

Therapeutic Governance for the Harmonious Family: Shaping Family Relationships during Marriage and Family Counselling in China

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Abstract

While psychotherapy is often framed as individualistic, in contemporary China it is increasingly oriented towards the family, linking intimate life with demographic and moral governance. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and critical discourse analysis, this article examines how the psychological education tool of Marriage and Family Counselling constructs new family ethics under the ideological framework of the 'harmonious family'. I introduce two interrelated concepts: therapeutic familism, which psychologises family ethics to transform individuals into agents of familial harmony, and therapeutic femininity, which positions women as primary bearers of emotional labour and moral repair. The findings show that counsellors mobilise hybrid therapeutic techniques to produce postcolonial and gendered moral subjects whose intimate labour aligns with state objectives of demographic stability. This study contributes to scholarship on therapeutic governance by foregrounding the family as a key site of population regulation and moral regulation in East Asia, offering a comparative insight into the gendered emotional labour through which population governance is now unfolding.

Keywords: *psychological education; governing through ethics; therapeutic familism; therapeutic femininity; Chinese family*

Introduction

Across East Asia governments are confronting population decline, brought about by ultra-low fertility, delayed marriage and rising divorce rates (Raymo et al. 2015). In China, scholars often attribute these demographic shifts to the long-term effects of the One-Child Policy, rising marriage and childbearing costs and entrenched gender inequality (Fincher 2014; Meng 2008; Minzner 2022). Yet the Chinese state has reinterpreted demographic decline not merely as an economic or policy problem, but as a moral one. By framing shrinking families and rising divorce as failures of responsibility and emotional management, the state redistributes responsibility for demographic revival to individual citizens who are positioned as reproducers, caregivers and emotional stabilisers of the family (Minzner 2023; Zhan 2004).

This moralisation of the demographic crisis has renewed the political significance of the family. Under President Xi Jinping's 2015 campaign for the Construction of Family, Family Education and Family Ethos (*jiating jiajiao jiafeng*), family harmony was presented as the foundation of social order and national prosperity (Xi 2021). This recalls Rose's (2000: 1395) argument on governing through ethics, where citizens become moral subjects responsible for managing everyday life in the name of collective well-being. In this reframing, demographic governance becomes a moral and psychological project.

This article examines how this moral governance is carried out through Marriage and Family Counselling (MFC), a nationwide programme that aims to integrate psychological expertise with family relationships. Since 2020, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the China Women's Federation have institutionalised MFC as preventive psychological education for 'equal, harmonious and civilised marital and familial relationship (*pingdeng, hemu, wenming de hunyin jiating guanxi*)' (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2020). MFC has been reported to provide to diverse groups including married individuals, students and community residents, turning psychological education into an instrument of moral regulation (Jingjing Zhang 2020; Zhao 2023) and positioning psychological expertise as a new moral authority.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork (2021-2022) in a government-affiliated NGO pseudonymised as 'CX-Group', I participated in 15 MFC sessions to understand how counsellors' discursive practices produce new family ethics. Rather than a single model of power, these encounters constitute what Strauss (1978) calls 'social worlds', spaces

where different actors, expertise and moral vocabularies negotiate what counts as a 'good' family. I introduce two analytic concepts to capture this process. 'Therapeutic familism' refers to the transformation of psychological self-improvement into the moral duty of producing family harmony. 'Therapeutic femininity' describes how women are constructed as emotional managers responsible for repairing family order. Together, these concepts illuminate how therapeutic governance in China reconfigures moral ideals about family in response to demographic and social anxieties, raising broader questions: not about whether MFC heals families, but about what kind of subjects it produces and whose labour sustains this healing.

Therapeutic Governance and the Chinese Context

Therapeutic governance studies suggest that psychological expertise translates structural crises such as war, unemployment and social disorder into individual psychological deficiencies to be managed through self-improvement (Pupavac 2001; Rehberg 2015). While this work emphasises depoliticisation and individualisation, it often assumes liberal, autonomous subjects and overlooks how therapy reshapes moral hierarchies within intimate life. As Rose (1992: 153-156) argues in his analysis of the family, therapeutic techniques aim 'to instill and use the self-directing propensities of subjects to bring them into alliance with the aspirations of authorities', and in doing so to diffuse therapeutic governance across the fabric of everyday life. Moreover, research shows that therapeutic authority is neither uniform nor neutral. Shoshana (2019) shows how Israeli social workers pathologise women who fail to embody ideal motherhood, while McKim (2008: 320) demonstrates the competing moral criteria used by therapists and courts in programmes for female addicts. These studies reflect divergent criteria for successful therapy and good selves across functions, nations, disciplines and contexts, which point to a key question: how psychotherapy, beyond individual self-care, produces moral hierarchies within family life.

