THE HAPPINESS-INCOME PARADOX AND WESTERN AND CHINESE CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

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Abstract: The rapid growth in income during recent decades in China (and other "tiger economies") has not been accompanied by an increase, but rather a temporary reduction, in the level of self-reported happiness. This so-called happiness-income paradox has caused much discussion, mostly related to happiness economics and research methodology. In this paper, we add a complementary, more philosophical perspective by considering the differences between typically Western conceptions of happiness, which inform the empirical happiness studies that have been used to identify the paradox, and traditional Chinese conceptions, especially that of Confucianism. An examination of the Confucian view of happiness serves both to highlight aspects of a good life that may have been lost during the recent economic boom and to identify deep-rooted cultural assumptions that may still influence the way contemporary Chinese tend to judge the quality of their life.

The so-called happiness-income paradox, first described by Easterlin (1974) (and also known as the "Easterlin Paradox"), appears to have been particularly strikingly exemplified by a number of countries with fast-growing economies, among them not least China. The case of China, which seems puzzling even when taking into account the possible shortcomings of Easterlin's research, provides a good occasion for philosophical reflection on happiness research. Different conceptions of happiness might be involved in the paradox in different ways. Identifying these conceptions and their possible roles might help to explain it, thus complementing existing explanations from economic methodology and psychology (e.g., Weiman et al. ,2015). It may be argued, in line with other criticisms of research based on self-reported life-satisfaction (e.g., Haybron 2008), that the results of happiness surveys are less than completely reliable because they measure superficial and highly context-sensitive judgments rather than real, genuine, or "authentic" happiness. Hence it deserves consideration whether contemporary Chinese people might actually be happier than the empirical studies indicate. Maybe they still conform to traditional, less subjectivist notions of happiness and only fail to meet the criteria of the life-satisfaction approach. However, it is also possible to take the results more or less at face value, and accept that there is a negative, or at least not clearly positive, the correlation between income and happiness in contemporary Chinese society, but explain this apparent paradox as a result of the abandonment by recent generations of Chinese of more traditional notions of happiness, or traditional ways of life.

We will explore both lines of thought in a tentative way. We do not claim that any of the two hypotheses is true, only that both are possibilities that ought to be

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taken seriously, and that sensitivity to different Western and Chinese conceptions of a good life is relevant to understanding the current "happiness situation" in China.

I. The Happiness-income Paradox and the Case of China

The core of the happiness-income paradox is the apparent lack of a positive correlation between income growth and average life-satisfaction in the population (Easterlin 1974; cf. Weiman et al. 2015). Put very crudely; it appears that money does not make people happy. This is contrary to basic assumptions in the economy, where money is seen as the key to not just more consumption, and so more pleasure and preference satisfaction, but also to enjoying a wider range of options – and so should be strongly correlated with happiness and well-being.

The crude summary is too simplistic, however. There *is* evidence, as Easterlin himself already noted, of *some* positive correlation between material wealth and happiness. Wealthier countries score better than poorer in terms of life-satisfaction. Likewise, high-income groups also consistently report higher life-satisfaction than low-income groups. The paradox pertains more specifically to the *dynamics* of income and happiness. It consists of the observation that *over time*, life-satisfaction does not increase as income grows. This seems paradoxical not just because it is at odds with basic assumptions in economics but also because the *synchronic* relationships between income and happiness should make one expect a positive correlation over time as well. If richer people tend to be happier than the less rich, why don't the less rich get happier when they get richer?

The paradox has been explained in terms of changing aspirations (Easterlin 2001), the importance of relative position (which might stay the same, even though one becomes wealthier), and hedonic adaptation (the general tendency to return to a certain baseline of happiness in the face of both positive and negative changes (Weiman et al. 2015). It has been criticized for being based on insufficient or poor-quality data (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006; Stevenson & Wolfers 2008) and confusing the absence of evidence for a link between income and happiness with evidence for its absence. Some even contend that it has been refuted, at least partially, after better data have become available and subjected to stricter analysis (Veenhoven & Hagerty 2006; Deaton 2008), arguing that there is, in fact, evidence of a significant increase in happiness.

