

How are Chinese youth taking control of their health?

REPORT | Apr 7, 2022

In order to offset burnout, young Chinese urbanites are turning to 'punk health' – a trend that sees traditional medicine used as a 'quick fix' for exhaustion. With many struggling to strike a healthy work-life balance, what does this approach to wellness tell us about the future of self-care in China?

AUTHORS

Michelle No

GENERATIONS:

GEN Z (BORN
1997–2010)

GEN Y (BORN
1982–1996)

SECTORS:

HEALTH AND FITNESS



EXPERTS

Christina Chu

Dr. Irina Logman

Sharon Yeung

HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** China's relentless work culture is driving consumers to seek solutions to their degrading physical and mental health
- 02** Punk health is an attempt to neutralise the excesses of a sleep-deprived lifestyle with the help of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)
- 03** Young people aged between 25 and 35 years old have become the largest demographic of TCM treatment

DATA

- More than a third of Chinese Gen Yers and Zers say they experience anxiety or stress 'all or most of the time'
- **44%** of Chinese students report mild or serious symptoms of depression
- China's plant-based meat market was estimated a **£675 million** in 2018 and is projected to grow between 20 and 25% annually

SCOPE

In China, a new health movement known as 'punk health' is gaining momentum as Chinese youth seek to take control of their wellbeing. Known locally as péngkè yǐngshǐng, punk health is ultimately an attempt to neutralise the excesses of a sleep-deprived lifestyle, replete with an overworked schedule, a party-hard mentality, and declining mental health. Think cups of coffee infused with goji berries to help a night owl stay alert for yet another 12-hour work day, or a heated eye mask combined with a meditation app to lull a wired brain to sleep. Or even eating jujube ice cream to combat the symptoms of an intense menstrual period. While such wellness measures – often derived from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) – don't do much to combat the source of the problem, they help the youthful participants of such extreme lifestyles feel a level of control over their health.

At its essence, punk health sits at the nexus of two major cultural trends for both Gen Zers and Gen Yers: On one hand, they are battling a work culture where employees are expected to work from 9am to 9pm, six days a week, to aid the greater national push toward economic dominance. This trend, known as the '996' working hour system, is fanning the flames of a mental health crisis that's seen disorders such as depression and anxiety on the rise. [1] On the other hand, people in China are increasingly turning toward the wellness industry to find solutions to life's ailments. Chinese consumers report the highest share of wellness spending online, followed by those in Japan and trailed by those in Europe, the US, and Brazil. [2] They're also going back to wellness' roots, seeking out products that blend TCM and herbal ingredients such as ginseng, lotus seed, and jujube to address contemporary needs.

Of course, efforts to balance out our lives have always existed, but given the recent extreme turns in work culture, sleeplessness, and mental health, attempts to reach homeostasis have come to embody certain 'new old' measures

as well. Like ordering a diet coke with a supersized meal, punk health is an approach to health that lets people 'have it all'. Whether the strategy is effective or meritless, though, is mostly up to the individual to decide. So what does a punk health approach signpost about the future of wellness in China? And how can brands best support people as they try to manage burnout?

THE UNDERPINNINGS OF A SLEEPLESS LIFESTYLE

While China leads the world in economic growth, even as its rate of growth slows down to 5%, its workers suffer at the hands of a punishing work culture that often robs them of sleep and wellbeing. [3] In some offices, bunk beds and sleeping areas in converted conference rooms 'allow' people the option to sleep and spend the whole work week in the office. [4] At the same time, independent labour unions are barred from creation and there are few checks and balances that ensure the enforcement of limits on working hours. [5] In fact, some tech leaders like Alibaba founder Jack Ma, have gone so far as to call it a 'blessing' for workers who have the opportunity to take part in 996 work culture. [6]

Such environments are not without consequence. In recent years, the country has seen the tragic deaths of a 44-year-old start-up CEO who allegedly worked himself to death, ultimately dying of a heart attack, and two employees at ecommerce platform Pinduoduo who died "weeks apart – a young worker collapsed on the way home after working long hours, while another died by suicide." [7][6] At a base level, more than a third of Gen Zers and Gen Yers are affected by such working hours, and say they experience anxiety or stress 'all or most of the time'. [8]

For such overworked and sleep-deprived workers, punk health is one way to tap into ancient, time-proven remedies for the particularly stubborn problem of contemporary life. As one 25-year-old practitioner of punk health and advocate for Chinese herbs puts it, "Growing vegetables can calm my mind, and I feel a sense of accomplishment when I see my plants." [9] For brands like Buff X Foods, such downsides to modern living are an opportunity to offer a solution. Their catalog of products is a veritable list of 21st-century malaises – paired, of course, with their branded solutions to them. One of their newest products, for instance, is a lemon-flavoured candy that combines pueraria and turmeric to help consumers stay up all night.



