

The stressed-out in one part of China are being offered a unique form of psycho-analysis which includes attacking dummies. Lijia MacLeod reports

Beating the therapy taboo

THE EVE Psychological Consultancy Centre has just opened for business in the Yangtse River port of Nanjing and its prospects, if not its clients, look healthy indeed. The office phone buzzes with callers cracking under the pressures of modern China. A salesman worries his performance is below par. A student is anxious about landing a decent job. A migrant from the countryside feels out of place in the big city.

By nipping their anxieties in the bud, 36-year-old entrepreneur Zhang Qing seeks the silver lining amid China's worsening cloud of depression. "I had the idea after reading a report last year about a young woman who killed herself by jumping off the Yangtse River bridge," Zhang explains in Eve's freshly painted offices. As a wave of mental illness sweeps the nation, replacing physical ailments as China's number-one health problem, the bridge has become the hottest outside spot in town.

"Shortly afterwards, a respectable teacher and close friend of a colleague also attempted suicide," says Mr Zhang. "She became so depressed after being dumped by her boyfriend of many years. Luckily, she was discovered and sent to hospital. In both cases, if the women had received some professional help, they might not have gone that far." But that help is elusive remote for most Chinese.

Mental illness has been a taboo subject for centuries. The Chinese Communist Party scoured Western psychiatry and prescribed Maoism over medication until the late 1970s. Even after two decades of economic reforms that have subdued its dramatic social change, China's 1.3 billion people are served by just 13,000 psychiatrists. In therapy-addicted America, 200,000 psychiatrists treat a population of just 250 million.

other suicides, Chinese are falling prey to depression, insomnia, sexual dementia, and alcohol and drug abuse. Suicide rates are among the highest in the world.

"The sharp increase in mental problems is the natural result of the market economy," argues Xu Haoyuan, a United States-educated psychiatrist running the Heart to Heart psychological health education centre at Nelling's Qinghua University. "When Britain went through the Industrial Revolution, people felt anxious too. But it is much worse in China, which is developing so fast with so many changes at once."

In Mao Zedong's day, political persecution was a daily torment for many Chinese. Nowadays, there are fewer ideological pitfalls to dodge, but rampant capitalism produces other pressures. "You often see people argue in the street over small matters," says Mr Zhang of an ever-more-inflammatory society. "That's because they are angry and stressed. The economy is developing so fast, and life has become faster paced and more competitive. Yet, people have little knowledge about mental health issues. Our job is to help them ease the pressure in their lives."

Besides counselling with trained psychiatrists at 30 yuan (about 10.2226) to 50 yuan per hour, Mr Zhang encourages clients to release their frustrations in a more primitive fashion. Inside the "venting-out-space bar", they attack sandbags, balloons and dolls with fists, feet and plastic hammers. The life-sized dummy in denim and belted is brand new, after an overly enthusiastic female client wrecked the last model.

Mr Zhang is proud to offer the first such psychotherapy facility in Nanjing, but other centres are springing up across China.



Showing off the equipment he developed for stress release, Eve Psychological Consultancy Centre founder, Zhang Qing, has tapped into a growing demand in China for counselling. (Lijia MacLeod)

advice was always sensible. Without her help, it would have been much harder to go through that difficult period."

Qing has since become a regular customer at a Beijing clinic. "A few years ago, if you told people you were visiting a psychiatrist, they would really think you were crazy," she admits. "Now it is more acceptable, even with educated

business Mr Zhang. "But such attitudes are gradually changing. I set up the centre because I feel it is good for society. Of course, as a businessman, I also expect to make a profit from it and I think I will."

Yet the fast growth of the psychiatric-advice sector raises concerns in some quarters over the quality and ethical of the practitioners.

who stalled-business management, weeded for the Jiangsu provincial government, and most recently managed a holiday village on the outskirts of Beijing. With registered capital of 10,000 yuan, he quickly obtained a business licence in March.

"Many of these psychiatric centres are aimed at treating memory," says the Xu of the Heart to Heart

ket. Many psychiatrists are poorly trained, which is potentially damaging. Also, for the women, there are no rules to regulate the market. They operate just like normal businesses with no involvement from the health authorities."

Despite such reservations, Dr Xu says she is encouraged by the higher profile psychological problems are assuming in China. "It

says. "In China, illness used to mean only physical problems."

Dr Xu gives lectures and consultations to large corporations that are increasingly aware of the dangers inherent in the fast pace of modern life. Even the People's Liberation Army has established a mental-illness prevention and control centre, also in Nanjing.

Although most city-dwellers and their employers can afford professional advice, China's villagers lack both the access and the habit of seeking help for problems like the skyrocketing suicide rate, especially among women. China is responsible for more than 30 per cent of female suicides worldwide, although it is home to only 21 per cent of the world's women. Many victims are peasant girls sold into marriage to abusive partners.

Recent surveys on the worsening state of China's mental health include the business prospects of centres such as Eve look assured.

A survey in February found that more than 20 per cent of university students suffer various psychological problems. In a survey of pre-school children in the city of Tianjin last year, the ratio rose to one in three. Indulged by parents and grandparents, the "little emperors" of China's one-child policy grew up ill-prepared for the challenges of adult life.

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Nowadays there are fewer ideological pitfalls to dodge, but rampant capitalism produces other pressures. "You often see people argue in the street over small matters," says Zhang. "That's because they are angry and stressed. Our job is to help to ease the pressure."

Besides counselling at £2.50 to £4.20 per hour, Zhang encourages clients to release frustration in the "letting out anger bar", where they attack sandbags and dolls with fists, feet and plastic hammers.

Despite reservations, professionals such as Xu Haoyuan are encouraged. "It shows people are paying more attention to mental health," she says. "In China, illness used to mean only physical problems."

But China's mental health crisis looks set to get worse. A survey in February found that 20 per cent of students have psychological problems. In pre-school children in the city of Tianjin, the ratio rose to one in three. Indulged by grown-ups, with no siblings to temper their behaviour, these "little emperors" grow up ill-prepared for the challenges of adult life.