

China Through the Eyes of a Behaviorologist

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China is a country with a huge population. It is altogether safe to say that at any given moment there is more behavior going on in China than anywhere else on earth. And, as is the case with people throughout the world, antecedents get behavior going and consequences determine what happens to it after that.

Since I was in China discussing matters of education and parenting, I was not surprised to find that among the people of China, there are two compelling concerns. The “one child policy” has created a sociological dilemma for China that has come to be known in many quarters as the “Little Emperor Syndrome.” It is a problem created by members of two and three generations of a family living together in very cramped quarters in high rise apartment buildings with little to no facilities for children to play and romp about outside. In most instances both parents are working and a child is left at home to be tended by two or three sets of grandparents. Before long the child is ruling the roost and chaos reigns.

As these children enter school, they bring with them a repertoire of behaviors that is unlike anything that modern-day school teachers in China have ever experienced; hence, the concern of parents for the schooling of their children—a concern, I hasten to add, that is expressed quietly.

None of the problems created by these perplexing circumstances are the least bit adequately addressed by the reigning political ideology of China. The top down centralized system of government that has ruled and reigned in China for the last 50 years doesn't seem to impress little children at home or students in school. Political and educational leaders, as well as parents, know they have a mammoth problem and they know they have no solutions.

Subsequent to the two talks I gave at West China University for Medical Sciences in Chengdu, Sichuan,

*With his wife Louise, Prof. Glenn Latham spent three weeks—29 August through 20 September, 1996—in China (PRC). They were guests of the West China University for Medical Sciences, in Chengdu, Sichuan. Written in November 1996, this is the report of that visit, the author's second professional visit to China. It is also, through its call to action, one of the major factors prompting the founding of TIBI.

people swarmed about me wanting to know how the science of human behavior could be adapted to the solution of China's parenting and educational problems. The talks I gave were entitled “Major Reform Issues in American Education” and “Strengthening Families.” In both talks I stressed the importance of what has been learned scientifically, through the study of human behavior, about the solution of difficult educational and family/parenting problems. (For some detailed information on this science and its application to these areas, see, Binder, 1988; Christophersen, 1988; Clark, 1996; Heward, 1994; Johnson & Layng, 1994; Latham, 1994, 1997; Lindsley, 1990, 1992, 1993; Skinner, 1953, 1968; Vargas, 1996; West & Hamerlynck, 1992; and Youth Policy Institute, 1988. [Also, see Latham, 1998, 1999; and Ledoux, 2000, 2001, 2002.—Ed.]

In my talk “Major Reform Issues in American Education,” I emphasized the importance of addressing educational reform with science rather than intuition, and the importance of focusing on teacher and student behavior in school rather than overarching policies and grand organizational schemes (which, over the centuries, have assured the status quo!). During the question and answer period following my talk, one member of the university faculty made the following observation:

I think there are two reasons why education never changes. First, in medicine there is more money to be earned if one is up to date in his treatment of patients. Second, there is more immediacy in treating sickness and injury. There is less room for error. A patient could die if the doctor didn't know exactly what to do.

I thought it amusing that this would come from a faculty member in Communist China who didn't know Capitalism but did understand logic. She had grasped with ease something America's educators just can't seem to get!

There is a prevailing feeling across the earth that the margin of error in the education of children is so broad, and the sense of immediacy is so weak, that there is no reason to be concerned; that, as one teacher I interviewed put it, “They (meaning students) will finally get it somewhere along the way.” The problem, of course, is that too many don't “finally get it”; hence, the mess we are in, in education.

I was also asked by a faculty member about “systematic methods of instruction for preschool children.” He noted, “Surely there must be systematic methods of instruction that are based in science, and are known to work!” In all of my hundreds of school, classroom, and teacher/principal visits, I have never, ever, been asked by an American educator about “systematic methods of instruction” for children at any level. During further discussions with this same faculty member, he was equally

interested in “systematic methods of instruction” for older students, “even into college.” I told him I would send him information about precision teaching, direct instruction, mastery learning, and Keller’s Personalized System of Instruction. As I spoke of these methods to the faculty member and others gathered about me, they were in awe that such systems of instruction actually existed and assumed that they must be in widespread use in America, in fact in universal use. When I told them that the educational establishment of America, generally, had rejected these scientifically sound, data-based approaches to instruction, in favor of intuitive, individualistic, “artsy” methods, they were dumbfounded. One faculty member said to me, “Where can I learn about this wonderful science of human behavior?” (Arrangements are presently being made to bring this faculty member to America to learn about the science of human behavior and how to apply that science to a broad range of educational problems. It appears as though she, and a faculty member from the West China University for Medical Sciences, will be living with Louise and me while they go to school in America to learn about this “wonderful science.”)

Everywhere we went in China, whenever it became known that my field of scholarship was the study and treatment of human behavior, great interest became immediately generated. The guides that had been arranged to escort Louise and me would ask questions, specific questions, about their children’s behavior. I see China as a nation ready for the science of human behavior. It has such huge needs, and those needs are immediately demanding attention. I would hope that something could be done to arouse the American community of behaviorists and behaviorologists to an interest in getting the science of behavior into that mammoth population of people. I believe it would be well received and I believe that evidences of impact would be felt early on.

