

## Enduring Together Apart: Resilience as Negotiated Practice Among Psychological Counsellors in Zero-COVID Shanghai



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**Dr. Anna Iskra** is a medical anthropologist and Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research explores mental health, therapeutic cultures, and the governance of emotion in contemporary China. Through multi-sited ethnography, she examines how urban transformation and global mental health paradigms reshape emotional life, self-formation, and the politics of care. Her work on China's Body–Mind–Spirit (*shen xin ling*) milieu, published in renowned journals including *Signs*, *Ethos*, *Nova Religio*, *China Information*, and *Transcultural Psychiatry*, underpins her broader scholarship on healing and cultural translation. She has also studied Indian New Religious Movements in China, Crazy English study as affective pedagogy, Zero-COVID mental health governance, and is currently developing a research project on the deployments of AI in China's mental health services.

This talk examines how psychological counsellors navigated prolonged separation, uncertainty, and moral strain in pandemic-era Shanghai. Rather than treating resilience as a stable personal attribute or a policy ideal imposed from above, the study approaches it as an ongoing, relational practice—one that counsellors actively negotiated in their professional and intimate lives. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and analysis of social media posts from the Shanghai Mental Health Centre (SMHC), the talk traces how counsellors sustained forms of togetherness despite enforced physical distance. Through improvised routines of care, emotional boundary-work, and recalibrations of professional ethics, they sought to remain present for clients while managing their own exhaustion, fear, and ambivalence. These practices often unfolded in tension with official narratives of positivity and psychological endurance, revealing resilience as fragile, uneven, and contingent rather than heroic or total.

By foregrounding counsellors' lived experiences, the talk argues that resilience in Zero-COVID Shanghai emerged less as an abstract virtue than as a situational achievement: produced through ongoing adjustment, ethical compromise, and collective support. In doing so, it contributes to anthropological debates on care, affect, and governance by showing how mental health professionals themselves became sites where state imperatives, therapeutic ideals, and everyday survival intersected.