Most literature and media coverage of trauma emanate from western countries and from a western perspective, while in China psychological trauma has not attracted much attention until recent years. The term “psychological trauma” appeared in local media reporting and in more widespread conversation in the wake of the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008.

Even in academic circles, the study of psychological trauma has not been given much attention until recently, and this has been a very gradual process. This chapter will briefly discuss the Chinese people’s understanding of trauma from their traditional cultural point of view, methods of coping with trauma from a Chinese perspective, and the development and evolution of psychological and trauma counseling in China.

Chinese Cultural Background

Traditional Chinese culture is based on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism which value the harmony and unity of human and nature; and, according to the traditional Chinese medicine which was developed out of this cultural background, diseases are deemed to stem from an imbalance of “yin” and “yang.” Yin and yang comprise an ancient Chinese philosophy which is based on the idea that everything in the universe is formed and influenced by the combination of the yin and yang forces and the disorder of the “five elements”: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These elements were used for describing interactions and relationships between phenomena.

This imbalance or disorder of yin and yang may result in the obstruction of the human body’s energy for life, known as “qi” (also commonly spelled ch’i, chi, or ki). Qi is a fundamental concept of everyday Chinese culture, most often defined as “air” or “breath” and, by extension, the life force or spiritual energy that is part of everything that exists. This belief still deeply influences Chinese people’s concept of disease and even their symptoms.
According to traditional Chinese medicine, body and soul are linked together, so there is no obvious distinction between physical disease and mental illness. This concept holds that, in order to keep physical or mental health, people should avoid extreme expression of emotions and maintain the harmony of family and other social relationships. Traditional Chinese medicine regards the “visceral system” as the center where body and soul unite and internal organs as the manifestation of physical diseases. This may be one of the reasons why there are more somatic symptoms in Chinese patients involving depression (Kim, Li, & Kim, 1999).

**Changing Coping Strategies and Social Development**

The cultural background of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism has a profound effect on the strategies that Chinese people adopt when they encounter disasters and trauma. When facing circumstances beyond their individual control, Chinese people of traditional views always hold the belief to “Do one’s level best and leave the rest to God’s will.” Many events outside of human action are attributed to “God’s will” or the “arrangement of fate.” While this could be seen as a negative coping strategy, it effectively relieves feelings of shame, self-accusation, and helplessness in the face of trauma and, at least to some degree, reduces the negative effects arising from the trauma.

Traditional Chinese culture is based on agricultural culture, in which there is a phenomenon of “authority worship” and the strongly held belief that “Losers are always in the wrong.” In such a belief system, people are not devoid of mercy and love, yet it’s difficult for people who suffer trauma to fully express sorrowful emotion, because everyone else in the society believes that no matter how difficult the situation one faces, one should be strong enough to face it. To not do so would even see the person experiencing the disaster as being described as a coward.

In China there has traditionally been a strong social support system tied to the family or clan. In fact, in traditional Chinese people’s view, people of the same surname belong to one clan, and these people share weal or woe (the population of the largest clan with the same family name in China is close to 100 million). In such a huge network based on the patriarchal surname, one’s trauma is no longer regarded as personal business, but something that the whole clan will cope with together. In these circumstances it could be seen that the degree or impact of such trauma or disaster is diluted. This belief is evident in ancient Chinese stories recounting how immigrants experienced various misfortunes in other lands – because they were far away from their clans and lost the strong social support of the clan.

This situation had lasted for thousands of years until the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Along with the establishment of a new state structure this resulted in earth-shaking changes in the social structure. The sense of “clan” with feudal traditions was vigorously challenged, and new thoughts and concepts such as independence, equality, democracy, and freedom were gradually conveyed to the society by scholars and the government.

