

## China and the Political Myth of ‘Brainwashing’

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PC: ‘Investigative Study of Brain Essence’, article and diagrams in the *Zhixin Bao*, 1897. Source: 全国报刊索引 database.

*The concept of ‘brainwashing’ was introduced to the West as an adaptation of the term xinao 洗脑, supposedly in use to describe Communist indoctrination practices in China. From the early 1950s on, this idea became globally influential as one of the dominant metaphors of Cold War politics. Ever since, it has formed a recurring trope of contemporary political discourse. However, a search for the actual origins of ‘brainwashing’ in China reveals that the early connotations of this metaphor were very different from later uses.*

‘Brainwashing’ is a ubiquitous word, a basic part of the vocabulary in various languages around the world. In fact, the allegation is used so frequently in modern discourse that we might be puzzled as to how political arguments ever got by without its striking, pejorative imagery. It’s *de rigueur* to describe those with different viewpoints as incapable of independent thought—instead, for example, mainland Chinese citizens must have been ‘brainwashed’ into fervent nationalism, or, alternatively, Hong Kong protesters must have been ‘brainwashed’ by Western media or governments. Though it was the English word that became globalised from the middle of the twentieth century, writers on the topic have long claimed, with varying degrees of certainty, that it was in turn a calque of a preexisting Chinese term: *xinao* (洗脑), literally ‘to wash the brain’.

Did this concept—which emerged in the West at the very beginning of the Cold War, took the world by storm, and still plays a central role in

the modern political imagination—really come from China? A careful look at the term's origins reveals that it did, though not in the manner or with the meaning that has previously been supposed.

## A Symbol of Modernity

The idea of 'washing the brain' made its first notable appearance in the writings of reformist intellectuals in the years following the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). The Qing defeat in that conflict, and the harsh terms of the subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki, provided a powerful burst of momentum for the scholars and officials calling upon the court to 'change the laws' (变法) and for Chinese society in general to be modernised. The constitutional monarchists Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were leading figures in this movement, founding in 1895 the Strength Studies Society (强学会) in Beijing, along with various other groups and publications elsewhere. In particular, Hunan emerged as a key centre of reform advocacy, with new educational organisations and media organs, including the Calculation Studies Society (算学社) in 1897, the Southern Studies Society (南学会) that was opened at the beginning of the following year, several academies, and a series of journals and news media bearing the name of Hunan's Xiang River (湘江).

It was in the context of these activities and publications that political discussion of the brain first began to gain currency. The fact that human consciousness is rooted in the brain—and not, as traditionally believed, in the heart—was one part of the 'new learning' that reformers hoped to propagate in Chinese society. Discussions of this topic appeared in a number of venues, including the *Zhixin Bao* (知新报) that Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao launched in Macau in 1897, as well as in the Hunan reformers' *Xiang Bao* (湘报) newspaper the following year. Two hundred years earlier, Western medical teachings on the brain had

caused a scandal when introduced by Jesuits at the early Qing court (Elman 2009, 146). Later missionary publications also discussed the brain, but did not achieve widespread dissemination or official endorsement. By the 1890s, however, the newest imperial textbooks referred to the brain as the organ of thought, even if this was still not part of mainstream knowledge (Elman 2009, 329). Thus, to refer to the brain in the context of pedagogy and political subjectivity would, by itself, be a way to mark the reformist intellectuals as scientific modernisers.

Tan Sitong, who was the son of a former governor of Hunan, devoted important passages of his syncretic philosophical opus *The study of Benevolence* (仁学, written from 1896) to the way that the brain and nervous system act as the channel between the individual mind and the 'ether' of the universe (Tan 1898). As he argues, '[t]he reason for people not being communally unified is [simply] that their nerves [literally 'brain energy', 脑气] move differently'. To achieve communion, 'one must ... change the movements of one's brain energy' (Tan 1898). Tan's close collaborator Tang Caichang, meanwhile, called for 'making the brain new' (新脑) (Tang 1898). During the short-lived period of support for these intellectuals by the Qing court under Emperor Guangxu, before their suppression in late 1898, cautious high-level officials tolerated but declined to directly engage in, such newfangled discourse. The Viceroy of Huguang Zhang Zhidong, for example, was a moderate reformer whose imperially-endorsed essay 'On Promoting Learning' (劝学篇) mentions the character 'heart' (心) 51 times, but 'brain' (脑) not even once (Zhang 1898).

