



# A life in 'science of the heart'

**P**ROFESSOR Zheng Richang is one of the most prominent figures in Chinese psychology today. He has played a major part in introducing counselling and psychological testing into modern China, and has published extensively and lectured in many parts of the world. The Chinese government has honoured him, and he is often on television and radio promoting popular psychology. He is now an Honorary Visiting Professor at University College Chester, where I talked to him.

## **Professor Zheng, could you tell us something about your early life?**

I was born 60 years ago in a remote village in Liaoning province in northeast China. My family was Manchu. My father was the village schoolteacher and my mother was a farm worker. I had six brothers and sisters. When I was six years old I went to the local primary school and at 13, I went to the small local high school. My family was very poor. With so many children and very little money, life was very hard. The social upheavals of the Japanese occupation and then the civil war caused my family many hardships.

## **Were you the first person in your family to go to university? Did your family encourage you?**

Yes. Because only a very small percentage of candidates gained university places, I did not have any hope of getting in at first, but I succeeded beyond my dream. I was 18 when I started at Beijing Normal University – one of the best universities in China. My brothers and sisters helped to pay for me.

The first time I saw the word psychology (in Chinese *xinli*, which means 'science of the heart') was when I filled in the application form before the college entrance exam. At that time I had no idea what it was about but I was curious to know.

I enjoyed university and learned a lot. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1967. While I was still a student I published a paper about the relationship between emotion and cognition.

## **What happened after you graduated?**

This was the time of the Cultural Revolution in China. All psychology research and teaching was stopped, and

**LOUISE T. HIGGINS** (University College Chester) interviews **PROFESSOR ZHENG RICHANG** (Beijing Normal University).

the government sent all the students to the countryside to help the workers. I was sent to work in a coal mine in my hometown. The colliery management at that time was in chaos: there were many accidents. I had some narrow escapes while I was digging coal underground. Two of my eight roommates died. During one mine collapse I was seriously injured and spent some time in hospital where I met Tian Yuhua, a surgeon, whom I later married. We have two grown-up sons; one is finishing his PhD in America and the other works in Beijing Television.

## **How long did you work down the mine?**

I was there for eight years. Then politics changed once more and universities began to function again. I passed an exam to do postgraduate study and I went back to Beijing Normal University, where I began research on the national university entrance exam.

## **What do you think the long-term effects of the Cultural Revolution were on Chinese psychology?**

That is a difficult question, but mostly it resulted in a severe shortage of trained psychologists. Also, before the Cultural Revolution, Chinese psychology was modelled on Russian psychology (I learned Russian not English) and after the Cultural Revolution, Chinese psychology followed the Western model. But until the Open Door policy of the 1980s, China was still isolated from the rest of the world.

## **What did you do next?**

In 1985 I passed an exam to study overseas

and I spent two years at the American Centre for Educational Testing at Pittsburgh University.

## **Which psychologist do you admire most?**

Carl Rogers. His person-centred approach had a great influence on me. I think his humanistic ideas are very valuable for Chinese who have been keen on class struggle for a long time. Rogers believed that all people are equally valuable and inherently good. They try to survive, grow and make the most of themselves despite frustration and difficulty. They want increased independence and social responsibility. This is like the Chinese people.

I have looked at counselling in the context of exam stress, job choice and personal relationships. I think that school counselling is very important, and in China we hope to have a school psychologist in every school in the future.

## **Why did you think it was important to introduce counselling to China?**

Because the pace of change in society was very rapid and drastic. People were finding it difficult to adapt to the pace of change. Many young people were moving from the countryside to live in an urban environment and they found it hard to adapt. The market economy was different from the planned socialist economy and was difficult to cope with, and there was a lack of specialist counsellors who could help.

## **What is the current position of counselling in China?**

The Chinese people need to adapt to the demanding circumstances of industrialisation and development. Most people in China now have their basic needs met and they are looking for their higher psychological needs to be satisfied. Nowadays the political atmosphere is more liberal. There are more choices for people. This results in dilemmas and indecisiveness and anxiety.

In the past, psychological problems were seen as the result of the wrong mentality or having the wrong political

ideas, but now we see mental problems as being related to psychological needs. The main reason to introduce counselling to China was to meet the needs of society, and it signifies the progress being made in China and the new emphasis on the human dimension of economic development. We pay more attention to humanity because of the political democratisation.

The current position is that psychological health receives more and more attention from the Chinese government in several different sectors including education. Hu Jintao [China's president] has mentioned many times that development should be based on people, or as a psychologist might say more 'person-centred'.

#### **Tell us more about your academic career.**

I became a professor in 1993. I offered university courses in counselling and psychological testing. I have had about 30 postgraduate students several of whom are now professors; currently I have about 14 PhD and 10 master's students. I have visited the UK, Korea, Belgium, Russia and Australia to do cooperative research. I have lectured in every province in China and do a lot of travelling.

#### **What about research and publications?**

I have researched intelligence scales, creativity, cognitive style, personality, selection of athletes and pilots, career and vocational counselling and human resource development. A few years ago I was

involved in setting up the Beijing Senior Management Selection Centre that was the first of its kind in China. Now it advises companies on personnel selection and training and modern management methods.

My current interest is in the effect of pets on health and happiness.

#### **One of the other things that you are famous for is your research into young people's mental health.**

Yes, we are just now gathering national normative data from a new mental health

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### **'There is a great deal of pressure on Chinese students to do well'**

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scale we have devised for all university freshers. Last year there was a lot of public discussion about the case of a student who killed his three classmates after an argument about a game of cards. Now it has been decided to try to screen new students for severe psychological problems so that they can be given help. There is a great deal of pressure on Chinese students to do well at school and gain university places.

#### **How is the Chinese government dealing with this?**

The Chinese government policy is to increase the number of places in higher education, but even with two million places every year, the competition among 47

million middle school students is intense. I was part of a research group which looked at university entrance procedures in the 1980s and found they were costly and ineffective. We modernised the national University Entrance Exam according to good psychological principles. The exam now includes both objectively and subjectively marked elements to test knowledge, creativity and the ability to organise ideas. The procedure has been standardised, markers are trained and there are scoring rules. Reliability and validity measures are taken and published every year. Now the results are more satisfactory.

#### **What are your plans for the next few years?**

Before I focused on students in educational settings. Now I want to give more attention to parenting. With the one-child policy we have a generation that lacks independence. These single children have two parents and four grandparents to care about them. They become used to being the centre of attention and they have to try to fulfil the ambitions of six adults – it can cause problems. I want to help people to be better parents. I do not plan to retire soon; but even when I do, I shall continue my research.

#### **What do you think will happen to Chinese psychology in the next few years?**

Human resources and other applications of psychology in enterprises will be very important for the training and selection of personnel. Coping strategies will also be vital, for managers who are working in the very stressful situation of the market economy. And cognitive neuroscience could be big: the government has allocated funding especially to it.

#### **What will China gain from psychology?**

The application of psychology in very wide and diverse areas of industry and commerce will facilitate economic development. Psychologists will help people to release the psychological pressures caused by the new economy like a safety valve, help to reduce crime and violence and facilitate social stability.

#### **So what do you still want to achieve, Professor?**

I want to bring the benefits of psychology to China; and bring the benefits of psychology to all human societies.