J., Ma, H., He, Y., Xie, B., Xu, Y., Tang, H., Li, M., Hao, W., Wang, X., Zhang, M., Ng, C. H., Goding, M., Fraser, J., Herrman, H., Chiu, H. F. K., Chan, S. S., Chiu, E., & Yu, X. (2011). Mental health system in china: History, recent service reform and future challenges. *10*(3)

⁵ Liu, J., Ma, H., He, Y., Xie, B., Xu, Y., Tang, H., Li, M., Hao, W., Wang, X., Zhang, M., Ng, C. H., Goding, M., Fraser, J., Herrman, H., Chiu, H. F. K., Chan, S. S., Chiu, E., & Yu, X. (2011). Mental health system in china: History, recent service reform and future challenges. *10*(3)

⁶ *The Chinese revolution of 1949*. US Department of State Office of the Historian. Retrieved November 12, 2024, from <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/chinese-rev>

⁷ Baum, E., & Lin, Z. (2022). Maoism and mental illness: Psychiatric institutionalization during the chinese cultural revolution. *History of Psychiatry*, *33*(3), 293.

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developments or findings about mental health during this time were either not recorded out of fear of persecution or destroyed.

In the time following the Cultural Revolution, many researchers and historians attempted to find information about how psychological practices and trends changed under the leadership of Chairman Mao. Many researchers found that “Cultural Revolution-era psychiatry quickly became the handmaiden of political persecution.”⁸ They discovered that in some regions people who disagreed with government policies and practices were diagnosed as mentally ill and forced into treatment centers against their will and those who shared ideas that favored the government were released regardless of other mental challenges they may have been facing.⁹ In addition to this, one study said that the “local Public Security Bureau visited the hospital and accused patients of being counter-revolutionaries or ‘rebels’ (*zaofan pai*), a charge that had serious implications even for those who were undergoing psychiatric treatment.”¹⁰ This means that even if political dissonance was expressed by an individual in a mental state in which they have no control over how they perceive the world or what they say about it, it could lead to great ramifications and punishments from the government even if the person was receiving treatment for such conditions that led them to have said perceptions. This same study also found that as the government escalated threats and violent actions toward the people during this time, certain mental health challenges became more pronounced and common as the growing fear and stress of potentially displeasing the government became a more significant concern throughout the

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⁹ Munro, R. J. (2002). Political psychiatry in post-mao china and its origins in the cultural revolution. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 30(1)

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population.¹¹ During this period, “political cases” such as each of those listed earlier composed at least 10% of the criminal psychiatric caseload.¹²

Since the Cultural Revolution and the change of power from Mao to others, the percentage of “political cases” in this caseload has dropped significantly. Additionally, progress has once again started to take root and make changes in the mental health sector. Some of the most interesting points of development in this area are the government activities that are being implemented and research that is being conducted. While Mao was only in power for a relatively short time in comparison to the overall development of mental health services and policies in China, the effects on the sector from his time in power can still be seen in how the sector operates today.

Government Programs, Policies, and Agencies

Since 2002 the government in China has created a series of goals to promote the development of mental health care systems throughout the country. These goals include:

“Preventing and minimizing the occurrence of mental illness...strengthening psychiatric services for severely mentally ill people... establishing mental health policies and laws and regulations and protecting the civil rights of mentally ill individuals...promoting training and development of mental health professionals...setting priorities on certain target populations...engaging in scientific research to generate data for the development of mental health policies.”¹³

These goals set standards that agencies within the government can create programs and policies to implement around the country to benefit the citizens and give them greater access to mental health resources. In addition to this, in October 2012 the National People’s Congress of China endorsed the Mental Health Act. This created a new law which “stipulated that hospitalization

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¹² Munro, R. J. (2002). Political psychiatry in post-mao china and its origins in the cultural revolution. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 30(1)

¹³ Wong, D. F. K., Zhuang, X. Y., Pan, J., & He, X. S. (2013). A critical review of mental health and mental health-related policies in china: More actions required. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 23(2), 195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12052>

for people with a mental illness should comply with the principle of voluntary admission. Moreover, for those who are required to be hospitalized because of an intention to harm themselves or others, these patients or their guardians can request a reassessment of the patient's mental conditions."¹⁴ This law prevents people from being admitted to a psychiatric hospital against their will unless they had the intent to harm themselves or others. In theory, this law prevents situations similar to those that took place during the reign of Mao and makes those services more available to those who need and want the help the institutions can offer.

