

REVIEW ARTICLE

Embracing a new decade of the *PsyCh Journal*:
State of the Art and Future Perspectives

A brief review of applied psychology in China

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Abstract

Psychology in China has a long past, but a rather short history. Modern psychology was introduced to China in the early 20th century soon, psychology as a scientific discipline was established when the teaching, research, and academic exchanges began. Specifically, applied psychology was established until the last decade of the 20th century; however, the past 30 years have witnessed the fast growth of applied psychology in China. In this article, we briefly introduce the history of psychology in China, its establishment as a discipline and a profession, and present some applications of psychology in the domains of public mental health as well as in educational and organizational settings.

KEYWORDS

applied psychology, history, mental health, psychology in China

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY IN CHINA

The Chinese culture has profound connections with psychological thinking, and it is rooted in its ancient philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism practices throughout at least 3000 years of recorded history. Modern psychology in China, however, was inspired by German psychology in the late 19th century whereas the Chinese scientific community began to form when Western knowledge systems were extensively introduced to China (Han & Zhang, 2007).

The first Chinese book in psychology was translated from the English version of Joseph Haven's "Mental Philosophy: Including the Intellect, Sensibilities and Will" (*Xin Ling Xue*, 心灵学) by a Chinese pastor, Yongjing Yan (1838–1898), in 1889 whereas Japanese scholar Nishi Amane used *Xin Li Xue* (心理学) (*Xin Li Xue*) as the title of his translation of the same book by Joseph Haven from German (W. Yang & Ye, 2014). This book and other pioneering psychological work were introduced to China and endorsed by Youwei Kang and his student Qichao Liang, two of the leading Chinese scholars at that time. Therefore, *Xin Li Xue* became the standard Chinese translation of psychology and was recognized by Chinese scholars through their introduction, promotion, and application (Wang, 1993).

Psychology as a discipline was established in China around the 1920s when several milestones were achieved at that time. The first psychology laboratory was established in Peking University in 1917, the first psychology department was founded in Nanjing Normal College in 1920, the Chinese Psychological Association

(predecessor of the Chinese Psychological Society) was established in 1921, and the first national-level research institute, the Institute of Psychology, Academia Sinica (predecessor of the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences [IPCAS]) was founded in 1929 (Han & Zhang, 2007; Wang, 1993). Schools of psychology such as structuralism, behaviorism, Gestalt psychology, and psychoanalysis were introduced to China, and Chinese psychologists began their own research. Before 1949, degree programs of psychology were offered in more than 20 universities nationwide; the teaching and research were mainly influenced by American psychology traditions (Chinese Psychological Society, 2021).

Soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the IPCAS was reestablished in 1951, and several psychology departments and laboratories were founded in universities in the same period of time. After being falsely accused of being pseudoscience during the Cultural Revolution, psychology resumed its status as a scientific discipline in the 1970s and reestablished diplomatic education and scientific research in 1978. Toward the end of the 20th century, there were 20 psychology departments in the universities across China (Han & Zhang, 2007).

PSYCHOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE IN CHINA

The term *discipline* originates from the Latin word *discipulus*, which means pupil, student, and follower (Turner, 2006). The use of the term in relation to areas of teaching and scientific inquiry occurred from the mid-17th century and onward. By this origin, formal education at universities or colleges is

fundamental to the establishment of a discipline. There are other characteristics for a subject to be recognized as a discipline, such as having a particular object of research, concepts and theories, professional associations to connect researchers and institutes, and publication or other means to communicate knowledge (Hollingsworths, 1986).

Psychology is taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in China. In the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution, there were only five universities that had psychology departments. In accordance with the rapid growth of graduate education in China, applied psychology has been launched as an independent degree program since 1993. The total number of universities that provided degree programs in psychology and applied psychology increased to 45 by Year 2000, and to 187 by 2007 (Han & Zhang, 2007). In 2020, there were 1270 universities offering bachelor's degrees (Ministry of Education of China, 2021); among them, 334 universities had undergraduate programs in psychology or/and applied psychology (China Education online, <https://gaokao.eol.cn/>). Among 827 universities and institutes that offer postgraduate programs (Ministry of Education of China, 2021), 114 had master programs in psychology (psychology, mental health education), and 30 universities had doctoral-level programs in psychology in 2020 (China Education online, <https://kaoyan.eol.cn/>).