Yet such a transformation has not been always easy, especially during the first three decades after the founding of PRC. China suffered many natural disasters and social movements in which many people experienced severe psychological trauma. At that
time, urban and rural residents were affiliated to different “units” and “production
teams” for their different work places. As basic administrative organizations, these
teams represented in a sense, government power, and when people experienced trauma,
they often turned to the unit for help. Consequently, the role of clans in relieving
trauma gradually declined. This transformed social support system could still cope with
psychological trauma, but the units were less concerned with affection elements and
more with rational elements. Therefore, during this period, people who suffered
trauma became less inclined to express emotions, and many psychological pains were
constrained and internalized. However, because of the authority of production teams
(or other organizations which represent government) and people’s confidence in these
organizations, traumas which occurred in workplaces were generally dealt with through
the organizations and, because of this, possibly in a positive way.

Nevertheless, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had a severe psychological
impact on many Chinese people. Many individuals and families experienced traumatic
situations. Because of the sensitivity of this topic, many people who experienced
psychological traumas during this period tried their best to avoid referring to it. This
silence resulted in many individuals not dealing with the traumas for a long time. Today
patients with psychological traumas arising from the Cultural Revolution can be seen in
clinics of psychiatry and psychological counseling organizations in China.

Some scholars have put forward the theory of intergenerational transmission for the
kind of psychological trauma attributed to the Cultural Revolution (Scharf, 2007), and
a few Chinese scholars have tentatively made some investigations into this, but to date
there is no published Chinese literature on this area. And while the intergenerational
transmission of trauma is full of complexities, Kellermann (2001) reported that these
children do show signs of stress and specific disturbances and demonstrate a higher
vulnerability to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Since 1979 China has undergone profound, even revolutionary change under the
late Deng Xiaoping’s reform program and “open door policy” (Liang, 1997). After
China implemented the policy of reformation, the young modern society established in
China changed greatly once again, and western culture and ideology moved swiftly into
China. In the China of this period, the importance of the individual and the attention
paid to the individual by people gradually increased, and the population’s mobility
greatly increased. This saw the influence of units and production teams rapidly
decreasing, and the psychological support and sense of security provided by them
to people weakened synchronously. The influence and support system of clans, which
had been weakened in the previous 30 years, continued to diminish.

China at this time did not have a social security system similar to that found in
developed countries in the West, and this, together with the changes mentioned in this
chapter, resulted in Chinese people finding themselves in a relative vacuum in relation
to social support systems. People had to cope with more intense psychological stresses
from life and work without sufficient psychological support. When people in this period
experienced psychological traumas, they had to turn to other means for help because it
was difficult for them to obtain enough resources from traditional psychological
support systems. This resulted in the development of a western-influenced psycho-
logical counseling services and employee assistance programs (EAPs), particularly in
major Chinese cities experiencing economic growth and an emerging middle class.
A Brief Introduction to the Development of Psychology in China

The development of indigenous psychology in China can be traced to the Pre-Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), and many psychological thoughts concerning body and mind relations, self-awareness, group mind, and individual psychology were clearly recorded in *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Classic of History*, and other early ancient books and records. From the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) to Tang Dynasty (618–907), along with the combination of foreign Buddhism and the indigenous cultures, people attached a deeper level of attention to psychological problems. Buddhism emphasizes the inner world and has a strong connection with psychological phenomena, and it inspired many Chinese scholars to study psychological problems.

Achievements in science and technology during the Sung, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties (especially achievements in physiology in Chinese medicine) greatly influenced the development of psychological thought. However, though ancient scholars had explored human psychological activities, there was no real science of psychology in China at this time. The psychological thoughts were found in works of traditional philosophy, politics, history, ethics, education, medicine, military science, religion, and so on.

During the late period of Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), western civilization was spreading out to the East and western psychology gradually entered into China. The dissemination of modern western psychology by Chinese scholars who went to Europe and America strengthened the combination of Chinese and foreign psychological thinking and accelerated the formation and development of a modern Chinese psychology. The provision of psychology courses in new-style schools and missionary schools also played a role in the early development of a Chinese modern psychology.