The Chinese government has also distributed power in allocating mental health care to four different organizations throughout the country. These organizations are the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the military, and the Ministry of Public Security.¹⁵ Each of these organizations has a different role to play in the distribution of mental health services throughout the country, however, one study published in the *International Journal of Social Welfare* states that "the level and modality of care throughout these institutions vary greatly, and generally speaking, the overall professional standards and level of services are not high."¹⁶

Therapeutic Governance

Therapeutic governance occurs when the government of a country implements specific policies and programs in specific sectors of society to increase public health and benefits. In China, many of the mental health-related programs outside of those services and protections for mental disorders mentioned previously have been implemented through this system of

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¹⁵ Wong, D. F. K., Zhuang, X. Y., Pan, J., & He, X. S. (2013). A critical review of mental health and mental health-related policies in china: More actions required. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 23(2), 195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12052>

¹⁶ Wong, D. F. K., Zhuang, X. Y., Pan, J., & He, X. S. (2013). A critical review of mental health and mental health-related policies in china: More actions required. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 23(2), 195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12052>

therapeutic governance. This idea has become further popularized by China's current president Xi Jinping who advocates for the creation and realization of the China Dream in which people can reach a higher state of emotional well-being in addition to becoming more economically well off.¹⁷ To achieve this goal the government has begun to integrate different mental health resources and policies into areas that would affect a person's everyday life.

One example of therapeutic governance in the country has been the implementation of psychological evaluations required to obtain jobs in specific fields. These evaluations are then kept on file for that individual for the entire span of the individual's time working in that field and give an idea of how individuals might respond in a given situation based on the psychological information the organization has.¹⁸ In addition to this, some state-owned companies and corporations, under the direction given by party leadership, require that their employees participate in a worker's education program which "entails shaping the mindset, attitude, and life of the employee."¹⁹ Additionally, an article written by Jie Yang stated that "as part of its political project of constructing a 'harmonious society,' the government tends to focus on expediency in treating cases of open distress in the populace and limits scrutiny of social, economic, or political processes that may contribute to such distress."²⁰ This means that while there are more services and resources available to confront some problems with mental health and the therapeutic governance structure leads the government to be knowledgeable about those things in society that are triggering mental health problems in its citizens, the government is

¹⁷ Zhang, L. (2015). The rise of therapeutic governing in postsocialist china. *Medical Anthropology*, 36(1), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1117079>

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²⁰ Yang, J. (2018). "Officials' heartache" depression, bureaucracy, and therapeutic governance in china. *Current Anthropology*, 59(5), 596–615.

choosing to treat the symptoms of the problems in the fastest way they can instead of reevaluating those places in society that are creating stress and fear in the lives of their citizens triggering mental health problems. Citizens are also wary of turning to some of the resources available as mental health problems are viewed with a sense of shame in the culture.²¹ Having mental health problems and seeking interventions for them can harm the way both the individual and their family are perceived by society.²² Thus one can see that the presence of more mental health services throughout the country can be a valuable and beneficial resource for the people but can also have the negative consequence of promoting the party agenda over the needs of the citizens.

Research

Research is perhaps the area of the Chinese mental health sector that has grown the most in recent history. One of the most notable advances in research in this sector has been the studies and findings of the China Brain Project. This project is working on discovering new neural structures and processes through brain mapping, creating new technologies, and getting a better understanding of brain disorders and treatments that can be used to combat them.²³ Findings from this project have the potential to change many aspects of mental health struggles in both understanding and treatment for both China and people all over the world.

In addition to the China Brain Project, there are many other mental health research studies being conducted. One study conducted a series of tests that examined the neural pathways of major depressive disorder. As a result, researchers were able to find new molecular

²¹ Yang, J. (2018). "Officials' heartache" depression, bureaucracy, and therapeutic governance in china. *Current Anthropology*, 59(5), 596–615.

²² Wu, D. Y. H., & Tseng, W. (1985). CHAPTER 1 - introduction: The characteristics of Chinese culture. In W. Tseng, & D. Y. H. Wu (Eds.), *Chinese culture and mental health* (pp. 3–13). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-701630-6.50007-1>

²³ Liu, X., Gao, T., Lu, T., Bao, Y., Schumann, G., & Lu, L. (2023). China brain project: From bench to bedside. *Science Bulletin*, 68(5), 444. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scib.2023.02.023>

targets that can be used in the creation of new antidepressant medication to address the needs of more people living with this disorder.²⁴ Another study evaluated treatments for patients who suffered from emotional memory disorders such as PTSD. In doing so they discovered that “conditioned stimulus re-exposure during slow wave sleep promotes fear memory extinction without altering sleep profiles which may be a new way to eliminate negative emotional memory without pain.”²⁵ These are just a few examples of different research studies that China has undertaken in a move toward greater mental health among its citizens.