Established in 1921, the Chinese Psychological Society (CPS) is one of the earliest national academic organizations in China, and has been a member of the China Association for Science and Technology and the national representative member of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS) since the 1980s. CPS currently has 36 specialist divisions and 12 committees of special task forces, in cooperation with 31 provincial psychological societies across the country. The CPS National Convention of Psychology is held annually with around 2000 attendees, and is the largest forum for academic communication in psychology. CPS joined the IUPsyS in 1980, and the International Association of Applied Psychology in 1984. There are two other national associations of psychology in China. The Chinese Association of Social Psychology was founded in 1982, with 12 specialty divisions and 21 provincial branches. The medical application-oriented Chinese Association for Mental Health (CAMH) was founded in 1979 and is currently affiliated with Beijing AnDing Hospital. There are 18 specialty divisions, and CAMH also has three vocational branches.

Seventeen psychological journals are published in China; 13 in Chinese and 4 in English. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, the flagship journal of CPS and copublished by CPS and the IPCAS, was launched in 1956. *PsyCh Journal*, copublished by the IPCAS and John Wiley & Sons, Inc., was launched in 2012 and is the first China-based international journal in psychology.

A peak achievement in terms of international academic communication within China was the 28th International Congress of Psychology, held in Beijing on August 8–13, 2004, hosted by CPS under the auspices of IUPsyS. It was the first ever to be held in an Asian developing country, and it attracted more than 6000 psychologists from 78 countries around the

world. CAMH and CPS, jointly in cooperation with Peking University (Department of Psychology), held the 5th World Congress of Psychotherapy in Beijing in October 2008. In addition to that, CPS will host the 30th International Congress of Applied Psychology in Beijing, July 25–28, 2023.

ETHICAL STANDARDS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

CPS issued its first ethical codes for psychological assessment in 1993 (Chinese Psychological Society, 1993). As the demand for mental health service providers keeps increasing, Divisions of Clinical Psychology and Counseling of CPS are working together to develop ethical codes for Chinese clinical psychologists and to build up a system of registration and regulation for psychological service providers. CPS published the first edition of “Registration standards for clinical and counseling institutions and professionals” and “Ethics Standards for Clinical Psychology and Counseling Psychology Professionals” (“CPS Ethics Standards”) in 2007 (Chinese Psychological Society, 2007a, 2007b), and revised the CPS Ethics Standards in 2018 (Chinese Psychological Society, 2018a, 2018b).

CPS Ethics Standards (Chinese Psychological Society, 2018b, page 1314) forwards five general principles that registered psychologists should follow:

Beneficence: Providing expertise and skilled services, psychologists should aim at benefiting clients, protecting their rights, providing them with appropriate help, and avoiding any possible harm.

Responsibility: Psychologists should maintain their expertise, be fully aware of their professions, ethics, and legal responsibilities. Psychologists should protect the honor and dignity of the Psychology profession and take social responsibilities.

Integrity: Psychologists should be honest at work and keep credibility and genuineness while doing clinical implications, research, publications, teaching, and publicity.

Justice: Psychologists should handle all the work and treat all the people concerned with fairness and impartiality. Psychologists should remain cautious and careful to avoid any inappropriate behavior caused by prejudice, incompetence, and technological limitations.

Respect: Psychologists should respect every person who is seeking help, as well as his or her privacy, confidentiality, and voluntariness.

CPS Ethics Standards also set up regulations ruling, respectively, professionalism, consenting, privacy and confidentiality, competence and responsibilities, psychological testing and assessments, teaching tutorial and supervising, research and publication, virtual and telephone counseling, media communication and cooperation, and various clinical situations. These

regulations can be used as ethical codes for organizations and pundits of clinical and counseling psychology as well as ground rules for dealing with ethical conflicts. Compared with the first edition, the second version includes more content, especially the ethical rules for virtual professional work and public media communication and cooperation, regarding the increasing acknowledgements and needs for psychological services in China.