Around the May 4th Movement of 1919, with the catchphrase of “Science and democracy,” psychology aroused further attention in Chinese society and there were increasingly more people who went to Europe and the United States to learn psychology. After returning home, they were engaged in the teaching of psychology and began to introduce theories of various schools in western psychology. A few psychologists also began to establish departments of psychology, psychology research institutions, and academic organizations related to psychology. There was also some limited academic exchange and the development of psychology journals and publication.

For example, at the beginning of the 1920s, colleges and universities in Beijing, Nanjing, and other cities began to offer psychology courses; Peking University founded the first psychology laboratory in China in 1917. After this, the development of Chinese psychology slowed down because of the unstable political situation in China and the influence of World War Two. After the establishment of PRC in 1949, Chinese psychology entered a period of renaissance. Following the development of economic construction and scientific undertakings, psychology research institutions were founded. The Chinese Psychological Society was re-established and psychologists from the whole country were gathered and organized to study the philosophy of dialectical materialism and the theories of Pavlov in particular. There was also a focus on Soviet psychology and attempts to transform western psychology to suit Chinese
thought. However, because of the influence of politics and society and other factors
during the Cultural Revolution, psychology was eventually disparaged as idealism, and
its development was greatly impacted upon and obstructed.

Since the 1980s, psychology began to obtain a new life and this corresponded with
the deepening of reform and opening up of the PRC. Western psychology began to be
taken seriously again and with the economic development of the 1990s China saw
professional institutes in various cities offering various kinds of psychology training
courses through cooperation with overseas universities or psychology research institu-
tes. An example of this was the Sino-German Senior Psychotherapist Continuous
Training Program held by the German-Sino Academy for Psychotherapy jointly with
Shanghai Mental Health Center, Hamburg University, Freud Research Institute of
Frankfurt, and other organizations. This became the eminent training program in
China at this time. It developed workshops in psychoanalysis, cognitive therapy, and
family therapy, and many graduates of this program have become cornerstones in the
Chinese psychotherapy field. Additionally, the Chinese-American Cognitive Behavior
Therapy Training Program, the Chinese-Norwegian Psychoanalysis Training Program,
the Chinese-American Trauma Therapy Training Program, and other training pro-
grams have been accepted gradually by the industry. Meanwhile, various kinds of
training classes for the examination of Chinese psychological counselors sprang up like
bamboo shoots in the 1990s; however, the quality of the training was mixed. In short,
the current Chinese psychological counseling and therapy industry is going through a
period of ongoing and rapid development.

On December 9 1997, China Daily reported on the expansion of psychological
education. It stated that “more and more college students today have come to realise
that healthy emotions and personalities are important for their lives and studies”
(Cui, 1997, p. 2). It also reported that 70 percent of colleges and universities in Beijing
and Shanghai provided psychological counseling services for students (Cui, 1997).

At present, Chinese psychology is taking its lead from the West, but people have
begun to reflect on the cultural characteristics of western psychology and attempted to
see psychology from a cultural perspective. Research on the Sinicization of psychology
has been given much more attention in recent years. Chinese psychologists emphasize
the study of Chinese people’s special psychology according to different characteristics
of Chinese culture. Additionally, the participation of Chinese scholars in international
academic exchanges on psychology has resulted in much development and advance-
ment in the development of a Chinese psychological paradigm.

Trauma Counseling and the Development of Employee
Assistance Programs in China

As mentioned above, after the implementation of reform and the general opening up of
the PRC in the 1980s, significant and rapid changes took place in the Chinese social
structure. Modern thoughts collided with traditional concepts, traditional values
conflicted with external behaviors and an increasingly accelerated life and work rhythm,
and the inevitable competition resulted in substantial pressures and stresses. Yet the
simultaneous weakening of the traditional social support systems resulted in those with psychological problems not receiving support or assistance.

Together with the “one-child policy” implemented since the 1970s, a new generation of young people in China was growing up in an environment entirely different from that of their parents. Many of them were spoiled by their parents and received excessive attention from family members. This resulted in generational differences in relation to a number of issues between the young and the older generations, particularly regarding workplace conflict and workplace trauma. For example, in the face of a superior’s unfair criticism, the employee from the older generation may often believe they should accept and endure such criticism, and they should be strong to face it even if feeling wronged. However, young workers would probably not accept this, and they would most likely point out the superior’s mistake and safeguard their dignity. These young workers may even experience emotional disturbance in relation to this criticism.