In contemporary China, therapeutic governance emerges from socialist legacies of 'thought work' and has expanded through a commercialised 'psycho-boom',¹ creating a hybrid psycho-social field circulating among state, market and everyday life (Huang 2015; Yang 2015: 108-140; Zhang 2017). For instance, career counselling reframes women's marital struggles as barriers to self-realisation (Hizi 2018),

while laid-off male workers' anger is psychologised as a crisis of masculinity within the family (Yang 2015: 181). Notably, unlike the neoliberal emphasis on an autonomous self and its moral flexibility (Rose 1992: 157), Yan (2018, 2021) argues that Chinese psychotherapy wrestles with reconciling rationality, intimacy and the moral tension between the individual and the family. Yang (2017, 2022) further conceptualises the growing psychologisation of everyday life in China as Confucian-inflected therapy, which integrates psychological counselling with Confucian moral teachings to reconcile familial harmony with national prosperity. These therapeutic framings therefore evidently relocate structural contradictions such as labour insecurity, gender inequality and ageing into the moral domain of the family.

Although both Yang (2015) and Li Zhang (2020) highlight the centrality of the family in Chinese psychotherapeutic culture, the family tends to appear as an unproblematic moral site. What remains under-explored is how psychotherapy reshapes family ethics and allocates responsibilities among family members. I conceptualise this as therapeutic familism, a postcolonial reconstruction of family ethics through psychological language. It operates at the intersection of imported psychological discourse and local moral frameworks, producing a hybrid logic that reshapes how family responsibilities and hierarchies are understood. On the one hand, Western psychological frameworks inevitably influence how counselling interprets family life. Scholars have documented the coexistence of diverse therapeutic approaches, such as behaviour therapy, cognitive therapy, Chinese Taoist cognitive psychotherapy, the Satir model of family therapy and Jungian-inspired sandplay therapy, which are conceptually integrated in ways that reconcile market-driven individualism with Confucian collectivism (Chang et al. 2005; Huang 2015; Yang 2017; Li Zhang 2020: 93-111). This reflects the gradual internalisation of Western therapeutic values while maintaining compatibility with local moral norms. On the other hand, Chinese efforts to indigenise psychotherapy draw on Confucianism and reproduce a long-standing ideological function in which the family provides a normative basis for national ethics. Such approaches position the West as the developmental other and thus, often unconsciously, embrace colonial modernity. According to Yang, Confucian-inflected therapy, while it potentially offers 'freedom' to citizens, remains a form of therapeutic governance that renews political order based on family, hierarchy and patriarchy (Yang 2017: 184). Hizi (2017) similarly observes that the state treats psychology as a developmental

tool for social modernisation and objectifies social groups considered useful to that project. Thus this 'indigenised' psychology reveals a colonial temporality that constructs hierarchies between coloniser and colonised through notions of temporal advancement and backwardness, producing a postcolonial logic of self-improvement and catching up (Meinhof 2017, 2021, 2024). In this configuration, therapeutic familism manifests as a continual pursuit of harmonious family life, measured against imagined Western norms and enacted through routinised psychotherapeutic techniques.

At the same time, therapeutic familism is deeply gendered. Although the Chinese state has long encouraged gender equality, policy and popular discourse continue to treat family care as women's natural duty (Bram 2022). Bram further notes that while most of the participants in the 'psycho-boom' are women and may experience a degree of self-empowerment through psychological knowledge, this does not dismantle the unequal regimes of care and domestic labour. Looking at families caring for autistic children without sufficient social support, An (2024) additionally shows that everyday efforts to maintain intimacy often become an extra form of emotional self-discipline for women. Comparable patterns are evident across East Asia. Studies suggest that women are positioned as primary emotional managers within families, tasked with caregiving, moral education and reconciliation, even when pursuing autonomy or after divorce (Alexy 2020; Howlett 2021; Nakano 2022). In this sense, emotions become another field of duty, self-discipline and moral surveillance. I conceptualise this process as therapeutic femininity, the production of womanhood as a moral technology through which families are stabilised and social anxieties are absorbed. This logic resonates with broader patterns of reproductive and affective governance, where women's bodies and emotions are instrumentalised for moral and demographic objectives (Lau 2023; Nandy 1983).

Against this backdrop, MFC provides a compelling empirical site to examine these dynamics. As a state-sponsored programme, MFC targets the promotion of 'harmonious families', offering premarital guidance, divorce counselling and family education (Ministry of Civil Affairs and National Development and Reform Commission 2021; National People's Congress Standing Committee 2021). Typically delivered by psychologists and social workers, the programme incentivises target groups through small subsidies, free services or bundled offerings. In practice, state outsourcing, volunteer participation and

an eclectic mix of therapeutic techniques render MFC a heterogeneous space where psychological expertise gains moral authority while remaining subordinated to government priorities such as divorce reconciliation and demographic revitalisation (Qu 2021). Marriage laws and public discourse further designate women as the keystones of family harmony, making them the primary targets of MFC intervention (National People's Congress Standing Committee 2022; Xi 2016).