We will not, however, take a stand in this debate (which has been referred to as the "happiness wars"). We will not call into question that there is seemingly substantial evidence for lack of a positive correlation between income growth and happiness, at least in some countries and for some periods of time (something which is conceded by most critics of the paradox). One relevant upshot of the debate is, however, the acknowledgment that early research on the relationship between income and happiness failed to separate different dimensions of happiness (Weiman et al. 2015), and, especially, those results were obtained with different *conceptualizations* of happiness, and that different kinds of *questions* display different results (Graham et al. 2010).

While it is an open question to which extent there is a general happiness-income paradox, there are a number of particularly striking cases of lack of, or

even negative correlation, between economic growth and happiness. They are cases of so-called "tiger economies", that is, countries that have recently undergone very rapid economic growth and also enjoyed a massive improvement in material living conditions. India and Egypt,[1] for example, both exhibit a puzzling pattern of relatively steady growth in average income accompanied by a seeming decline in happiness. China is another vivid example. China's real GDP multiplied over five times between 1990 and 2015; at the same time, however, self-reported life-satisfaction (a measure of subjective well-being) declined. Though it started to recover from about 2005, it is considered doubtful whether the recovery has been large enough to restore the former level of subjective well-being (Easterlin, Wang & Wang 2017). Different time series data differ on this point, though all show a more or less U-shaped pattern.

The pattern might seem puzzling, or even paradoxical when viewed from the point of view of economics. However, a number of likely explanations are at hand. For one thing, it might be seen as a typical *transition* phenomenon, as countries that have undergone rapid and deep societal changes (typically linked to a change from centrally planned to a market economy, as in post-communist Europe) generally tend to show a decline in subjective wellbeing (Grün & Klasen 2012). Rapid economic growth often leads to more uncertainty as to future living conditions, greater inequality, erosion of social bonds and traditional values. Several of the standard, general explanations of the happiness-income paradox, like those in terms of changing aspirations or standards of comparison (for example, due to media exposure), also appear to be readily applicable to the case of China as well.

However, even if the development need not be considered paradoxical, it is still intellectually and practically challenging. The available explanations remain speculative or based on superficial correlations (or both). The apparent lack of a positive correlation between material living standards and subjective wellbeing merits closer scrutiny. Though the results may not alter or even challenge the standard explanations, they may complement or deepen them, showing, for example, in more detail *how* economic and societal transitions, changing aspirations, or standards of comparison influence subjective wellbeing. One might also dare to ask some more philosophical questions: To what extent *ought* contemporary Chinese to be happy? To what extent they are *really* happy? The very idea of applying such an absolute or "objective" standard may seem controversial, and we will only consider the philosophical questions cautiously. Still, we believe that they deserve to be also raised in this context, where speculations as to whether it really is *happiness* that is being studied and debated are rife, anyhow.

II. Western and Chinese Happiness: Concepts and Approaches

1. Empirical wellbeing research and Western notions of happiness

[1] We use the term "tiger economy" here to denote all countries which have enjoyed a significant improvement in material living conditions, restricting it neither to Asian countries nor to countries recognized as having been commercially successful.

Empirical happiness and wellbeing research have focused mostly on *subjective* wellbeing in one form or another. The most widely used approach and the one that has shaped most wellbeing economics (like the work of Easterlin), is the life satisfaction ("LS-") approach (see e.g., Pavot & Diener 2008). People are asked to complete a questionnaire with a small number of questions about the extent to which they are satisfied with their life as a whole, rating it on a numerical (e.g.) 7- or 10-point scale. Suspicions that such overall judgments may be subject to temporal and other biases, as well as theoretical ideas about the important thing being how good one actually *feels*, rather than how one *thinks* about one's life, have led to a parallel interest in the *affective* dimension of wellbeing (Kahnemann 1999; 2000). Tools for studying this, like the "day reconstruction method" (Kahnemann et al. 2004), have been developed, and "affective balance" has been added to life-satisfaction as a complementary construct, becoming part of hybrid notion of subjective wellbeing (SBW) (Diener et al. 2002) now widely used for studies of various causes and conditions for wellbeing.