For trauma in the workplace, the older generation does not have many options because they are used to “being strong to face them” and “believing that organizations will solve them adequately,” while young workers are unlikely to accept the organizations’ “adequate solution” when they are facing such traumas. Young Chinese people’s mode of thinking is very different from their parents’, but they have inherited the tradition of not being good at directly expressing their emotions. Therefore, young workers seem to develop greater psychological pressure and often appear lost in helplessness and despair when experiencing severe psychological traumas. They are aware that, psychologically, there is something wrong with them but they don’t know how to resolve these psychological problems. The provision of trauma counseling to these young workers appears to be increasingly important.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of psychological counseling was still new and strange to many people in China, while the actual demands of Chinese people for psychological counseling services were increasing. However, there is a significant shortage of specialist practitioners who are able to provide psychological counseling services in China. For example we estimate that there are less than seven people providing psychological services persons for every million people presently in the PRC. In particular it is difficult for people who experience psychological trauma to obtain timely and effective psychological aid in the PRC. This contradiction between supply and demand encouraged, to some extent, the development of a psychological counseling and psychotherapy industry including EAPs during this period.

In 1997, Tony Buon and Xiaoping Zhu developed the first EAP in the PRC in Shanghai and began promoting the EAP concept throughout China (Buon, 1998). The Hong Kong Christian Service also provided EAPs in the then UK-administered Hong Kong from 1993 and reported “good usage” by Chinese people of their EAP (Fong & Lam, 1998). At the Asia-Pacific Conference of Employee Assistance Programs held in Hong Kong in March 1998, providers from many Asian countries also reported good usage of EAPs in their countries. Throughout the early part of the new century, many foreign EAP business began developing EAPs (to a limited degree) in China. In 2003, a not-for-profit organization, the Asia Pacific Employee Assistance Roundtable (APEAR), was formed to promote standards of practice and continuing development of EAPs in Asia. In 2005, a Chinese Government agency ran the First China International Forum on Employee Assistance Programs in Beijing. Today there are more than 20
providers of EAPs in China, both foreign and local, and these include organizations such as the EAP China Service Center, a local Chinese provider.

In fact, even before the development of these services in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese enterprises were aware of paying close attention to staff’s physical and psychological health. This was mainly reflected in the “ideological and political work” taken charge of by the Chinese Communist Party and government departments. There was also an emphasis on using methods of behavioral science in relation to staff management issues and the scientific ideological and political work after the implementation of reform and “opening up” during this time in Chinese history.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century many organizations began to pay attention to occupational psychological health and organizational development, and the concept of EAPs was introduced by some large-scale foreign-owned enterprises.

At first, some foreign-owned enterprises adopted internal EAP models or contracted with foreign EAP services to provide EAP services to their expatriate staff. But with an increase in the demand for EAP services, and the inclusion of Chinese staff in EAP contracts, a boom in EAP work began in earnest at the start of the twenty-first century. Services were generally provided to mainly foreign-owned enterprises that already had EAPs in their home countries. Some foreign companies who were the early adopters of the EAP model in China were Coca Cola, HP, Motorola, Cisco Systems, Alcatel, and Proctor & Gamble Co. However, at this time few Chinese-owned enterprises also developed EAPs.

Human biological makeup, the distribution of cognitive abilities, and the general features of the physical world are similar to all people. However people from different parts of the world have different sociocultural traditions and different experiences in their interactions with the world. These social variances may lead to different perspectives, from which they approach the same physical reality and how they conceptualize the world. These different sociocultural traditions and different experiences suggest that EAP counseling needs to be modified to suit the local market and be provided by psychologists who are part of that tradition and consequently share the same perspectives (Buon, 2000).