This article develops a framework that connects macro-demographic anxieties to micro-therapeutic practices, advancing two analytic concepts, therapeutic familism and therapeutic femininity, to illuminate how psychotherapy governs intimate life in contemporary China. The subsequent sections advance from this theoretical framework to examine the operational logics of MFC, delineating the methodological approach and presenting empirical findings that illuminate how therapeutic governance is enacted, negotiated and embodied within a specifically Chinese, yet regionally resonant, context.

Research Methods

This article combines ethnographic fieldwork with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) of MFC arranged by CX-Group, which is contracted by the Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau of City A for the 'Harmonic Family Project' to promote marital harmony. This case is representative for two reasons. Firstly, City A has consistently ranked among China's top ten cities for divorce rates, making divorce reduction a key political priority. In October 2021, the marriage registry served by CX-Group was designated as a municipal pilot zone for Wedding Customs Reform,² making its MFC services exemplary. Secondly, government purchasing of services is the main form of grassroots governance in contemporary China, with psychological counselling widely used to support social governance.

From August 2021 to March 2022, I conducted fieldwork as a volunteer for CX-Group, serving at the marriage registry in District A and on their WeChat group (WeChat being a Chinese messaging app) for married people, where I collected recordings of events, reports, on-site and online materials, field notes and photographs. CX-Group was a social group focused on promoting benevolence and filial piety (for further discussion of its operations, see Meinhof and Zhang 2025). Because the staff consisted of only four people, most of their project work was carried out through constant volunteer recruitment and

inter-organisational collaboration. During the period of my fieldwork, the MFC services discussed in this article were primarily provided by counsellors from three organisations working with CX-Group. These organisations were mostly led by female social workers and psychologists. Organisation A was a nationwide network of counselling companies, self-styled as Chinese psychological coaches; they recruited members through a paid membership model, including psychologists, social workers and the general public. Organisation B was a private counselling firm with four licensed counsellors and three licensed social workers, participating in the project under the name of an additional registered non-profit social work centre. Organisation C was a non-profit social work centre, jointly established by the CX-Group leader and a counsellor in 2022. Although not a primary actor during my fieldwork, this organisation gradually took over most of CX-Group's project work from October 2022.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I participated in five in-person and ten online MFCs, each lasting 1-2 hours. The former took place in District A before the pandemic lockdown (September to December 2021) and were provided by Organisation A. The latter occurred during intermittent lockdowns (February to December 2022), with Organisations B and C each responsible for five sessions. As pandemic restrictions eased, most MFCs transitioned back to in-person formats. During the in-person observations, with the consent of both the recipients and the counsellors, I recorded two individual counselling sessions. The remaining three sessions were conducted as community lectures, where, with the counsellors' consent, I took photographs and recorded parts of them. The ten online sessions were livestreamed via WeChat group due to the pandemic. Although these sessions were open to all married individuals and counsellors, some of the livestream recordings were not publicly accessible. With the counsellors' consent, I obtained access to these pieces.

Given the impact of both online and offline modes on verbal and nonverbal counselling processes, I have decided to focus on how counselling discourse constructs the notion of good families and marriages, temporarily setting aside the significance of bodily techniques and interactions, which is widely acknowledged in psychological counselling. The inability to mobilise the body and perceive the reactions of the audience was, in fact, a regrettable reality during the pandemic's psychotherapeutic sessions. Nevertheless, intersubjective communication occurs at the very moment discourse takes place. I transcribed 12

session recordings and analysed the ways in which family relationships were assessed, such as the intergenerational influences on self. From each example, I selected typical expressions to interpret these relationships; I then analysed the material clause by clause using Fairclough's (2003) critical discourse analysis, focusing on rhetorical justifications through devices such as structure of causality and proximity, logical contradictions, depiction of certainty, and active/passive voice.

The process of participating in and documenting MFC permeated my entire fieldwork, gradually leading me to recognise how my dual identity influenced the development of my theoretical framework (Robertson 2002). As a long-term volunteer with CX-Group, I shared responsibility with colleagues for enhancing service quality, developing strong rapport with them and being invited into their WeChat working group. This made my joining in MFC, particularly during the pandemic when much of it was online, like that of other colleagues in supporting and learning from the counsellors. Nonetheless, due to my identity as an international student and an unmarried woman, I was also sought out by counsellors to be the recipient of their therapeutic ideals. With this dual positionality, I was able to observe the evolving possibilities of therapeutic governance, particularly the expansion of therapeutic practices in everyday life and the capacity of diverse psychological discourses to shape new ethical frameworks.