Both approaches to wellbeing are often characterized as *hedonic*. This makes sense, inasmuch as they are both "subjective," albeit in a different sense (affective happiness does not depend on subjective *judgment* or evaluation, but on subjective "feel"). However, *hedonism* in the philosophical sense refers to the narrower view that wellbeing consists of a positive balance of pleasurable over unpleasurable experiences. Moreover, it is generally acknowledged that LS is a notion of distinctively *cognitive* wellbeing. Nevertheless, both approaches, and the general notion of *subjective* wellbeing ("SBW"), could be said to reflect a typically modern *Western* notion of happiness, akin to the one that has been championed by utilitarians and classical economists, for they conceive of happiness as being either about feeling good or about having one's preferences or expectations satisfied. They also conceive happiness as being quantifiable. Perhaps most importantly for the comparison with Chinese notions, they conceive of happiness as a result or "product" that can be achieved or brought about in all sorts of ways, where the "way" itself does not matter, and which is *de facto* contingent on a large variety of external circumstances.[2]

The "hedonic" (LS and/or affective happiness) conception has been contrasted with the so-called *eudaimonic* approach, which focuses on meaning and self-realization and defines wellbeing in terms of the degree to which a person is functioning well (Ryan & Deci 2001). This notion is also "Western" in the sense that it originates from ancient Greek philosophy, notably the ethics of Aristotle. As we will show, however, it resembles ancient Chinese notions of happiness in some respects. It seemingly differs from the typical *modern* Western conceptions in being less subjectivist, less individualist, less centered on feelings or preferences, and more concerned with the *conduct*, as opposed to the *products* or

[2] In principle, hedonic theories allow for the possibility that one might achieve happiness even in the absence of typical external causes (like wealth, achievements, societal status etc.). However, pleasurable experiences and positive affect are assumed to be, as a matter of fact, and in most individuals, contingent upon external stimuli; the same goes for life satisfaction.

gains of life. However, especially when considering how it has been operationalized and applied to empirical research, it still appears strongly centred on matters of individual psychology; and the emphasis on self-expression, self-development etc. (see, e.g., Delle Fave et al. 2011) might seem to reflect other aspects of a distinctively modern, Western conception of a successful life.

2. Happiness in traditional Chinese philosophy: Emphasis on virtuous character

It might be thought that ancient Chinese philosophy is largely irrelevant to the "happiness situation" in contemporary China. Yet it is widely acknowledged that Confucianism and Daoism have had a deep and enduring influence on Chinese Culture (Ivanhoe 2012) and that the old philosophical traditions have molded even the meaning of modern concepts (Lu 2012) and shaped the mentality of Chinese people (Hwang 1996). Hence by interpreting the principles of Confucius[3] (Kong Zi 孔子, 551–479 BC), and exploring his perspectives on happiness and the good life, we might also learn something about the conceptual and spiritual underpinnings of contemporary Chinese culture and how far it resembles and differs from Western forms of thinking.