Punk health offers 'have-it-all' solutions to people's sleep-deprived lifestyles

Anthony Tran (2018)

A PERSONALISED SOLUTION TO LIFE'S AILMENTS

In the face of paralyingly overwhelming circumstances, Chinese consumers are turning to wellness – both the products and habits it espouses – and repurposing their own set of punk health solutions to create their own personal health toolkit. Indeed, one of the most alluring aspects of punk health is its potential to personalise solutions using a vast marketplace of options. This bespoke aspect – or, the imperative to consider the whole patient, and not just one part – is in fact one of the major tenets of TCM, which punk health is based on. “This is the beauty of Chinese medicine – it’s very individualised,” says Dr. Irina Logman, founder of the Advanced Holistic Center. “Western medicine, on the other hand, is not balanced enough. It pushes you from one end to the other, from too little to too much.” [10]

There’s nothing new about individualised care. In fact, it’s one of the trends that kicked off the wellbeing industry and continues to fuel this unstoppable sector today. [11] “It’s not the first time we’ve seen ‘punk health’ – we saw it in Silicon Valley, with the rise of dopamine fasting and Soylent shakes,” says performance dietitian Christina Chu. “It’s an attempt to outsmart your body.” [12]

Despite the ephemeral nature of some of these trends, this personalised approach to health is something that Chinese consumers can’t get enough of. Many (particularly in Brazil and China) are more comfortable trading privacy for personalisation. What’s more, a majority of consumers around the world say they prioritise personalisation now more than they did two or three years ago. [2] And if aromatherapy diffusers, chrysanthemum tea, or adding osmanthus to an alcoholic drink is actually effective in counterbalancing one individual’s very specific lifestyle, even dietitians say they probably can’t admonish you against it. “If something helps you and it does no harm, go for it. You know your body the best. And no one can tell you otherwise,” Chu says. [12]

This taste for ever-niche solutions means it’s not enough for businesses to create quality wellness products – an effective product that wants to thrive in the era of punk health must be personalised to the constellation of ailments and needs that drive consumers to the stores. Take Dong’e Ejiao Co, China’s largest donkey-hide gelatin producer, for whom adapting to new punk health demands meant recognising people’s crammed schedules and producing an instant version of ejiao (donkey-hide gelatin) pastry and ejiao powder. As the gelatin is traditionally obtained by a long period of soaking and stewing, such a new iteration on the ingredient speaks to both the consumer’s desire for TCM and addresses the consumer’s general lack of time.



Many are turning to plant-based options in a bid to address excessive indulgence

Cottonbro (2021)

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE IS MAKING A COMEBACK

Another one of punk health's primary allures is in its centring of TCM, amid other treatments. Contrary to the traditional expectation of the more senior, or rural TCM user, Chinese youth are a key demographic in this renewed embrace. In fact, highly educated □□people of younger age who hail from economically developed areas have become the primary population for utilising TCM. In addition to positive personal experiences with TCM, they're drawn in by TCM's effectiveness with chronic diseases and centuries-old standing in mainstream culture. [13] And it's not without the backing of the scientific community, either: In 2015, chemist Tu Youyou from the China Academy of TCM won a Nobel Prize for deriving an anti-malaria drug from sweet wormwood, a traditional Chinese herb. The discovery won widespread celebration from the TCM community. [14]

There's also a more practical draw of TCM, though. According to Dr. Logman, one of the best parts of embracing TCM is that it incurs no side effects. "It's super forgiving and super effective," says Dr. Logman. And when it's not effective, it doesn't wreck your body the way over-the-counter or prescription medication might, she adds. [10] For younger consumers who want to maintain their lifestyle and take care of their wellbeing, punk health then appears as the most generous and flexible option. This acceptance of TCM as the more trustworthy option is confirmed by findings which revealed that people who favoured TCM ranked 'years of practical experience' as one of its most alluring selling points. [13]

And for all its naysayers, consumer Yu Zhengwei says, "I think that yangsheng, TCM, and lots of things are all passed on through generations. I don't need to research their veracity. I believe in the things of our ancestors." [9] And while the efficacy of some of these products – especially those that don't have a clinical dose of a TCM that could actually effect change – can be questioned, Sharon Yeung, founder of Five Seasons Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine, makes the case that, "there is value in incorporating traditional herbal substances into everyday products regardless of whether or not they actually work – it plants the seed for the desire to focus on more natural and holistic ways of maintaining health and introduces young people to examples of what some of these items may be." [15] For many people disillusioned with the dangers and side effects of conventional, Western treatment, this positive, fail-proof aspect of herbal medicine, stands in as simply another reason to lean into the good-for-you ingredients of TCM.