Therapeutic Familism: Becoming Better in the Family

If participants attended all MFC sessions arranged by CX-Group, they might encounter multiple and sometimes contradictory therapeutic vocabularies. Table 1 illustrates the main therapeutic theories referenced by counsellors in the 15 sessions. These theories, grouped under 'Marriage and family sessions', encompass a blend of Euro-American psychology, Confucian relational ethics and globalised spiritual therapies such as Hawaiian *ho'oponopono*. The effect is not a chaotic mixture but a coherent technique of therapeutic familism, a counselling process that fuses heterogeneous therapeutic rationalities into a single moral project: the cultivation of family harmony through individual emotional transformation.

This fusion is sustained by colonial temporalities, where the family becomes a developmental site that must progress from emotional backwardness to affective modernity. According to Table 1, Organisations

Table 1 Content comparison of Marriage and Family Counselling

Organisation	Main theory mentioned in talk	Source
A	Zero limits (Hawaii SITH)	Hawaii
	Lu wanxinxue 陆王心学 (Lu-Wang's School of Heart)	Ming Dynasty
	<i>Liliang zhi yuan</i> 力量之源 (<i>The Source of Power</i>)	2013, China
	Mindfulness	Dharma (Buddhism)
B	Positive psychology	USA
	Flow (positive psychology), translated as <i>fuliu</i> 福流 by Peng Kaiping (professor of psychology at Tsinghua University)	USA
	Evolutionary psychology	USA
	Four embraces theory (Satir model)	USA
	Iceberg theory (Satir model)	USA
	Consistent communication (Satir model)	USA
	<i>Xingfu, cong jiena kaishi</i> 幸福, 从接纳开始 (<i>Happiness Begins with Acceptance</i>) (Satir model)	2016, China
	<i>Ai de wuzhong yuyan</i> 爱的五种语言 (<i>The 5 Love Languages</i>)	USA
	<i>Yujian weizhide ziji</i> 遇见未知的自己 (<i>Meet the Unknown Self</i>)	2008, Taiwan
C	Attachment theory/attachment cycle	UK
	Dance and movement therapy	Europe and USA
	Positive psychology	USA
	ABC theory of emotion	USA
	Cognitive behaviour therapy	USA
	Gestalt therapy	USA
	Family constellation	Germany

Note: Based on transcripts and recordings of 15 sessions arranged by CX-Group in 2021 and 2022.

B and C adhere to mainstream Euro-American psychology, influenced by positive psychology and the Satir model. Counsellor Liou, a woman in her thirties from Organisation B, critiques the defects in Eastern family education, arguing that family happiness is rooted in the ability

of family members to express love, a trait usually considered more prevalent in Western families:

We must allow this love to flow within the family. In fact, our Eastern family upbringing, specifically our parents' generation, and even our grandparents, often lack the ability to express their love. (Liou, online session, 2022)

Liou's narrative constructs an emotional civilisational hierarchy, portraying 'the East' as affectively deficient and insufficiently modern. 'Western' families, by contrast, implicitly embody open communication, rational intimacy and psychological literacy. Scholars such as Rey Chow (1998) argue that modernisation narratives are sustained through a grammar of lack and catch-up, where Chineseness becomes legible only through its imagined distance from Western norms. Liou's formulation echoes this logic that Chinese families are imagined as emotionally stunted and thus awaiting enlightenment through psychological expertise. Like the developmentalist narratives identified by Meinhof (2017, 2021), emotional deficiency is located historically. Parents and grandparents personify tradition and 'pre-modern' emotion, while young counsellors and young recipients embody the future. This produces a linear genealogy of affective progress, in which each generation is imagined as more modern, more rational and more psychologically enlightened. Within this narrative, emotional improvement is not a collective or structural matter, since there is no discussion of pressure of family care, labour precarity or institutional inequality (Fan 2007; Yan 2003). Rather, family harmony becomes a matter of autonomous self-work, which involves learning to speak love, regulate emotion and educate elders. In this framing, the young are not only the beneficiaries of progress but its agents. They must modernise the family from within. Therapeutic familism becomes a technology of governance in this precise way.

