

Free Market Reforms in China Spur Growth of Psychosocial Services

By Mallory Starr

China is undergoing great change. In terms of physical evidence, there are new buildings, new technology, and new fashions. When I first visited China in 1983, there were few cars, few large buildings, and most people dressed in the gray and blue style that looked like a uniform. My second trip to China this past September revealed a very different picture. The magnitude of the change is immediately apparent. Ten years ago, there were 20 high-rise buildings in Shanghai, China's largest city. Now there are over 500 and more are under construction. Traffic is like most western cities and the people dress like westerners.

Change is also apparent at the socio-psychological level. For example, in 1979, 4.7 percent of Chinese marriages ended in divorce. By 1997, the national divorce rate tripled to 14 percent and in Beijing, 25 percent of marriages ended in divorce. There used to be an old Chinese expression about marriage: "If a woman marries a dog, she should stick with the dog; if she marries a chicken, she should stick with the chicken." This view is dying. While allowing women to break from their marriages is a sign of progress, it obviously also leads to problems. China is rapidly experiencing the socio-psychological problems common in western nations.

The rise of marital problems has led to the expansion of China's limited—the Beijing telephone book lists approximately 15 organizations—mental health services. One such organization is the Beijing Stress Management Company. I serve as an advisor to the group that is developing the Company. Since psychological counseling services are new to China and carry a stigma, and since few people know what counseling or therapy is, the first focus of the new center will be public education offered through workshops, seminars, and retreats.

Outreach will initially concentrate on women because women are more receptive to the kind of educational and counseling services the center will offer. They also face the greatest changes in terms of family and societal status. Women

are marrying later, they are the largest group of laid off workers from state-run organizations, and the number of women who participate in government is decreasing. It is thought also that once women begin to participate they may also lead men to the services.

The Company organizers have decided on an educational model rather than a medical model because this allows greater freedom of operation and avoids the burdens of licenses. In considering where to locate the new facility, they decided to place it near business organizations so that it is especially convenient for working women. The counseling sessions will take place in a setting that looks like a tea garden. Educational presentations and meetings will be held at various sites such as libraries, restaurants, and possibly schools

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The Beijing Stress Management Company is privately owned and reflects the entrepreneurial trend stimulated by free-market reforms and privatization of state industries that is sweeping China today. It is important to note that the mind set—the thinking, planning and activity scope—of a person who operates as an owner of an entrepreneurial organization is much different from one who works for a government organization. The Company planning group has had its struggles with such start-up activities as getting a team together, defining what they will do, and organizing themselves for running programs and marketing activities. But helping

individuals in China make the shift from state-owned enterprises to private entrepreneurial activity does not appear to be a major undertaking because for many it seems to come naturally.

So far, the Beijing Stress Management Company has a team that is completing such basic foundation tasks as: business plan development and modification, definition of planned services and programs, identification of markets and potential clients, market research, identification of potential alliances and working partnerships, development of program flow charts tracking the intake process through program delivery and case reporting, and identification of the operating model. The programs are estimated to begin in early 2000.

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