## Revolutionary Genealogy

With the defeat of Guangxu's 'Hundred Days Reform' (戊戌变法) by conservative dynastic forces in 1898, some reformers such as Tan were martyred while many went into exile in Japan.

Liang Qichao, in particular, would refer in his strident political writings from this period to the need to transform the brains of the Chinese populace. From Liang's perspective, the failure of 1898 had shown that millennia of harmful customs had 'deeply penetrated into everyone's brains such that they could not extricate themselves' (Liang 1903). It was also for this reason that China's people formed a 'loose sheet of sand' rather than a unified, active, and powerful citizenry capable of defending its own interests. Given 'all that had soaked and stained their brains ... they could not attain the status of citizens of a state' (Liang 1903).

In various writings of this period, Liang called for the 'bare-handed forging of new brains' (赤手铸心脑) (Liang 1899, 357), and speculated about the role of religion, literature, and other factors in achieving this goal. He also remarked on the changes he himself experienced as an exile in Yokohama reading large amounts of Japanese texts, including translations of Western political classics: 'This transformed my brain essence (脑质) such that my thought and speech, as compared with before, were like those of two different people' (Ding 1962, 93). In the years to come a young, pre-Marxist Mao Zedong, studying in Hunan, would be influenced by both Liang's writings and the martyred Tan Sitong's *The Study of Benevolence* (Hu 2018).

Brain-changing had become a thematic symbol not just for Liang, but also for others in the embattled reformist milieu. The 1899 essay 'Theory of Changing the Brain Essence of the National Citizenry' (变易国民脑质论), published in Shanghai by a little-known writer named Li Shiji, connected this goal with the specific idea of 'washing' the brain: the reformers' aim must be 'to wash away the millennia of dregs and filth from the brain matter of our countrymen, and project upon it the model of the modern world' (Li 1899). This essay was soon after included in a collection of writings edited by the influential educator and revolutionary Cai Yuanpei (1997, vol. 1, 399–401). The following year, the leading

intellectual Yan Fu in his translation of Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* inserted a reference to the need for 'those who engage in the study of sociology [to] wash our brains and purify our hearts (洗脑涤心)' (Yan 1903).

The new metaphor of 'washing the brain' served well to encapsulate the aim of transforming China into a progressive, powerful, and scientifically modernised state no longer fettered by its traditional ideas. When the *Cui Xin Bao* (翠新报) newspaper was founded in Hangzhou in 1904, the foreword introducing the publication declared its intention to 'roar into our ears, shake alert our eyeballs, wash clean our brains (洗刷我脑筋), fill ourselves with knowledge, and guide ourselves towards reform'. The same year, the science fiction story 'The Stone of Goddess Nüwa' (海天独啸子) (Hai Tian Du Xiao Zi 2002; Tsu 2008), published under the pen-name 'Lone Howler of the Seas and Skies' (海天独啸子), featured a female protagonist working to save China by opening a series of 'brain-washing institutes' (洗脑院) to awaken her countrymen into political modernity.

These and other contemporaneous references to 'brainwashing' are clearly envisioned as a form of enlightening pedagogy, not violation or control. Semantically, they played on the traditional term *xixin* (洗心), or 'washing the heart', common in both Confucian discourse as well as Buddhist and Daoist religious contexts. In phrases such as *xixin gemian* (洗心革面), or 'wash the heart and transform the countenance', *xixin* referred to internal moral transformation in order to renounce past transgressions and to better realise ideals of propriety, benevolence, loyalty, and other such imperially-promoted values. As Timothy Cheek notes, the basic idea of 'the modification of assumptions, habits, and values to suit the norms of a cultural or political elite' is perhaps as old as Chinese politics itself (Cheek 2019). The derivation of *xinao* from *xixin* displays what the German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck argued was true for all innovative metaphors: that they 'can only be understood if they are embedded in the

handed-down linguistic inventory and coined in analogy to previous formulations' (Koselleck 2018, 171).