A similar postcolonial construction of family ethics emerges in Lieu's further remark and Cang's account from Organisation C, adding an internal colonisation perspective along spatial and gendered lines:

Empathy is an important ability in love, yet we Chinese, or more specifically we City A people, often lack this capacity. (Liou, online session, 2022)

He [the husband in the divorce counselling couple] looked at me again and said, ‘[I can write about my wife’s good qualities] but I can’t seem to say it.’ We say in Chinese/Chinese people, especially men’s communication, that is really [not doing well]. (Cang, Institution C, 2022)

Liou and Cang’s narratives reveal a dual logic of self-othering and internal colonisation. First, by characterising ‘us Chinese’ as deficient in empathetic love and portraying Chinese men as poorer communicators, they internalise Euro-American representations of Asia, engaging in a form of self-orientalisation that guides identity formation through external imagery (Bhabha 1995; Dirlik 1996). This framing reduces the culturally diverse expressions of love to a set of Western-defined communicative and psychological traits, thereby individualising and psychologising what are often historical and structural concerns. Second, marking City A residents and Chinese men as particularly deficient enacts an internal hierarchy of civility through imported psychological discourse (Pinderhughes 2011). City A people are implicitly positioned as emotionally underdeveloped, constructing such a hierarchy, which mirrors colonial distinctions but within the national context. Similarly, the portrayal of men as communicatively deficient positions the man as a kind of ‘internal savage’ in need of correction and discipline.

Although the counsellors may not be consciously aware of the colonial undertones in their discourse, the discursive power inherent here effectively reinforces a developmentalist perspective that treats Western norms as advanced and frames non-Western societies as perpetually catching up. Ultimately, this discourse serves a governance function, reframing social and structural issues such as marital crises as psychological and emotional deficits and thereby neutralising systemic critique and diverting attention from structural reform.

Whereas Organisation B and C valorise Western emotional modernity, Organisation A constructs a different but structurally similar developmental horizon. It blends the neo-Confucian School of the Heart (the Lu-Wang School) of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) with Hawaiian mindfulness. Wang’s key contributions to the School of the Heart include the theories of the unity of knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*) and the expansion of intuitive knowledge (*zhi liang zhi*) (Tien 2012; Zhu and Liu 2022). These form the theoretical foundation for Organisation A, which posits that cultivating one’s inner core anchored in the heart and harmony fosters familial harmony that extends to

society (Yang 2022: 161). Hawaiian mindfulness, or *ho'oponopono*, is promoted by this organisation to achieve self-completion, despite its fundamental difference from the Confucian relational self. It is presented as a method of 'Self-Identity Through Ho'oponopono' (SITH), a self-focused mental cleansing process grounded in four mantras: 'I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, and I love you' (Ito 1985; Kalama 2018). Counsellor Duang, a middle-aged woman from Organisation A, communicates a universal ethic of self-awakening, using 'awakening (*jue xing*)' to symbolise the elevation of the self through understanding family relationships. As she expressed in the final stage of a face-to-face counselling meeting in 2021:

In this world, from past to present, from China to foreign countries (*gu jin zhong wai*), there have been few parents (*jia zhang*) and people who have experienced the awakening that I have today [...]. Dear elders (*zhang bei*), you are too great. You sacrificed your own happiness to accompany me, which is why I woke up today. (Duang, face-to-face counselling, 2021)

Duang's language reproduces the same colonial temporality: she positions herself at the peak of historical progress as being more awakened than the 'world', the 'past (*gu*)', the 'present (*jin*)', 'China (*zhong*)' and 'foreigners (*wai*)'. Yet this awakening does not liberate the self from family hierarchy. Instead, it returns Duang to Confucian relational ethics, where self-cultivation is validated through filial gratitude. As Meinhof (2017: 53) emphasises, colonial temporality is not controlled by any single power group or ideology: it permits the emergence of any project that supports, opposes or even manufactures tradition. Duang emphasises that 'parents (*jia zhang*)' are the significant other in her awakening, making personal transcendence situate within the Confucian tradition of familism. Pretending to be the recipient, she further expresses gratitude for the parents' self-sacrifice (assumed to be certain) through SITH's mantras, simulating the filial self that should emerge post-awakening; filial piety is the foundation of the claimed relational ethics of Confucianism (Yang 2022: 169). The method appears to hybridise Western-style individual healing with Confucian familism, but the outcome is not a critical interrogation of family power. Rather, personal growth is measured by one's capacity to renew familial harmony. The self awakens thus not away from family, but back into it.

The family in all such narratives is imagined as a moral organism nourished by the emotional labour of individuals. Family happiness becomes a product of inner transformation, and structural inequalities disappear under the universal promise of self-improvement. What needs fixing is allegedly not institutional troubles but the psychological skills of family members. This is precisely how therapeutic familism psychologises family ethics, relocates structural social problems into intimate spaces and transforms national modernisation imperatives into individual emotional labour.

