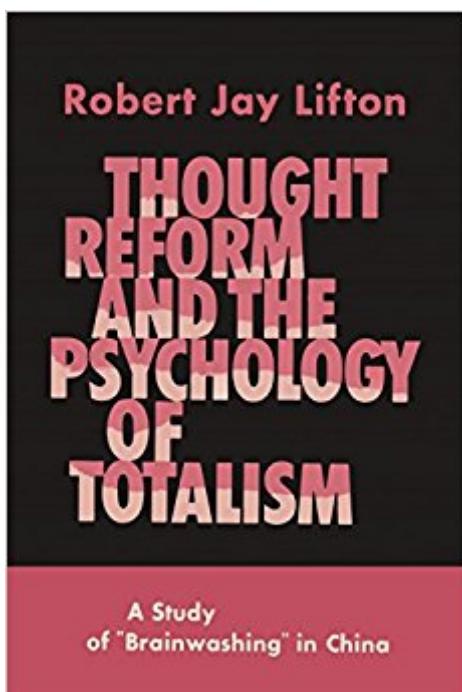


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# Thought Reform And The Psychology Of Totalism: A Study Of Brainwashing In China



## Synopsis

2014 Reprint of 1961 Edition. Full facsimile of the original edition, not reproduced with Optical Recognition Software. Lifton's research for the book began in 1953 with a series of interviews with American servicemen who had been held captive during the Korean War. In addition to interviews with 25 Americans, Lifton also interviewed 15 Chinese who had fled their homeland after having been subjected to indoctrination in Chinese universities. From these interviews, which in some cases occurred regularly for over a year, Lifton identified the tactics used by Chinese communists to cause drastic shifts in one's opinions and personality and "brainwash" American soldiers into making demonstrably false assertions. This work has become a classic text in the field and continues to serve as a fundamental guide in the debriefing of former cult members. Lifton's famous eight criteria for thought control are:

- 1. Milieu Control. This involves the control of information and communication both within the environment and, ultimately, within the individual, resulting in a significant degree of isolation from society at large.
- 2. Mystical Manipulation. There is manipulation of experiences that appear spontaneous but in fact were planned and orchestrated by the group or its leaders in order to demonstrate divine authority or spiritual advancement or some special gift or talent that will then allow the leader to reinterpret events, scripture, and experiences as he or she wishes.
- 3. Demand for Purity. The world is viewed as black and white and the members are constantly exhorted to conform to the ideology of the group and strive for perfection. The induction of guilt and/or shame is a powerful control device used here.
- 4. Confession. Sins, as defined by the group, are to be confessed either to a personal monitor or publicly to the group. There is no confidentiality; members' "sins," "attitudes," and "faults" are discussed and exploited by the leaders.
- 5. Sacred Science. The group's doctrine or ideology is considered to be the ultimate Truth, beyond all questioning or dispute. Truth is not to be found outside the group. The leader, as the spokesperson for God or for all humanity, is likewise above criticism.
- 6. Loading the Language. The group interprets or uses words and phrases in new ways so that often the outside world does not understand. This jargon consists of thought-terminating clichÃ©s, which serve to alter members' thought processes to conform to the group's way of thinking.
- 7. Doctrine over person. Member's personal experiences are subordinated to the sacred science and any contrary experiences must be denied or reinterpreted to fit the ideology of the group.
- 8. Dispensing of existence. The group has the prerogative to decide who has the right to exist and who does not. This is usually not literal but means that those in the outside world are not saved, unenlightened, unconscious and they must be converted to the group's ideology. If they do not join the group or are critical of the group, then they must be rejected by the members. Thus, the outside world loses all credibility. In conjunction, should