Discussion of the brain put a more modern-sounding twist on the longstanding disposition towards politics as pedagogy, but it does not actually seem to have caught on widely as a replacement for *xixin*. The latter and more familiar term appears more often in newspapers and journals during the years between 1912–49, and various regimes and factions used it to refer to their own projects of political pedagogy (Chiang 1939). The Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan, for example, required those under his rule to regularly attend meetings of 'Heart-Washing Societies' (洗心社), for the purposes of self-criticism and moral cultivation (Gillin 1967). Even the Japanese puppet regime of Wang Jingwei at times used terms such as *xixin* (and even *xinao*) to describe its efforts at moral and political education (Kiely 2014, 229; Pan 2006).

Other, related concepts were also in circulation. Notably, Nationalist, Communist, and Japanese forces in China *all* explicitly

sought to 'morally transform' (感化) detained offenders, leading to a diffusion of institutional models and practices that shared basic assumptions across stark ideological battle lines (Kiely 2014, 297–98 and 304–7). As the Chinese Communist Party developed its own practices of 'thought reform' (思想改造), these were in key respects continuous with the methods in use by their political competitors. That political and common prisoners should be subjected to 'reformation' was not a radical innovation by the Communist Party. Rather, it appeared in context as 'a normative modern, progressive mode of penalty'—albeit in practice the conditions of such reform could be quite brutal, at times intentionally and other times due to mismanagement or lack of resources. (Kiely 2014, 299–303; Smith 2012). Overall, reeducation existed along a very familiar 'persuasive-coercive continuum' (Teiwes 1993, 36–37)—there were no mysterious, special methods of mind-control.



'Transform the Countenance and Wash the Heart', cartoon appearing in the *Zhongyang Daobao* journal in Japanese-occupied Nanjing, 1940. Source: 全国报刊索引 database.



'Adapt to the Times: One Must Always Keep Wiping Clean One's Brain', cartoon in the Beijing-based magazine *147 Huobao*, published in 1946 under Kuomintang rule. Source: 全国报刊索引 database.

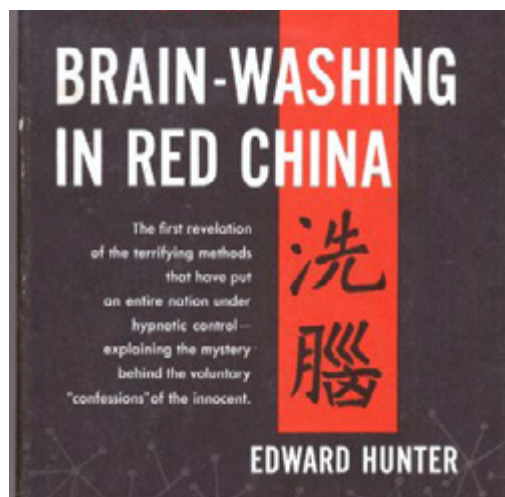
Moreover the term *xiniao* was not in use to describe any particular ‘reeducation’ or indoctrination practice, as it is sometimes imagined today. Rather it continued to convey a very general sense of political awakening. Indeed, it was a sufficiently generic term that at times it lost its political character entirely, appearing for example as a way to express feelings of mental rejuvenation brought on by a trip abroad. Though the word was indeed used occasionally to support the adoption of Communist ideology, its various uses through the late 1940s indicate that *xiniao* did not up to that point have any one clearly-defined political meaning. This is perhaps because its original connotation of embracing ‘modernity’ had already been almost universally accepted. Later on, the Western fascination with ‘brainwashing’ would cause considerable bemusement in China.

## A Cold War Metaphor

When the American journalist, anti-communist crusader, and former OSS agent Edward Hunter first brought the word ‘brainwashing’ to widespread Western attention via his writings and public appearances of the early 1950s, he described it as a mysterious new technique by which the Chinese Communist Party was creating a vast corps of zombie-like, subservient foot soldiers. These writings began with a 24 September, 1950 article in the *Miami Daily News* under the title “‘Brain-Washing’ Tactics Force Chinese into Ranks of Communist Party’, and continued the next year with the sensationalist book *Brainwashing in Red China*, promising ‘the first revelation of the terrifying methods that have put an entire nation under hypnotic control’.