Over the past few years, there has been increasing belief in China that EAP services for national staff need to be provided by local (Chinese) psychological professionals. For this reason, a number of local EAP service agencies have emerged. This has also resulted in some Chinese enterprises starting to use EAPs or similar services. This includes organizations such as Lenovo Group, China Development Bank, China Mobile, and the Bank of China.

The Psychological Trauma Responses of Chinese People

Human beings have common psychological reactions in facing trauma, and Chinese people have no difference in this regard from people of other cultures. Chinese people experience normal post-traumatic psychological reactions. However, the Chinese culture generally includes a strong volitional quality in facing traumas or difficulties and doesn’t encourage the expression of emotions, especially for men. For example,
Chinese men will often believe that “A true man only weeps where he is touched to the marrow.”

When hearing that someone has experienced a traumatic situation, it would be common for those around them to say “Pull yourself together.” Therefore, in experiencing trauma, a person’s fear or emotions are often not fully ventilated and a common coping strategy would involve suppression or isolation.

When a group experiences natural disasters or other traumatic events, this tends to result in different coping strategies or reactions. For instance, in facing disasters such as earthquake or flood, Chinese people tend to think “This is fate or God’s will.” They will tend to face such situations outside of their control with a mind-set of “Do one’s level best and leave the rest to God’s will.” This reaction reduces guilt and makes it easier for people to accept the reality. Meanwhile, Chinese people hold a belief of “One who survives a great catastrophe is destined to good fortune for ever after,” which can be a positive belief system in the treatment of trauma.

This may explain, at least in part, that after experiencing the Wenchuan Earthquake on May 12, 2008 the actual incidence rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was reported as being 2.37 percent (Sun, Sun, & Li, 2010), far below the data reported after disasters in western countries in spite of a huge number of disaster victims. According to a report on September 25, 2008, authorized by the Earthquake Relief Headquarters of the State Council of China, the death toll reached 69,227, with a further 374,643 injured and 17,923 reported missing (see also Sina, 2008).

Of course, during such natural disasters faced by groups, people will still experience negative emotions and individuals still tend to cope with these by means of suppression or isolation. Such coping strategies may be propitious to the mental adaptation of people involved in the short term, but later, psychological pain may reappear in other ways, including depression, anxiety, or even dissociative disorders. Therefore, it is essential to provide suitable trauma counseling to people who experienced trauma. Nevertheless, it is not easy to practice trauma counseling in China.

For most Chinese people, counseling of any type is a new concept, and with the disaster relief of traumatic accidents in the past, trauma counseling was not provided. This has resulted in many Chinese people rejecting assistance and psychological services. Additionally, because some professionals who provide trauma counseling haven’t received sufficient training on trauma counseling, the risk of secondary trauma is high. This occurred during psychological intervention after the Wenchuan Earthquake, which saw the avoidance of psychological intervention by many disaster victims.

However, in the 11.15 Large Fire which happened in Shanghai on November 15, 2010, the response was different. This fire resulted in 53 deaths, and psychological professionals involved in this crisis demonstrated a high level of professionalism. They established contact with victims’ families and survivors of the fire, provided basic psychological support to survivors through non-intrusive approaches such as active listening and accompanying, and guided survivors to express their distress and fear with empathy.

It should be pointed out that there was a common phenomenon in trauma counseling after both the Wenchuan Earthquake and the Shanghai fire disaster. For some people who demonstrated great fortitude or bravery in public or in group counseling, their sadness, fear, or other emotions would burst out suddenly once they
came into an environment of individual counseling or had the opportunity to have one-to-one professional trauma counseling. This may be related to the subtle defense mechanism of repression and isolation in Chinese culture, and may also be the result of the fact that Chinese people do not want others to feel that they are weak or “not mentally strong,” or that they don’t want to “lose face.” Nevertheless, a majority of people who experienced trauma are unwilling to receive psychological counseling; they will avoid the contact with psychological counselors because even simple contact means that they are not strong enough psychologically and it’s difficult for them to “show their soft side” in public.