Traditional Chinese Medicine is gaining traction with a younger demographic

RODNAE Productions (2021)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

A BUFFET OF OPTIONS

The rise of punk health, or health hacking, reflects the fact that people are looking for holistic approaches to health, and solutions that fit with their personal needs. People's health produces an access to an avalanche of data points – from data on sleep and menstrual cycles data, to cardiovascular and caloric data. Not only does the availability of such data points create imperatives for personal optimisation, it also pushes people to seek solutions that are in line with their personal health profile. Sometimes, the best way to dole out so many options is to get creative. At Table81, A pop-up dinner series featuring plant-based Chinese medicinal dinners in NYC, Gong 'Zoey' Xingyi offered diners the opportunity to try various herbs by infusing them into well-known dishes such as herbal soups, rice desserts, and summer salads. Even established TCM pharmacies like Tong Ren Teng have begun to sell health-boosting, traditionally blended versions of such classic single-version items like 'Punk Health Coffee' in three options flavoured with goji berries, longan and dates, and rose and hawthorn respectively. [16]

MAKE PEOPLE'S VICIES AN OPEN PART OF HEALTH MESSAGING

When it comes to marketing, an approach that acknowledges the consumer's lifestyle and needs will capture the most attention. While this may seem par for the course in the health marketing space, knowing your consumer in the case of punk health means acknowledging a lifestyle that might be on the fringe of society, or that continues to be systemically stigmatised. As people look for brands that represent them, and with 44% of Chinese students reporting mild or serious symptoms of depression, this explicit acknowledgment feels especially essential to consumers of punk health, who might have shunned more moderate aspects of public life and might be drawn to consumerism only if it promises to address, without judgment, their imprudent life choices. [17] In China, one collaboration featured a skin-brightening relax pack by C-beauty brand CHANDO and the snack brand Pejoy. The result of that marketing strategy was a bundle of breadsticks sold along with a CHANDO facemask, which suggested a natural pairing of products that at once acknowledged a consumer's lifestyle while simultaneously offering a counterbalancing treatment to it. [18]

MAKE PUNK HEALTH PLANT-BASED

For many, such a turn toward plant-based products is a counterbalancing solution to their excessive indulgence, and less motivated from a strictly dietary perspective. China's plant-based meat market was estimated at 6.1 billion yuan (£675 million) in 2018 and is projected to grow between 20 and 25% annually. [19] The figure is especially significant within the context of the world's largest meat market in the world. However, most consumers still associate vegetarianism with buddhism or more strict vegetarianism. To appeal to the wide sector of the market that tends to neither extreme, brands should strive for products that prioritise flavours and textures which consumers can easily adapt into their lives without making big concessions. [20] For instance, Oakidoki, a Chinese oat milk brand, raised approximately 10 million yuan (\$1.49 million) and its owner said that sales "tripled" three months after the product became available on Tmall in July. [21][22] Such figures indicate a largely untapped market for middle-of-the-road plant-based products that emphasise a healthy lifestyle and the use of natural ingredients.

RELATED



Why 'self-care' needs more compassion

REPORT • JAN 8, 2021

The concept of wellness has gained renewed importance in the wake of COVID-19, yet maintaining



'This Counts' campaign addresses self-care gap

• SEP 13, 2021

Sanctuary Spa has launched 'This Counts', a campaign that empowers women to spend more



Mindbloom: the new home of psychedelic medicine

CASE STUDY • MAY 28, 2021

Mindbloom is one of a handful of private therapy practices that offers ketamine treatment for de-



Somryst: digital medicine for insomnia

CASE STUDY • APR 27, 2021

Digital therapeutics program Somryst is the first FDA-approved tool of its kind to target chronic in-

SOURCES

1. South China Morning Post (October 2021)
2. McKinsey & Company (April 2021)
3. BBC (October 2019)
4. Reuters (May 2016)
5. TechCrunch (October 2021)
6. BBC (September 2021)
7. China.org.cn (October 2016)
8. Deloitte (October 2020)
9. Sixth Tone (December 2018)
10. Interview with Dr. Irina Logman conducted by the author
11. Ernst & Young (April 2020)
12. Interview with Christina Chu conducted by the author
13. Frontiers in Public Health (January 2022)
14. The Conversation (October 2015)
15. Interview with Sharon Yeung conducted by the author
16. Radii (March 2021)
17. The Hechinger Report (September 2020)
18. Jing Daily (January 2021)
19. Good Food Institute (March 2019)
20. Reuters (November 2020)
21. China Daily (October 2020)
22. Daxue Consulting (February 2021)

Want to know more?

Canvas8 are a leading behavioural insight practice. Working across media, communication and product design, we harness a range of research methods to reveal practical insights into what audiences really think and do.

EXPLORE THE PLATFORM

Unrivalled resource of 29,000+ articles on global consumer behaviour, available exclusively to members.

Your account manager:

meera@canvas8.com

BECOME A MEMBER

Sales opt here for the reader.

Dominic Rowe | Group Commercial Director

dominic@canvas8.com

BESPOKE SOLUTIONS

From ethnographic research to strategic planning workshops, we offer a range of solutions tailored to enhance your understanding and inspire creativity.

James Cunningham | Group Head of Strategic Partnerships

james@canvas8.com