Taken together, these cases show that therapeutic familism is not simply imported psychology or Confucian resurgence. It is a post-colonial moral technology that reframes the family as an unfinished modernisation project. Counsellors invite recipients to imagine a better future, one that is more expressive, harmonious and peaceful. Yet the pathway to realising this future runs through the self, not through social change. This conception of the family evolving in tandem with individual progress resonates with the state's modernisation agenda. Counsellors have thus depicted a novel form of therapeutic familialism in which individuals could gain happiness within family relationships through their own positive efforts. It embraces conflict and integration across various psychological genres, portraying family and individual relations as a fluid, cross-temporal process of doing family rather than a static outcome. In this configuration, becoming a 'modern' family means becoming a therapeutic subject, and doing therapy becomes a moral obligation to do family.

Therapeutic Femininity: the Making of Gendered Family Ethics

Building on the first finding, which demonstrates how therapeutic familism constructs family harmony as a psychological and moral project, the second finding reveals who is most expected to carry out this project. Here, therapeutic discourse locates the responsibility of emotional labour and moral repair almost entirely in women, producing what I call therapeutic femininity. This mechanism not only assigns women the burden of ensuring familial stability but also rearticulates gendered hierarchies through a hybrid language of empowerment and domesticity.

Although counsellors aim to teach both spouses, they emphasised in fieldwork that approximately 95 per cent of counselling recipients

are women. Women are encouraged to transform themselves into psychologically aware homemakers, embodying the belief that 'women's self-cultivation of gendered qualities is the precondition for improving life quality and the ultimate cure for family disintegration and social unrest' (Xiao 2014: 5). I interpret this default assumption of women's capacity to heal the family as therapeutic femininity under therapeutic familialism. It renders women ethically dominant in the family, echoing the concept of their everyday bargaining in patriarchal households (Zavoretti 2017). Nonetheless, the conflicting discourses of domesticity and women's empowerment are merged through psychotherapeutic interventions, constructing a gendered ethical framework that reinforces powerful female figures while reproducing patriarchal hierarchies. Ultimately, therapeutic femininity legitimises men's emotional absence by framing women as the sole agents responsible for identifying, managing and repairing emotional ruptures at home.

Counsellors consistently impose gendered definitions onto marriage and family, resulting in female-centric explanations of social change. In one session, Liou explained that the shift from extended to nuclear families has fundamentally elevated women's status:

In the 1970s [. . .] with an average of 7.4 people per household [. . .] a family of four, when a girl got married, she transitioned from her natal parents' family to another family, and practically no one else needed to change, right? It seems that only the girl needed to change back then. However, today, it's a different story [. . .] with an average of 2.8 people per household, a family of three [. . .]. When two people get married and start a life together, do we live the boy's way or the girl's way? It is neither; we are now completely reconstructing a new way of life. (Liou, online session, 2022)

Here, the struggle between self-realisation and self-sacrifice noted by Hizi (2018) among unmarried women in personal growth workshops disappears. This 'unspeaking' of gendered struggle forms part of a therapeutic rewriting of female history, presenting contemporary women as free agents who now reconstruct conjugal life on their own terms. From the standpoint of socioeconomic transition, this representation creates a universalised image of powerful women who are implicitly considered middle-class (Bram 2022; Tomba 2009). In her other accounts, Liou uses such terms as 'joining (*ru huo*)', 'cohabiting (*da huo*)' and 'partnership (*he huo*)' to describe changing conjugal

relations and frequently tells women to treat marriage as 'a project, enterprise, and investment'. In doing so, she casts women as Rose's (1992) enterprising selves, whose success in marriage becomes evidence of personal independence and modernity. Yet this neoliberalised empowerment remains fundamentally domestic and relational, for it gauges a woman's success not by her economic autonomy but by the affective prosperity of her household.

At the same time, the discourse reinforces essentialised emotional differences between men and women. One counsellor declared that 'No woman is unhappy in her marriage unless she chooses to be', a statement that acknowledges female agency while quietly foreclosing divorce. Within this empowerment framework, counsellors frequently reinforce a natural gender dichotomy, emphasising the perceived biological inadequacy of male domestic capabilities. Domesticity is thus presented as a fundamental aspect of femininity. Counsellors frequently draw on pseudo-scientific claims such as 'men speak less than women', instructing women to tolerate muted male expression. This alleged gendered difference in emotional expression becomes a key element of therapeutic femininity. In another session, Liou asked women to imagine themselves as wives betrayed by broken promises, guiding them to express disappointment in carefully calibrated ways that provide space for male remorse. In doing so, she subtly attributed potential divorce, resulting from a communication breakdown, to women's lack of emotional capacity. Furthermore, even evolutionary psychology is mobilised to justify responsibility-shifting: women are said to be 'more evolved than men', while Duang joked that men are 'single-cell organisms' needing 'us women' to guide them. Her narrative of enduring verbal and physical abuse before achieving family happiness presents self-alteration as the legitimate response to violence, rather than withdrawal, confrontation or divorce. Under this deepening biological essentialism, women emerge as the primary engineers of relational well-being: family harmony is not a shared responsibility but a gendered emotional obligation.