For elucidation purposes, it is necessary to introduce Chinese philosophy in a broad sense as a means of paving the way to the fundamentals of Confucius' philosophy, which can be considered a spiritual foundation for Chinese civilization. There are three main streams of thought in the history of Chinese philosophy: Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Although none of them specifically define happiness in their writings, the term *le* (樂) seems to be more or less synonymous with "happiness". Daoism and Buddhism, in contrast to Confucianism, appear more "other-worldly", representing schools of thought that "wander beyond the bounds of society" (Fung 1966:7). In addition, these two schools teach that life is a source of pain and are motivated by an attempt to mitigate or eliminate suffering. They differ vastly, however, in their approach to how to avoid misery. The ultimate goal of Daoism as a philosophy is to follow nature. It emphasizes a sort of harmonious coexistence of mankind with the whole of nature, which is what makes up the universe – it is called "The Great Oneness[4] (大一)" by the ancient Chinese philosopher, Hui Shi(惠施) (Fung 1966:2). Given that everything is encompassed by the universe, there is no differentiation between what is pain and what is happiness. The supreme *le* (樂), according to Daoism, is a state of spiritual balance – neither cheerful feelings nor sadness but assimilating individual beings into nature in general.

By contrast, the philosophy of *le* (樂) (Buddhists refer to it as "sukkah") in Buddhism lays particular emphasis on transcending humanity – obliterating all that makes beings susceptible to pains, be they positive or negative, and acquiring a psychological state of tranquillity, "emptiness(空)," or "nothingness" (Alitto 2009). This could be seen as an equivalent of Haybrons' notion of attunement

[4] " The largest unit has nothing outside it. This is called the Great Oneness. The smallest unit has nothing within it. This is called the Small Oneness."-Zhuang Zi Tian Xia（《庄子天下》 "至大无外，谓之大一，至小无内，谓之小一。"）

(Haybron 2008; 2013) and also appears similar to ancient Greek notions of happiness as *ataraxia* (equanimity) championed by, inter alia, Epicurus, the Skeptics, and the Stoics. According to the Buddhist doctrines, the status of supreme *le* (樂) could be achieved by leaving the practical world, turning to mountains or monasteries and the like, and living a contemplative and meditative life.

In contrast to Daoism and Buddhism, Confucius maintained that humans belong in a practical world; they ought to care about personal affairs in the "this-worldly" (Fung 1966:7). Hence a central tenet of Confucianism is "roaming within the bounds of society" (Fung 1966:22). In the *Lun Yu* (論語)[5] (also known as the *Analects*; a book reporting Confucius' discourse which was compiled by his disciples), Zilu asks about how to serve the spirits and the gods, and Confucius answers: "Not yet being able to serve other people, how would you be able to serve the spirits?" Zilu asks again: "May I ask about death?" Confucius replies: "Not yet understanding life, how could you understand death (*Lun Yu* 11.12)"? Since we are predominantly human beings who are unable to leave the secular world, it is inevitable that most attention to the rules and principles governing worldly existence.

Unlike Aristotle, who asserted that the ultimate good is happiness (Aristotle 1999), Confucius never specifically claims that pursuing happiness is an ultimate goal. Yet, he also has an ideal state in mind, which is centered on happiness emerging from pursuing one's "way" (Dao 道). [6]

Confucius strongly linked a virtuous character, *ren* (仁), with *le* (樂), illustrating that only someone with the distinguishing characteristic *ren* (仁) can live in perpetual enjoyment (*le* 樂) and without anxiety. He stated that "Those persons without ren (仁) are neither able to endure hardship for long, nor to enjoy (le 樂) happy circumstances for any period of time. Those persons with ren (仁) are content in being the state of ren (仁); wise persons (zhi 知) flourish in it." and in another episode: "one with ren (仁) is not anxiety-ridden (*Lun Yu* 4.2; 9.29)". It appears that *le* (樂) in Confucius could be the result that spontaneously ensues from *ren* (仁). While it seems conceivable that happiness, as understood by Confucius, could be achieved in other ways, it makes sense to speak "the" path because of the very tight like between ren (仁) and happiness. According to Confucius, persons without ren (仁) are neither able to endure hardship for long nor to enjoy (le 樂) happy circumstances for any period of time. On the other hand, persons with ren (仁) are able to endure hardship for long and enjoy (le 樂) happy circumstances for any period of time.