PSYCHOLOGY AS A HEALTH-CARE PROFESSION IN CHINA

A recent epidemiologic study (Y. Huang et al., 2019) indicated that the 12-month prevalence of any mental disorders (excluding dementia) was 9.3%, and lifetime prevalence was 16.6%. Anxiety disorders are the most common classes of disorders, followed by affect disorders. Significant progress has been made during the past decade. However, there are only 24 professionals who can provide mental health services for every 1 million people in China (X. Chen, 2018). After almost three decades from its first proposal (J. Liu et al., 2011), the Mental Health Law of China came into effect on May 1, 2013 (H.-Y. Huang, 2018). Psychological services have been included in many national and provincial regulations, and two policy initiatives, *Proposal on Strengthening Psychological Health Services* and *Pilot Plan on Constructing a Social Psychological Services System*, were issued in 2017 and 2018, respectively, by the Chinese government (H.-Y. Huang, 2018).

In 2002, the China Ministry of Labor and Social Security launched the certification for psychological counselors, as a part of the National Vocational Qualifications (H.-Y. Huang, 2018). Before that, psychotherapy was not an independent profession but provided by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists who worked mainly in hospitals and universities (J. Liu et al., 2011). The new certification was given to anyone who fulfilled the basic requirement, took the training, and passed a national examination. It enables private psychotherapy practice and psychological counseling in general public settings such as hospitals, universities, primary and secondary schools, entrepreneurs, and communities. The certification for psychological counselors was ended in September 2017 by the States Council; by then, 1.2 million counselors had passed the certification examination and clinical practice requirement (H.-Y. Huang, 2018). New regulation and register systems of psychological counselors are currently being drafted under the supervision of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China. The CPS also developed its Registry System for Chinese Clinical Psychologists. This system has gained substantial influence on qualification, continual education and training, and the stipulation of ethical standards. The importance of formal education and training is recognized; graduate programs in applied (clinical) psychology are mushrooming whereas the standards for clinical training were specified at the national level in 2014 (H.-Y. Huang, 2020). China has also issued

recommendation standards, standard terms for goods reporting, recommendation process, and information management. China National Technical Committee for Service Standardization issued recommendation standards for psychological counseling services, which include three parts: standard language (China National Technical Committee for Service Standardization, 2018), service procedures (China National Technical Committee for Service Standardization, 2013a), and information management (China National Technical Committee for Service Standardization, 2013b).

PUBLIC PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE IN CHINA

We are going through a period of tremendous transformations worldwide, facing prevalent and fundamental changes in various fields such as economics, politics, society, culture, and technology. To deal with different kinds of issues accompanied with changes, psychological factors such as sense of safety, trust, achievement, resilience, and well-being would help countries, organizations, communities, and individuals resist the risk and make achievements.

Chinese governments have acknowledged that mental health is a major issue at both public health and society levels, and it could make huge impacts on economic and social developments. In late 2016, 22 national departments issued altogether *The Guiding Opinions on Reinforcing Mental Health Services* (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the China, 2017). This is the first document at the macroscopic level to improve mental health services. At the beginning of 2019, a social mental health services system was established and put into practice in 64 pilot cities, and the system has been further polished during the past 3 years. In 2020, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the city of Wuhan was added as another pilot city (National Health Commission of China, 2020). The development of a social services system using theoretical psychology is not equal to building a new set of ethical standards for theoretical research and paradigms from scratch but to use existing theories and experiences to guide the practice, acquire more experiences, and explore new applications and directions for psychological research. Effective intervention using big data to give forewarning on social or individual stress events can be a very good example.