This idea rapidly became popular in the West, particularly after the scandal surrounding cases of American soldiers switching loyalties during the Korean War. By 1953, CIA Director Allen Dulles would remark that ‘the brain under [Communist influence] becomes a

phonograph playing a disc put on its spindle by an outside genius over which it has no control’ (Dulles 1953). How better to deny the notion that there might be genuine intellectual commitments, or at least authentic loyalties, on both sides of the Iron Curtain? Meanwhile, Hunter sought by all possible means to



Edward Hunter's 1951 book *Brain-washing in Red China*.

promote the concept as his own ‘discovery’ (Holmes 2017). At perhaps the height of these efforts, he even incorrectly claimed in remarks before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1958 that he was ‘the first to use the word in writing in any language, and the first to use it in a speech in any language except for that small group of Chinese [refugees whom he had interviewed in Hong Kong]’. This was somewhat paradoxical given his continued insistence on the term’s frequency and importance in Chinese Communist Party indoctrination methods.

Though the concept of Communist mind-control had certainly caught on in popular culture (Richard Condon’s novel *The Manchurian Candidate* would be published the next year), already by the end of the 1950s there were doubts expressed by psychologists



and others that there were any real ‘secret methods’ in China of the sort Hunter claimed. When the psychologist Robert J. Lifton wrote his rigorous 1961 study of Chinese refugee subjects of indoctrination, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of ‘Brainwashing’ in China*, he notably casts aspersions on the buzzword appearing in his subtitle, noting that ‘the term has a far from precise and a questionable usefulness’ (Lifton 1961, 4).

This sentiment was shared in China. On various occasions, Party leaders made ironic references to the American hysteria over brainwashing. Mao, for example, sardonically reflected on the impossibility of ‘brainwashing’ at a 1964 meeting with student groups from Africa and Latin America:

You will ask, why is it that 15 years after Liberation, there are still many people who are moderates, and even some who are still rightists? (Audience laughter). It’s because thought work (思想工作) is just this difficult, it needs a period of time, and we can’t force them to wash their brains (不能强迫他们洗脑筋). (Audience laughter). We can only encourage them, we can only persuade them[.] (Mao 1964).

The following year, Politburo member and Beijing Party Secretary Peng Zhen in a meeting with Party members at Peking University even referred to *xinaojin* (洗脑筋) as ‘an American expression’ (Peng 1965). Party media likewise lambasted *xinao*—in its new meaning of mental manipulation and control—as an invention of the West. There were a few isolated public remarks, harkening back to the Late Qing imagery, defending the idea that ‘washing the brain’ was a necessary and healthy form of self-improvement. In general, though, the term’s original positive valuation seems to have been forgotten amid the global propaganda struggles of the era. During the subsequent Cultural Revolution period, there was of course a major nationwide attempt to remake the thinking of the Chinese populace—but not one that its

proponents, including Mao himself, associated with the term *xinao*. This has remained the case ever since.

## Constructing Irrational Adversaries

The status of ‘brainwashing’ today is quite curious. The term has obviously lived on (and thrived) in the popular imagination, even if it has never truly been validated as a psychological phenomenon. Somewhat remarkably, *xinao* is now most commonly used even in the Chinese-speaking world with its ‘American’ meaning. In China as elsewhere (not least in Western commentary on China), the term is used frequently by ideologues of all stripes to define the opinions of those whom they disagree with as the result of external mind control rather than an independent thought process.

Yet people do tend to have reasons, however valid or defensible or clearly articulated, for their beliefs and commitments. The Cold War imagery of brainwashing in the sense of Hunter or Dulles serves to obscure that reality by positing a lack of subjective agency in those favouring certain ideas. In this depiction the victims of brainwashing cannot be reasoned with. Rather, they can only be rescued through the righteous conquest of their oppressors. Nothing could be further from the original meaning of *xinao*, which conveyed individuals’ active attempts to re-examine their own ideas and to embrace modernity. The decline of that meaning demonstrates what the intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg referred to as the *Umbesetzung*, or ‘reoccupation’, of metaphors (Blumenberg 1983, 465–66). Where ‘washing the brain’ once seemed a perfect way to express casting aside unexamined prejudices to let in the light of scientific rationality, we now use it to embody the tainting of consciousness by insidious political doctrines that prevent it from perceiving the self-evident truths of nature—whatever our tribe may consider those to be. ■