With regard to ren (仁), it initially appears quite easy to attain. Confucius in

[5] The Confucian principles presented in this paper were chiefly based on the edition by Yang Bojun (楊伯峻). We have used the English translation by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (1998), with the exception of the interpretation of ren (仁) and le (樂).

[6] Confucius once said, "If at dawn you learn of and tread the way (dao 道), you can face death at dusk"(*Lun Yu* 4.8).

Lun Yu (論語) declared that "How could ren (仁) be at all remote? No sooner do I seek it than it has arrived (*Lun Yu* 7.30)". It seems as if ren (仁), it would appear right away; it sounds like a relatively easy and simple task. Yet this is too simplistic. Ren (仁) has both a shallow and more profound meaning. Confucius never casually evaluated his students as to whether they were in the state of ren (仁) or not, with the exception of his favorite disciple Yan Hui. He took particular pride in him, and in one episode stated, "With my disciple, Yan Hui, he could go for several months without departing from ren (仁) thoughts and feelings (xin 心); as for the others, only once in a long while, might ren (仁) thoughts and feelings make an appearance (*Lun Yu* 6.7)". Confucius did not even dare consider himself to be a person with ren (仁) *(Lun Yu* 7.34). In this sense, ren (仁) appears to be a relatively difficult state to achieve.

There is no consensus about the nature of *ren* (仁). Scholars have proposed different interpretations, describing it, for example, as "perfect virtue (仁德)" as in Fung Yu-lan (1952;1966) or as a moral feeling that comes to those who follow the way (*Dao* 道) as in Philip Ivanhoe (2013), yet others, for instance, Liang Shu-ming (2019), interpret it as the original "heart-mind" (仁心). The former is associated with a sense of nurturing, perceiving it to be the sum of all human virtues; while the latter concerns a natured capability, in which Liang construed it as "an all-encompassing, empty and impartial mind" (Alitto 2009), an ability to judge all that is right - a manifestation of human nature; the original state of one's mind; the most normal state that a person has. It has also been claimed by Wong (2017) to be an ethical capability that makes ethical judgment possible and an original feeling of "transference' to nourish things as they come. However, Luo (2012) has contended that none of the above terms accurately capture the genuine Confucian notion of *ren* (仁), arguing that *ren* (仁) is a plural, integral, higher-order virtue with respect as its primary (but not sole) component. Nevertheless, this understanding of *ren* (仁) could perhaps still fit under the rubric of "perfect virtue."

Although Confucius did refer to *ren* (仁) with various meanings, be it a feeling or perfect virtue, he seemingly did not see them as having equal importance. It seems that the interpretation of *ren* (仁) as a natural capability outweighs that which sees it as a nurtured one. Some episodes in *Lun Yu* (論語) clearly support this, for example, "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility (xiao ti 孝悌) to have a taste for defying authority. Moreover, it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion. Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root has taken hold, the way (Dao 道) will grow therefrom. As for filial piety and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of ren (仁) *(Lun Yu* 1.2)". Apparently, ren (仁) could be understood as an innate feature or human beings, which could also take on a more negative form. Opposed to *ren* (仁) is a "numbness (insensitiveness 麻木不仁)," that gradually develops as we keep ourselves aloof from the state of *ren* (仁) when our heart-mind, little by little, becomes indifferent and callous, affected profoundly by our

social-cultural experiences and other things. It occurs in an unconscious way, with subtle influences exerted by the environment in which people are immersed. We can use Confucius' reaction to one of his disciples to further illuminate the state of "numbness (麻木不仁)." In response to Zai Yu's inquiry as to why it was necessary to mourn a dead parent (an issue of filial piety), Confucius asked, Would you then be comfortable eating fine rice and wearing colorful brocade?" "I would indeed," responded Zai Yu. "If you are comfortable, then do it," said Confucius, adding that "When exemplary persons (junzi 君子) are in mourning shed, it is because they can find no relish in fine-tasting food, no pleasure in the sound of music, and no comfort in their usual lodgings, that they do not abbreviate the mourning period to one year. Now, if you are comfortable with these things, then, by all means, enjoy them." When Zai Yu had left, "Zai Yu is really perverse (bu ren 不仁)! It is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosom. Then the ritual of a three-year mourning period for one's parents is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly, Zai Yu received these three years of loving care from his parents!" remarked Confucius (*Lun Yu* 17.21).