Besides being the independent and communicative wife, the second major formation of therapeutic femininity is the affectionate mother. Xu, a counsellor from Organisation B, distinguishes maternally given 'blessing' from paternally 'conditional' love:

The essence of maternal love (*mu ai*) is a blessing. It is peace, requiring no effort to win it. And what is the essence of paternal

love (*fu ai*)? Obedience is the supreme virtue; disobedience is the gravest sin, and it will result in the punishment of losing paternal love [. . .] Once this misalignment of love occurs, it can impact his/her future intimate or marital relationships. (Xu, online session, 2022)

This distinction reinforces the traditional labour division of affection and authority, situating mothers as caretakers of the family's emotional order. Xu warns that misaligned parental love produces 'mama's boys (*ma bao*)', insecure children and future marital dysfunctions. Appropriate role-playing and emotional relations in the family are portrayed as essential competencies for both parents, with mothers often shouldering the emotional well-being of the entire family. Here, mothers are made responsible not only for everyday emotional labour but also for safeguarding the psychological future of the nation, as children's affective failures are traced back to maternal inadequacy. The articulation of love through disciplinary paternal authority and affective maternal care thus legitimises a parental hierarchy while rendering women's emotional labour both obligatory and morally surveilled. The family thus becomes a therapeutic space in which women operate as informal therapists, required to offer constant emotional regulation and preventative care (Alexy 2020; Hung 2008). This exemplifies therapeutic femininity as a gendered modality of psychological responsibility that elevates feminine emotional labour to a civic duty, while simultaneously reproducing paternal authority as the structure that requires women's continuous affective management.

Similarly, counsellor Cang, a middle-aged woman from Organisation C, advocates for women's caregiving roles in families and stresses the importance of looking towards the next generation within marriage. She employs a case involving a child's depression to construct crisis management as a maternal obligation:

I have a case where a child became depressed and cut his wrist with a knife [. . .]. The mother immediately quit her job and stayed home every day to watch over (*shou zhe*) her child [. . .]. As newly married couples, especially those currently without children, we can better adjust ourselves, adjust our relationship as a couple, and adjust ourselves individually [. . .]. I hope that the children born in our future will have a wonderful family and a happy childhood. (Cang, online session, 2022)

The emotional shock of the case produces a form of moral panic (Crichter 2009), where the imagined failure of maternal presence is linked directly to psychiatric harm. In this moral economy, the legitimate response to crisis is women's withdrawal from waged labour and their full reinvestment into the intimate domain. The advice directed at newlyweds to 'adjust ourselves, adjust our relationship' further naturalises emotional labour as preparation for motherhood, even before children exist. Thus, 'good marriage' becomes a disciplinary project in which women are pre-emptively trained to shoulder future therapeutic responsibilities. This narrative further reproduces the motherhood penalty in psychological terms by casting women as both culpable for children's emotional breakdowns and valorised only when they self-sacrifice. Such expectations reveal therapeutic femininity as a moral regime in which female subjectivity is measured by emotional vigilance, self-adjustment and psychic caretaking. Men remain largely absent from the labour of affective repair, confirming the gendered asymmetry of therapeutic responsibility and the reproduction of patriarchal authority through therapeutic governance.

Thus therapeutic familism not only psychologises family harmony but also feminises its execution. Through a hybrid language of empowerment, self-cultivation and biological essentialism, therapeutic discourse constructs women as enterprising yet domestic subjects whose agency is realised through emotional vigilance rather than material autonomy. This gendered moral economy produces therapeutic femininity, a normative ideal that requires women to anticipate, interpret and repair emotional disruptions within both marriage and parent-child relationships. In effect, therapeutic familism establishes the premise that family happiness is an ethical and psychological project, with relational outcomes contingent upon self-improvement. Therapeutic femininity specifies who bears primary responsibility for this effort, situating women as the primary agents through which family ethics are enacted. Both constructs are suffused with postcolonial temporality, as the ethical or autonomous self is measured against historical, global and developmentalist benchmarks, while women's emotional labour is tasked with ensuring the reproduction of both familial and national futures.

In summary, the interplay between therapeutic familism and therapeutic femininity illuminates the mechanisms of therapeutic governance in contemporary China. Familial harmony is not a naturalised or static outcome but a morally and psychologically mediated project.