Moving Forward

To continue the improvement of mental health care throughout the country there are a variety of areas that need additional advancement. To start, there needs to be an increase in psychiatric facilities and professionals across the country. One source reported that:

“In 2004, there were 557 psychiatric hospitals. Among them, 359 (64.5%) had 100 or more beds, and 44 (7.9%) had 500 or more beds. The total number of psychiatric beds was 129,314, i.e. 1.00/10,000 population, which is significantly lower than the global average of 4.36/10,000 psychiatric beds.”²⁶

Furthermore, this study found that a similar ratio existed with the number of licensed psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses when comparing the accessibility to global averages of these same positions. In China, there are on average 1.24 licensed psychiatrists for every 100,000 people in the population.²⁷ The global average for this same position is 4.15 psychiatrists for

²⁴ Que, J., Lu, L., & Shi, L. (2019). Development and challenges of mental health in china. *General Psychiatry*, 32(1)<https://doi.org/10.1136/gpsych-2019-100053>

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every 100,000 people.²⁸ For psychiatric nurses, the ratio in China is 1.91/100,000 population compared to a global average of 12.97/100,000 population.²⁹ These observations make it clear that China needs to invest in more services and resources to improve mental health care throughout the country.

Additionally, mental health care services need to be better distributed across the country. Even with increased hospital spaces and services, rural areas of the country still do not have access to psychiatric help. A study published in the journal, *Health and Policy Planning*, found that between the years 2006 and 2015 while the number of psychiatric hospitals had increased by about 50%, “two-thirds of counties in China still did not have psychiatrists.”³⁰ Most of the development that had occurred in this sector had taken place in urban areas and neglected to expand to other parts of the country.

Finally, the stigma around mental health and mental health services in China needs to be decreased. The same study from the journal, *Health and Policy Planning* found:

“A large epidemiologic study conducted in four provinces [Gansu, Qinghai, Shandong and Zhejiang (2001–05) 63004 participants aged 18 years or older in 96 urban neighborhoods and 267 rural villages], only 8% of individuals with mental disorders sought professional help within the general healthcare setting, and only 5% sought help from mental health professionals”³¹

²⁸ Liu, J., Ma, H., He, Y., Xie, B., Xu, Y., Tang, H., Li, M., Hao, W., Wang, X., Zhang, M., Ng, C. H., Goding, M., Fraser, J., Herrman, H., Chiu, H. F. K., Chan, S. S., Chiu, E., & Yu, X. (2011). Mental health system in china: History, recent service reform and future challenges. *10*(3)

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³⁰ Liang, D., Mays, V. M., & Hwang, W. (2017). Integrated mental health services in china: Challenges and planning for the future. *Health Policy and Planning*, *33*(1), 107. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czx137>

³¹ Liang, D., Mays, V. M., & Hwang, W. (2017). Integrated mental health services in china: Challenges and planning for the future. *Health Policy and Planning*, *33*(1), 107. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czx137>

As mentioned earlier, in this essay mental health issues are currently viewed with a sense of shame.³² Some researchers have found that in many cases “psychological distress is often attributed to personal weakness or foreign influence.”³³ In Chinese society, this perceived weakness or influence can negatively impact how others view an individual, and potentially extend to negative perceptions of their family and networks of people connected to them.³⁴ Other countries have found success in reducing the stigma around mental health by creating education programs to teach the public more about mental health and the resources available to them.³⁵ Similar programs could be implemented in China to reduce the stigma around mental health that exists in the country.

Conclusion

In summary, mental health and mental health care have become a topic of attention for the Chinese government. Historically, under the direction of Mao Zedong mental health services were used as a system through which the government could silence political dissidents. The threats of these past policies still linger in society today creating a stigma around mental health and seeking treatment for related challenges. While the government has implemented many different policies and agencies to mitigate some mental health problems it is clear that there is still much work to be done by the country in this field.

³² Yang, J. (2018). “Officials' heartache” depression, bureaucracy, and therapeutic governance in china. *Current Anthropology*, 59(5), 596–615.

³³ Yang, J. (2018). “Officials' heartache”: Depression, bureaucracy, and therapeutic governance in china. *Current Anthropology*, 59(5), 596–615.

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³⁵ Thornicroft, G., Mehta, N., Clement, S., Evans-Lacko, S., Doherty, M., Rose, D., Koschorke, M., Shidhaye, R., O'Reilly, C., & Henderson, C. (2016). Evidence for effective interventions to reduce mental-health-related stigma and discrimination. *The Lancet*, 387(10023), 1123–1132. [https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)00298-6](https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)00298-6)

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