

Loh Seng Tsai
1901 - 1992
PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, EMERITUS

Fuh Tan University; Nanking University; Ph.D., Psychology, University of
Chicago, December 14, 1928
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1965 To July 1, 1973
Birth: February 6, 1901; Death: December 31, 1992

Dr. Loh Seng Tsai was born in China on February 6, 1901 and died December 31, 1992 in Orange County. As a young man he earned degrees from Fuh Tan University and Nanking University. In the 1940's he served as an advisor to the Chinese Ministry of Education, as Dean at Nanking University, and later as Director of the Research Institute of Educational Psychology at the National Sun Yat-sen University.

He earned a Ph.D. in psychology in 1928 and joined the faculty in 1929 at the University of Chicago which had one of the most distinguished psychology faculties in the world. Subsequently, he returned to China and came to America again following the end of World War II. He was on the faculty at various times at Brown University, UCLA, and Tulane University.

In 1965 at an age when many people retire, Dr. Tsai came to California State University, Fullerton after a long and distinguished career in teaching and research. The CSUF Psychology Department was in its second year and uncertain of its direction and goals. Dr. Tsai, in his warm and gentle way, provided leadership and purpose to the department, mostly through example and suggestion.

The theme of Dr. Tsai's professional life was a strong unwavering belief that the empirical method of science could be applied to psychological problems. He was a brilliant and ingenious researcher and, in many diverse empirical studies, illustrated how basic psychological experimentation could be applied to everyday life and to the most pressing societal concerns. For instance, as early as 1939 in China he developed a mental speed test which was an excellent predictor of airplane pilot success. His simple test measured basic human perceptual and cognitive abilities at least as well as the complex battery of tests developed for the U.S. Air Force during the second World War. And, in an era dominated by Darwinian competition, he demonstrated experimentally that natural enemies (cats and rats) could learn to cooperate. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize for this epoch-making research. Again in another series of studies, he showed that complex problem solving in the rat could develop through the chaining of simpler, previously learned habits. It was not necessary to infer consciousness to explain reasoning.

Dr. Tsai the person is inseparable from his scholarly achievements and his strong belief in science and in the application of science. I do have one revealing anecdote. Years ago, a young colleague came to me chuckling and said that he had informed Dr. Tsai of how the well-known behaviorist B.F.

Skinner had spent months training a rat to pick up a small steel ball and drop it in a tube. "Oh", replied Dr. Tsai, "I did that in an afternoon by first giving a rat a gum ball. Of course, the rat picked up the gum ball with its forepaws and licked it. It was simple then to substitute the metal ball and train in the rest of the skills."

Dr. Tsai was named CSUF Outstanding Professor in 1971 and was chosen by students to receive a Distinguished Teaching Award in 1969. He retired in 1973 but continued to be active in psychology. He published important results from his experimental research in his late 80's.

Dr. Tsai was generous with his time, kind in his criticism and rigorous in his academic standards. He delighted in encouraging talented and hard-working students to pursue careers in psychology. Dr. Tsai was a happy, smiling person who enhanced our lives in the formative years of the Psychology Department. He was appreciated for his genuine warm humor and wit. He taught our students well and made learning enjoyable. Along with his charming wife Aimee, he hosted department parties notable for their companionship, stimulating conversation and truly excellent cuisine. It was an honor to know him and to learn from him.

He is survived by his wife, one son, three daughters, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Submitted by his colleague and friend,
Richard H. Lindley
Professor of Psychology
(est.) February 1, 1993