In the digital era, as for the specialty of current incidents, psychological services are offered via the Internet and artificial intelligence. Mental health apps are emerging in the area of mobile health in China. According to a review of Chinese mental health apps (Shang et al., 2019), there were at least 997 Chinese apps featuring “mental health” in the market by 2018. A close examination of 63 apps has indicated that popular mental health apps usually provided a synthetic platform organizing resources of information, knowledge, counseling services, self-tests, and management for the general population with mental health related inquiries. The quality of the apps was rated as acceptable, on average, suggesting some space for improvement. Official guidelines and regulations are urgently

required for the field in the future (Shang et al., 2019). During the recent COVID-19 pandemics, distant psychological support has been well accepted and has been proven as quite effective (S. Liu et al., 2020).

PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES IN NATIONAL CRISIS AND COMMON AFFAIRS

After the 2003 SARS epidemic, when the state inaugurated a large-scale public health reform, 6.86 million renminbi (the so-called “686 Project”), the largest funding by then, was invested in mental health. The 686 Project aimed to identify patients with major psychoses, have them assessed and registered, and offer them medications and follow-ups. The results of the program include a highly cited epidemiological study indicating 17.5% of lifetime prevalence of any mental disorders, which means 173 million people suffering from mental illness nationwide (Phillips et al., 2009).

The Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 (69,227 confirmed dead, 17,923 listed as missing, ~45.6 million people affected by the earthquake) was a turning point of the mental health services in China. Those affected were in need of psychological first aid, and over 1 million affected populations might need long-term intervention. For the first time, psychological interventions were included in the national reconstruction plan. Psychological aid stations were set up in the largest survivor shelters in the first week after the earthquake. Trained psychologists and volunteers outreached the survivors to assess their psychological needs and mental health status, and provided psychological first aid to high-risk people. In addition, several crisis intervention hotlines as well as an Internet-based intervention platform were put into operation. After the earthquake, integrated psychological, medical, educational and other social resources, an overall planning, scientific, and effective system of psychological aid was founded. Trauma-related psychology is fast-blooming and results in rapid growth of both research and clinical practice.

As the first country shocked by COVID-19, Chinese psychologists actively provided psychological services soon after the COVID-19 breakout in January 2020. At the emergency response and administration level, guideline suggestions were provided to governmental agencies to take necessary actions to prevent public panic and promote psychological relief from the beginning of the blockage. The psychological intervention had been integrated into the national emergency administration from the early stage. On January 26, 2020, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) issued the guideline of emergency psychological crisis intervention during COVID-19 outbreak (Xihua Press, 2020a). Shortly after the lockdown through China, the National Health Commission released the guideline for psychological intervention hotlines during COVID-19, guiding the hotlines setup, counselor training, and supervision (Xihua Press, 2020b). The guideline also addressed the importance of ethics in distance counseling. Other guidelines for psychological services targeting different groups were later issued and implanted at the national level.

The Chinese central government prioritized timely mental health services for those directly impacted by the pandemic,

including patients and frontline health workers, suspected patients and families in quarantine, close contacts, and other vulnerable groups. Mental health professionals were part of the medical crew assisting Hubei from other parts of China. Emergent research was conducted to understand and monitor the psychological impact of COVID-19, and intervention programs were implanted for those in need. Emergent medical staff showed signs of anxiety and depression, lack of sleep, and other stress symptoms, and reported little or ineffective coping strategies (Q. Chen et al., 2020). An early plan was conducted with the medical staff working at the hospitals in Wuhan to reduce stress level and maintain well-being of medical staff, and contained three parts: (a) building a psychological intervention team which provided online courses on coping and relaxation, (b) a psychological assistance hotline team which provided distance counseling, and (c) an intervention team which provided group activities to release stress (N. Zhang et al., 2020). The psychological services for the general population (online education programs, reading materials, individual distance counseling, and online self-helping apps) were mainly provided remotely via the Internet or mobile phones (S. Liu et al., 2020). Mental health programs for special groups were also developed. For instance, elderly people have limited resources and capabilities to access Internet-based interventions. Families could not visit elders who lived in nursing homes. Brief interventions, which can be conducted by social workers and caregivers, were developed for elderly people in communities and in nursing homes (Y. Yang et al., 2020).

PSYCHOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Educational psychology is the earliest research and application field of psychology research, and the first Chinese textbook of Educational Psychology was published in 1924 (Sun, 2011). The professional committee of educational psychology was established in 1962 and is the first branch of the CPS (2021). In China, psychology is a compulsory course in teacher training. Most of the psychology departments were originally set up in normal schools. Educational psychology is also the most taught undergraduate psychology course in Chinese universities. Therefore, educational psychology has a tradition and advantage in psychological research in China. Chinese educational psychologists and students used to focus on the “learning process” and the “cognitive processing process” and followed Western theories, but in the past 20 years have paid increasing attention to practical problems in teaching and school settings in Chinese societal backgrounds such as China’s social and economic development (e.g., education ecosystem and characteristics of left-behind children and intranational migrant children) and collective cultures (e.g., the role of “*JiTi*,” a well-organized collective characterized by teamwork and cohesive force) (X. Li & Xu, 2018).

Educational psychology and school psychology have profoundly been influenced by China’s family planning policies (e.g., only-child policy, 1980–2016, Hesketh et al., 2005) and education policies (e.g., college entrance examination system, 1978–, S. Yu et al., 2018). Insights from psychology also

influence the education policy in China. For instance, mental health is becoming one of the most important issues in school psychology in China (D'Amato et al., 2013), which underpins the development and release of the “double ease” policy (ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education), which has been carried out since 2021.

PSYCHOLOGY IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS

S. Liu and Gan (2021) analyzed 1755 articles published in *Chinese Journal of Applied Psychology* between 1981–2020, and concluded three main areas of publications: organizational psychology, education psychology, and psychological assessment. A shift toward the theme of mental health merged in the recent two decades. In terms of keywords, “self-esteem” and “psychological health” appeared in the journal for the first time after 2000, and were ranked the third and the sixth most frequently used keywords. However, organizational psychology has been the most influential field based on citation analysis. The most cited research has included research on organizational performance, job involvement, and satisfaction (S. Liu & Gan, 2021).

Gong (2011) analyzed 651 management psychology articles published in 8,200 major journals in China from 1999–2008. In terms of published journals, the application field of management psychology is very wide. In terms of the number of published papers, the number is increasing year by year. In terms of content, it mainly focuses on incentive problems, leadership behavior problems, management decision-making problems, team psychological problems, and individual psychological problems, with increasing emphasis on application and development in the real world.

As a practical application of organizational psychology, China began to carry out employee assistance programs (EAP) as early as 1998. The China-EAP international forum has been held annually since 2004, and speakers and attendees are leaders of top enterprises in finance, aviation, automobile, high technology, and other industries at home and abroad gather together with top experts in academia. The China National Employee Assistance Professionals Association was established and recognized by the Employee Assistance Professionals Association. By 2019, there were nearly 100 registered EAP service institutions in China, and about 10,000 psychological counselors and psychological professionals were engaged in EAP. Since 2018, an EAP executive qualification certificate has been issued by the China Vocational Skills Training Association. However, the gap between EAP providers and market demands is very large, and there will be much room for development in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

As China is a country with a large population, we have a spontaneous need for applied psychology. Publication trending has indicated that the fields of mental health, education, and

organization attract the most attention of applied psychologists in China (S. Liu & Gan, 2021). Here, we only covered a few fields (mental health, education, and industry) where psychology has been applied. Applied psychology also supports other important aspects of personal, community, social, and economic lives in China. For instance, there are growing interests in sport psychology (C. Li & Hwa Kee, 2019), environmental psychology (Xu et al., 2017), human factors (Xu & Ge, 2018), transport psychology (Y. Y. Zhang et al., 2019), applied gerontology (Zhou et al., 2013), and big data and psychology (P. Yu et al., 2015), to name only a few. Tremendous growth in the demand of psychology in society has emerged in recent years, as a result of the growing awareness among people and government of the importance and practical value of psychology in different perspectives. Such change in psychology studies was catalyzed externally by social demands, and demarcated by 2008 due to the demand of psychological support after the Wenchuan earthquake, and has become an essential part of civilian service during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhang et al., 2022). The need for a stable and harmonious society continues to drive the development of psychology as both a discipline and a profession in China.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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