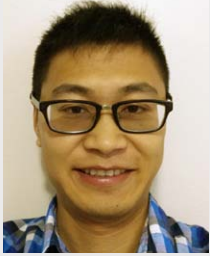


The Author



Zhipeng Gao is a Graduate Associate of the York Centre for Asian Research and a Doctoral Candidate in the Psychology programme at York University.

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact: Zhipeng Gao (gzhipeng@yorku.ca)

Revolutionizing Chinese Psychology in the Maoist Era

In the first half of the twentieth century, psychology in China was dominated by American approaches. However, as the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, it started requiring psychologists, along with physiologists and medical scientists, to adopt the Soviet approach, characterized by an interpretation of Marxist philosophy and the theory of higher neural activities by Nobel laureate Ivan Pavlov. Within a few years, Pavlov's work was introduced to China through translations, scholarly visits, guest lectures, workshops and educational reforms. Giving up their previously favored western approaches, many Chinese psychologists attempted to render psychological research both informed by Pavlov's theory and relevant to the development of the new communist-led postwar society.

During the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* in 1956 that encouraged free speech, a few psychologists expressed reservations about the exclusive application of Pavlov's ideas to psychology as well as the marriage between Marxism and Pavlov's theory, but received more criticism and disregard than support. Soon the political rein over academia tightened again with the onset of the *Anti-Rightist Movement* in 1957, when psychologists, physiologists and medical scientists all reasserted their loyalty to the Pavlovian paradigm. However, this strategy did not last long in psychology. Within a year, a party-directed Educational Revolution hit Pavlovian psychology, accusing it of being bourgeois and reactionary for emphasizing the physiological foundation of mental phenomena while overlooking the role of class struggle in shaping the mind. How could this happen, given the enduring influence of Pavlov's theory in physiology and medical science? The answer lies in very intricate dynamics at various levels.

Between 1955 and the 1958 *Educational Revolution*, Pavlov's theory had been veering into an ambiguous status, eroded by the de-Stalinization movement in the Soviet Union, and estranged from Chinese communist leaders who became suspicious of the Stalin model. Despite its lasting authority, Pavlov's theory was no longer an absolute academic-political orthodoxy. Meanwhile, for a number of reasons psychology had become more saturated with Pavlov's theory than physiology and medical science, including the greater interpretive possibilities to view psychological phenomena through a Pavlovian lens, as well as psychologists' need for a natural-scientific status that could be acquired through opting for Pavlov's theory. In contrast, physiology and medical science had significant areas that could not be subsumed under Pavlov's theory, and the health conditions and medical system in China made

Asia Research Briefs

Asia Research Briefs provide short summaries or perspectives based on research by YCAR Associates. Their purpose is to share insights from academic research with journalists, policy analysts, community leaders and interested members of the public. For further information, or to subscribe to the series, contact: ycar@yorku.ca.

About YCAR

The York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) is one of Canada's largest and most active communities of scholars working on East, South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian migrant communities around the world.

The Centre includes faculty, graduate students and research associates from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, law and business.

YCAR facilitates and supports research projects, knowledge exchange and graduate student training, as well as engagement with wider communities in the conduct or dissemination of research. YCAR is located on York University's Keele campus.

For more information:

www.yorku.ca/ycar

Eighth Floor, Kaneff Tower
4700 Keele St., Toronto
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3



Pavlov's theory less relevant to local practices. Further, physiologists and medical scientists were more successful in paying lip service to the dominant doctrine without actually obeying it. Then came the *Educational Revolution* in 1958, which, just like the Pavlovianization movement in the preceding years, had performative components for maintaining the communist ideology. To this end, psychology turned out to be a convenient target, partly because it addresses human nature, a politically freighted topic. It was also more dispensable than the better developed and more needed physiology and medical science. Thus psychology suffered the most pressure during the *Educational Revolution*. When physiologists and medical scientists continuously denounced the remaining western components in their disciplines to demonstrate political loyalty, such an option was no longer available to psychologists – there were few western components remaining in psychology, and any criticism of psychology was inevitably directed at Pavlov's theory. This differentiation across disciplines presents a case in which historical localities and dynamics ruptured the overarching political context in Maoist China.

Acknowledgements: This project received kind support from the Vivienne Poy Asian Research Award and the Professional Development Fund from the York Centre for Asian Research, and the Research/Fieldwork Cost Fund from the Faculty of Graduate Studies of York University.

Part of this project is better elaborated in: Gao, Z. (2015). "Pavlovianism in China: Politics and differentiation across scientific disciplines in the Maoist era." *History of Science*, 53(1), 57-85.