any member leave the group, he or she must be rejected also.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Lifton has written a book with the rare virtue of being at once a rich source of information vital to international relations, and an interesting exploration of several aspects of ideology and identity.--Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease While exploring the dynamics of Chinese Communist 'thought reform,' Lifton has performed the extraordinary feat of successfully linking . . . distinctly Chinese experiences with universal knowledge about human behavior.--Journal of Asian Studies --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Robert Jay Lifton is lecturer on psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima and The Nazi Doctors. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Growing up one of Jehovah's Witnesses, some of what Lifton describes in this book I have definitely seen and it really rang true for me. I think his idea of totalism, this internal drive that many (all?) humans have to give themselves over 100+% to something greater than themselves... it's very real and it is something that we should all be aware exists. Interestingly, I actually found chapter 8 on "Apparent Resisters" to be the part of the book that was most illuminating in my quest to understand the religion I grew up with. I always asked myself, even when I was one, how could JW's be so resistant... how did they resist in concentration camps and gulags, refusing to compromise even a

little? I feared that I could never have THAT kind of resolve. Lifton pointed out that those who best resisted the thought reform of the Chinese prison system were those who were most immune to the appeal of totalism, \*because they already had a totalistic worldview of their own.\* Therefore, the totalism that the communists tried to involve these resisters in was actually perceived as a threat to their already satisfied totalistic impulse, rather than a tempting means to fulfill it. I'm very grateful to Robert Lifton for this wonderful analysis, this isn't just a book about "brainwashing" in communist China, it's a book about human nature. If you're curious about the more extreme and darker impulses of human nature, read it! And if you're curious about high control religious groups, or especially if you are in the process of leaving one yourself, I highly suggest reading it along with his study on Aum Shinrikyo "Destroying the World to Save it".

There is no higher praise I can offer Robert Jay Lifton than this: his 50 year old book which deconstructs the mechanisms of Chinese Communist "re-education" efforts remains, to this day, the "go to" book for anyone interested in persuasion, indoctrination, and thought control. That's an amazing achievement. Can anyone dismayed by the shallowness of contemporary sound bite culture, for instance, not benefit from understanding Lifton's analysis of how "loading the language" leads to the "language of non-thought"? Is our tepid response to the continual revelations about government invasiveness (and the ensuing power grab so evident in the non-accountable judgements conducted by FISA and the NSA) a reflection of Lifton's prescient claim that "doctrine over person" is central to the success of ideological totalism, be it implemented by authoritarian regimes or democratic ones? These and other conclusions by the author are not the arbitrary musings of an Ivy Tower theorist - they are the conclusions arrived at after years of painstaking research, conclusions supported by other groundbreaking research that followed - particular the experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. This research is critical to digest if we're to avoid the prospects of the haunting warning issued by the author midway through this book: "For there is no emotional bondage greater than that of the man whose entire guilt potential - neurotic and existential - has become the property of ideological totalists." Any efforts to turn back the growing erosion of privacy, freedom, and sovereignty by corporations, governments and others will succeed unless we create a way to put into practice the wisdom Lifton articulates so clearly and powerfully in this book.

I first heard of this book during a Psychology 101 class I took in college nearly 40 years ago, and have always wanted to read it. This book is a classic psychological study of the techniques used to

manipulate the ideological thoughts of captives in Communist China. Although originally published in 1961, Dr. Lifton's work is still invaluable to anyone who is a student of the subject, or as an adjunct of the Cold War. Highly recommended.

Still the formative work on thought reform. This should be required reading for every freshman college student and every conscientious citizen of the world. So much of the politico-religious movements occupying global headlines could be understood by reading this book. Human nature hasn't changed so the need for cautionary reminders will never diminish.

The review of actual cases provides detailed insight into re-education processes in the mid-20th Century in China. Commentary by the author interprets these processes from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. The author compares the thought reform processes to education and treatment.

This book is filled with scary truth about totalism. It was heartwrenching to read, and I wish more people were reading it.

Lifton helps us to see how Mind control is being used even in our day. If you look at how even at the highest levels of Government we are being manipulated with Mind control you will see how to avoid it!

I Used Lifton's book and his concept of Totalism to write my Master's thesis. I highly recommend if you are interested in "cult" mindset, group think, or brainwashing.

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