The individual's ethical or emotional labour constitutes the locus of governance, while gendered expectations channel these efforts, ensuring that women disproportionately perform relational work. Together, these processes reveal how postcolonial, hybridised and gendered forms of psychotherapy are mobilised by the state and social organisations to shape citizens as moral, responsible and relational subjects, thereby linking intimate life with broader demographic and social imperatives.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has shown that Marriage and Family Counselling in contemporary China constitutes a distinctive form of therapeutic governance, where demographic pressures, moral anxieties and psychological expertise intersect. Families become sites through which the state manages social risks such as divorce and declining fertility. These issues are reframed as emotional and psychological deficits, rendering conflict a failure of communication, divorce a failure of self-management and domestic harmony a measurable psychological competency. Counselling thus trains citizens to govern the intimate sphere affectively, translating national stability into the psychological management of domestic life.

To capture this dynamic, I have developed the concept of therapeutic familism. This operates not through explicit moral injunctions or legal coercion, but via a postcolonial psychologisation of moral duty. Psychotherapeutic language is selectively borrowed and translated, then embedded within Confucian grammars of hierarchy and responsibility. It is a hybrid formation in which imported psychology is domesticated, Confucian ethics are psychologised and governance flows through affective self-cultivation rather than overt discipline. In this sense, therapeutic governance reflects a postcolonial logic by using imported repertoires of expertise to discipline affective life, while historical and cultural imaginaries intersect with state objectives to create moralised intimacies.

This process is thoroughly gendered, producing therapeutic femininity, in which women overly shoulder the moral and technical burden of emotional repair. Across East Asian welfare regimes, women are similarly mobilised as emotional buffers for shrinking families, anxious children and precarious futures (Alexy 2020; Borovoy 2005). The Chinese case, however, is distinctive in linking therapeutic intimacy

explicitly to demographic governance, such that repairing the family becomes a means of repairing the nation. As birth rates fall and population ageing accelerates, it is likely that therapeutic governance will deepen, drawing more psychological labour into the family and further moralising women's responsibilities.

The dual constructs of therapeutic familism and therapeutic femininity advance scholarship on therapeutic governance in three ways. First, they complicate accounts that cast therapy simply as depoliticising individualisation by showing how therapeutic repertoires can be embedded in collectivist and nationalising projects, producing a hybrid, postcolonial form of governance that marries Western psychologies with Confucian moralities. Second, they highlight how psychotherapeutic authority does not act on neutral subjects but actively (re)constitutes gendered moral subjects, particularly women, as both empowered agents and primary caretakers, thereby renewing rather than dissolving gendered orders. Third, by attending to the institutional modalities of state-outsourced counselling (MFC), this article illuminates how projects of population governance migrate from macro-policy to micro-techniques of everyday life, making demographic aims legible within intimate practices.

This study is limited by its focus on a single institutional site (CX-Group) and by privileging counsellors' discourse. It does not aim to evaluate whether this governance model works for its recipients, nor to assess the effectiveness of psychological techniques in shaping ethical family subjects. Rather, the focus is on institutional attempts to use therapeutic technologies to reconstruct or reconcile fragmented social worlds. Future research should adopt multi-sited ethnography and longitudinal approaches to examine how therapeutic governance reshapes life courses, demographic behaviour and domestic power dynamics, and whether it produces compliance, resistance or renegotiation of family authority.

Despite these limitations, the Chinese case offers broader comparative and global insights. Integrating psychological expertise into intimate life is not merely a local phenomenon but may occur wherever states seek to manage social risk through families. Across societies facing demographic anxieties, economic precarity or shifting moral orders, the negotiation of emotional labour becomes a critical site for enacting collective goals. By highlighting the hybridisation of Western psychologies and Confucian moralities, this study encourages comparative inquiry into how therapeutic repertoires are domesticated, moral

hierarchies renewed and gendered obligations reproduced under diverse institutional, cultural and political conditions. These findings resonate with global scholarship on therapeutic governance (Pupavac 2001; Rehberg 2015; Rose 2000), suggesting that interventions framed as ‘psychological care’ can function simultaneously as instruments of empowerment, social regulation and the reproduction of moral and gendered hierarchies. The future of family governance, in China or elsewhere, is therefore likely to hinge not on the decline of patriarchy or the rise of individualism, but on the everyday negotiation of care, responsibility and psychological authority, thereby making intimate life a central arena of modern governance across global contexts.

Notes

- 1 Psycho-boom refers to the collective phenomenon of widespread, spontaneous engagement in psychology studies and therapeutic practices in China from the 1990s onwards, marking the era of Western psychology’s popularity in the post-reform period.
- 2 ‘Wedding Customs Reform’ (*hunsu gaige*) is an initial ‘Guidance on Developing a Pilot Programme for Reforming Wedding Customs’ issued by the central government in 2020, aiming to rectify improper practices such as high prices of betrothal gifts and comparisons of gift-giving at weddings.

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Ethics approval statement

Oral informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to the publication of this study.

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