With the development of EAPs in China, some companies do utilize EAP providers for trauma counseling for traumatic events or work accidents. An example of this was the much publicized case involving the suicide of an employee in a manufacturing enterprise in China. A female employee of this company killed herself by jumping from the roof of a residence community. After learning the internal news, the human resources (HR) department immediately informed the companies’ EAP provider and this EAP provider established the trauma intervention program within the hour and assigned its staff to enter the workplace to carry out a field evaluation.

This employee, a recent graduate and recently engaged, was seen by other employees as an optimistic and outgoing young woman. Her suicide was a great shock to her colleagues and no one in her team could believe she had taken her own life. The first response of everyone was “It’s impossible”; afterward, emotional reactions such as sadness, compunction, self-accusation, and bewilderment emerged among the team; some suffered sleep problems; and some team members felt demotivated and lethargic.

During the trauma intervention, the EAP professionals provided assistance with the depressive emotions of team members and enabled them to begin to accept their normal reactions to this incident through one-to-one sessions. This team had a good cohesion, and the team members appeared to trust and support each other. Following group counseling, they started discussions that demonstrated self-awareness and mutual understanding on the feelings of guilt and life values.

Since this traumatic incident did not take place in the company, it may have been expected that there would be less impact on other employees of the company. But in fact the event led to very significant reactions by other employees and management. Internal support systems developed and staff found they could support each other. Under a safe group-counseling environment, a wide range of employees received support and assistance.

**Perspectives on the Development of Trauma Counseling in China**

China is a country with a population of 1.3 billion, and it is experiencing economic development and social changes of an unprecedented scale. In China, various forms of trauma resulting from natural disasters or workplace accidents occur daily. While trauma counseling in China is at the initial stage of its development, we are convinced that trauma counseling will develop significantly over the next decade.

On one hand, following the continuous improvement of the economy, people will certainly demand more in relation to their psychological health along with their basic
material demands; on the other hand, along with globalization and influence of western
culture, Chinese people’s means of expressing emotions are gradually changing. Compared with their parents, young Chinese people can express their inner emotions more openly and appear to accept trauma counseling and other similar psychological interventions more easily. Government departments and an increasing number of private companies or organizations are paying greater attention to the psychological health of their staff and are much more willing to provide trauma counseling and other psychological services than they were even five years ago.

The development of trauma counseling in China must take into account the unique history and culture of the Chinese people and have what is often described as “Chinese characteristics.” Among other things, the support of relevant Chinese government departments is particularly important. For example, the National Emergency Response Team for Public Health founded in China recently involved professionals in the fields of psychological crisis intervention and trauma counseling. We believe that this will play a demonstrative role for regional governments for trauma counseling to get attention, policy support, and even financial resources from the government. Furthermore, we believe this will allow trauma counseling services to extend from large-scale disasters and emergencies to the handling of general psychological traumatic incidents in workplace.

Nevertheless, the ongoing development of trauma counseling in China is stifled by a shortage of Chinese psychological professionals. It is presently a challenge to provide sufficient training to practitioners involved in trauma counseling so as to guarantee the quality and acceptability of trauma counseling. The development of trauma counseling in China needs to take into account the cultural applicability and the Sinicization of trauma-counseling technology. Perhaps Chinese psychological counseling experts will draw more influence from eastern culture, rather than just accepting existing western trauma-counseling methods. For example, Taoism advocates “Let it be,” “Govern by doing nothing that goes against nature,” and other thoughts that have possible implications for trauma counseling. Of course, some western psychological counselors have even begun to look to the East for new therapeutic methods in their trauma counseling; this includes areas such as meditation technology, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and other methods with strong eastern thought.

Psychological trauma is no longer a foreign concept in China, and people who experience trauma have gradually begun to seek professional psychological counseling and assistance, yet trauma counseling is still a new concept and the experiences of western countries can affect this process of development. However, most importantly for the ongoing development of trauma counseling in China, we need to develop trauma counseling modes that both respect and integrate Chinese culture.

References


