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# An introduction to mental health services at universities in China

Wensheng Yang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Litao Lin<sup>a</sup>, Waner Zhu<sup>b</sup>, Shehong Liang<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Counseling and Psychological Services, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai 200240, PR China*

<sup>b</sup>*Mental Health Education and Counseling Center, Zhejiang University, Hang Zhou 310058, PR China*

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## Abstract

After 30 years of development, the mental health service system in Chinese universities forms its own characteristics: (1) Mental health services are positioned as part of ideological and political education. (2) Most of work focuses on mental health education. Personal counseling plays a less important role. (3) Main problems of students are interpersonal relationships, emotional issues, academic stress, career development, neurosis, internet addiction. (4) Chinese counselors are making efforts to construct local conceptual frameworks of psychological counseling, among which the Mountain Stream Therapy is worth to note. A case study of Zhejiang University is also included in this article.

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## 1. History of mental health service development in Chinese universities

The history of mental health service development in Chinese universities can be traced back to the September of 1985 when Shanghai Jiao Tong University founded its Center of Counseling and Support Services (Pei, 2004), the first university psychological health counseling institute in China. At that time there were no full-time counselors in this institution, while all members worked part-time. They were members of the staff at university or department offices or teachers in the departments of psychology. The work of the center at Shanghai Jiao Tong University included organizing lectures, meetings, window

displays, newspapers etc. in order to introduce ideas and knowledge regarding mental health. After Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Zhejiang University, East China Normal University, Tsinghua University, Beijing Normal University and other prestigious universities in China established their own psychological counseling centers, playing similar roles of introducing knowledge regarding mental health and providing corresponding services (Ma, 1994; Zhu, 2011). One point to make here is, similar to Shanghai Jiao Tong University, all the universities have no professional counselors; counselors all work part-time who are from staff at university or department offices.

After 10 years of development at universities, university mental health services began to attract attentions from government. Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party issued a document in 1994, *Certain Suggestions on Enhancing and Improving Civil Education at Schools and Universities*, saying that universities and schools should

\*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [wsyang@sjtu.edu.cn](mailto:wsyang@sjtu.edu.cn) (W. Yang).

offer mental health education and services to students of different ages by various ways, in order to help them enhance mental health, personalities and competence to cope with stress and environmental changes. Approval from this official document encouraged more universities to found their own mental health service center; full-time psychological counselors also appeared after these suggestions. Beijing took a lead during the period of rapid development in the mid-1990s. 85% universities in Beijing founded their psychological counseling service center at that stage, with an emphasis on mental health education and supplemented by psychological counseling.

In 2004, Chinese government issued another important document, further suggestions on Enhancing and Improving University Civil Education, in which it stated that universities should make a plan for developing mental health education equipped with suitable curriculum and teaching methods and should set up a center that could offer professional mental health education and psychological counseling with sufficient full-time and part-time members in order to help students grow up healthily.

This document boosted the development of mental health services in Chinese universities. In the following years after the document, almost all universities around China set up their own mental health service institutions equipped with full-time professionals. Mental health services have gained increasingly more attentions recently. Mental health education has become a rationale to be evaluated in the university appraisal system (CSCPC, 2010).

As we can see from above, mental health service development in Chinese universities has seen three stages: the first stage is from 1985 to 1994, in which universities began to realize the importance of mental health services from the expressed needs of students for psychological counseling and some of universities established corresponding institutions albeit with part-time members. The second stage from 1995 to 2004 is a period that government boosted the development of mental health services with full-time members employed but the work of mental health services could not meet students' needs. The third stage is a fast development stage from 2005 until present with strong support from government, while in this stage many issues have arisen regarding how to develop a local system when introducing western theories and methods.

## 2. Characteristics of mental health services in China: a close link with civil education

As shown in the above two governmental documents, mental health services at Chinese universities are defined as part of civil education. This positioning has a deep influence on the work of mental health services in Chinese universities. The first point we want to make is about the affiliation of university mental health service center. It usually affiliates to the office responsible for student affairs. A survey on the management of mental health service centers at some universities (Qu & Xiao, 2008) shows that 77.8% of the centers are managed by university student affair offices, 11.1% by departments, 7.4% are independent but affiliate to university party committee offices, and the

remaining 3.7% are managed by university civil education offices.

Since student affair offices at Chinese universities are responsible for organizing civil education activities for students, members of mental health service centers are part of staff in these offices. They engage in all projects in these offices, including opening ceremony, graduating ceremony and even financing work in these offices. Some universities even assign civil education teachers to be director of mental health service center. The marginalized and awkward position has some negative influence on mental health service development in specialization.

Another point we want to address is that classroom lecturing is the main task for university psychological counseling centers. Delivering civil education in China is mainly through classroom lecturing. Qiu, Sang, and Fei (2008) show in a survey that 81.2% of university counseling centers in Jiangsu Province were required to deliver mental health courses. Roles of psychological counseling centers in Chinese universities include delivering required or selective courses regarding mental health education, organizing public lectures, conducting personal and group counseling, undertaking mental health surveys, organizing campus activities regarding mental health education, providing crisis intervention and referral, offering teacher trainings on mental health knowledge, conducting psychology related research projects and supervising work of student societies regarding mental health education. Personal counseling is only a tiny part of responsibilities required for counseling centers. Some universities even encourage less involvement of professional counselors in personal counseling, in order to fully engage in mental health education activities. The assumption behind those practices is that students would have no psychological problems if they received enough education.

In relation to mental health education, Chinese universities develop a local way to deliver mental health education - peer consulting, implemented by student representatives. Student representatives with a role of assisting in mental health education first appeared in Tianjin University in 2003, and soon gain popularity throughout China (Liu, He, & Zhang, 2012). Student representatives have become an important role in current mental health education in Chinese universities. Roles of student representatives include deliver mental health knowledge in their classrooms; organize regular activities to promote mental health education; report regularly to mental health education teachers in order to find and track problems efficiently (Zhang, Ma, & Li, 2009).

## 3. Main psychological issues reported by students

Psychological problems reported by Chinese students include problems with interpersonal communication, relationships, studies, emotions, sleep, stress etc. Universities might demonstrate some variations, but the following problems are common.

### 3.1. Interpersonal communication problems

Many university surveys list interpersonal relationship as the top five theme students concern in psychological counseling. It is ranked as the most concerned issue in Ma's (2012) survey based on one university in Shanghai, the second?, the

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