Although China is a totalitarian nation that is governed by powerful centralized leadership—a system I don’t agree with—there are advantages that could come from it. For example, television is state controlled, as are other forms of media. If video-taped training and awareness programs could be developed that were acceptable by the government for presentation to the masses, it would be possible to get the message of behaviorology into millions and millions of homes rapidly and thoroughly. Such “media campaigns” (Biglan, 1995, p. 486) are already in place relative to health care and other topics of broad concern. Extending such campaigns to include aspects of “behavioral hygiene” (Ledoux, 1997a) such as parenting skills would not be unreasonable. When we were in China, there was interest generated by officials at the West China University for Medical Sciences to do that very thing. I believe it is worth looking into. We behaviorologists might do for the society of

China what W. Edwards Deming did for Japanese business. I don’t believe that is a farfetched notion.

I’m not prepared at this moment to make many specific recommendations. But I am looking into the matter carefully and intend to have several specific recommendations in the not too distant future. [The founding of TIBI was related to these.—Ed.]

Regardless of what those next steps might be, this much I know: they will have to be taken at some expense to the Americans involved in working with the Chinese. The Chinese are in a position to help cover local expenses like food and lodging, and some forms of ground transportation, but extensive travel arrangements, consulting fees, and expensive technology will have to be borne by the Americans who take the initiative in getting this ball rolling. China is a terribly, terribly poor nation. Although some things are cheap for the Chinese, like food and lodging, their wages, nevertheless, barely allow them to make ends meet. For example, the average worker’s salary in China is \$25 a month. The president of West China University for Medical Sciences earns \$100 a month as president of the university, and an additional \$100 a month for his work as a surgeon. He is a fairly well known surgeon in China, and is active in his profession, even though as president of a university he has heavy administrative responsibilities.

The university is also poor. When visiting with the president and members of his administration, we were told of how they struggle to keep their buildings heated in the winter, and how they can barely afford to make major repairs to keep their facilities functional. But in the long run, I still believe that we in America who have this great science should make every effort we can to get it into China. A relatively inexpensive way of doing that would be to host Chinese scholars in America. They would be able to get to America at their own expense, and their universities would continue to pay their wages which would be anywhere from \$50 to \$100 a month. But if they were hosted by American faculty members, that is, invited to live in our homes and eat at our tables as our extended guests, they could do quite well, acquire the skills and knowledge they need, and take those skills back to China where they would get the word out amongst their colleagues and the people generally.

One of the nice things about China is that there isn’t a philosophical disposition which has biased or prejudiced the academic community against the behavioral approach. Though many Chinese scholars, educators, and university leaders were educated in Russia, and are aware of the psychodynamic approach to treating behavior problems, psychodynamicism is not a compelling force in China. Also, there is nothing about communist ideology that would stand in the way. Communism is virtually meaningless to the masses in China. They could care less.

Communism is a stepping stone to moving up in the system. For example, one could never be a university president or a college dean without being a member of the communist party. But beyond that, communism has little or no meaning to the people, and would certainly not be a deterrent to the work I am proposing.

In a word, the Chinese aren't already committed to the "isms" that are plaguing America. That is certainly a big plus. Their cup is relatively empty and waiting to be filled. I think we should start filling it.

To some American scholars and academes, the thought of sharing their knowledge and expertise with a government that would order the massacre of untold numbers of students is offensive—even repulsive. I have a friend who is on the faculty of a large Midwestern university. For years he was active in providing services and training to university personnel in China. He was in China on the night of the Tiananmen Square massacre—in fact, he watched it happen and vowed never again to lift a finger on behalf of such a government. That is understandable. One must deal with his/her own conscience on such matters. As for me, I have concluded that things will never get better for the Chinese if there are no healthy influences from the outside.

I believe strongly that we need to get bright, young as well as seasoned, assertive Chinese scholars to America, where they can be educated and trained, and who can then go back to China and be our contacts for additional work there related to promoting the science. I believe that if we could get a network of behaviorists/behaviorologists located throughout China, that network could become a dynamic force in building the science in that country, and in making it available to the people as a tool in the solution of compelling educational and parenting problems. That is certainly what my wife and I are committed to doing. Within the next few months, we expect to have two of those scholars living with us in our home, taking classes at Utah State University, being mentored by selected faculty members, and given a broad base of hands-on experience so that they will know how to apply this science to the problems facing their country. It is an enriching experience. For what it is worth, my wife and I have already hosted a visiting scholar from China in our home. He was with us for about six months and was a wonderful house guest, a delight to be with, and the fruits of that are already being realized by the influence he is having in China.

For additional insights into this matter, I suggest you read "Behaviorology in China: A Status Report" by Dr. Stephen F. Ledoux. His article (Ledoux, 1997b) was written after Professor Ledoux had spent a year teaching in China. (Also see Case & Ledoux, 1997, for a chronicle of the experiences of Ledoux and his family during that year; it will help you be prepared to appreciate your own

visit to China—or provide you with an adventurous, informative, and culturally expanding visit to China from the comfort of your own home.) ✻

Endnotes

Hoping that it might enlist the informed assistance of its readers in the worthy endeavor of developing behaviorology in China, the author initially prepared this work as a report of his experience in that country. The paper received minor revisions for inclusion in *Origins and Components of Behaviorology* (Ledoux, 1997c).

The author thanks his Chinese hosts both for their efforts to make his visit to China possible and for their efforts to increase the availability of the independent natural science of behavior in their country.

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