In this case, Zai Yu took for granted the way in which he treated his parents; his heart-mind had been profoundly impacted by external issues and was quite remote from the original state. In contrast, Confucius expresses a view of the "heart-mind" that is similar to Mencius'[7] "Ce Yin Zhi Xin (恻隐之心)[8]", implying that one has a natural ability to feel whether things are good or bad (this resembles later Western "sentimentalist" ethics, associated with the like of Hume (1978), Smith (2010) or Scheler (2000): for contemporary versions, see e.g., Nussbaum 2001; Prinz 2004; 2005; 2007). This was also interpreted by another of Confucius's followers, Wang Yangming[9], as *conscience* (良知) （Wang 1963:40). Our heart-mind will be ethically restless whenever we do something inappropriate, even if we have countless reasons to persuade ourselves that it is justified. Basically, this uneasy sensation could be perceived as a symptom of the presence of *ren* (仁), as a kind of "moral compass," and without such uneasiness in the heart, one is seen as being remote from *ren* (仁). Confucius's *ren* (仁) invariably maintains a tender heart of innocence that is genuinely sensitive to everything in the world – possessing the ability to empathize with others, have a positive attitude to, and right direction in life. Confucius also once said: "The authoritative person (ren 仁) alone has the wherewithal to properly discriminate the good person from the bad (*Lun Yu* 4.3)". Obviously, he regarded this aspect of ren (仁) as the original heart-mind (仁心) as more important than the other.

Understood like this, Confucius' notion of *ren* (仁) may seem to resemble still other notions from Western philosophy than those with which it has usually been compared. For it seems to refer primarily (if far from exclusively) to a kind of

[7] Mencius (Meng Zi 孟子 372–289 BC) was an important early Confucian thinker.

[8] Referring to Gao Zi Zhang Ju Shang of Mencius (《孟子》的《告子章句上》).

[9] Wang Yangming (王阳明 1472-1529), one of the Neo-Confucians representing the idealistic wing, developed Confucian doctrines to a new height.

fundamental attitude, a willingness to do the right thing, whatever that may be, which at the same time constitutes one's innermost self and self-understanding. This makes it less similar to the Aristotelian notion of virtuous character and more similar to notions of authentic existence associated with existential philosophy. While Aristotle did take the virtuous character to consist in fairly deep and naturally grounded dispositions, he saw it is as less a matter of personal attitude. By contrast, existential philosophers like Kierkegaard have seen a fundamental unity of self-understanding, self-approval, moral attitude, and practical vocation as the basis for a good life (Kierkegaard 1992; [Author 2018]). This parallel does not speak against our hypothesis that Chinese notions of happiness may differ significantly from Western ones, as the existential philosophers' view has had only a marginal influence, and hardly any influence on the notions of happiness employed in empirical research. It is important, however, because it helps to correct the stereotype of Chinese notions of the good life as being one-sidedly collectivist or conformist. In this way, Confucius's notion of virtuous character is actually less collectivist or socially conservative than Aristotelian virtue ethics.

On the other hand, Confucius' different replies to his disciples when responding to their inquiries about the conception of *ren* (仁) can probably be seen as evidence that "perfect virtue (仁德) – like *li* (禮), *jing* (敬), *gong* (恭) – could be leveraged as a virtue *tool* which supplements the *original heart-mind* (仁心), especially when people are gradually departing from the status of *ren* (仁). For example, to Yan Hui, Confucius' answer is "[t]hrough self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (li 禮) one becomes authoritative in one's conduct (Lun Yu 12.1)"; to Zhonggong, "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not want, and you will not incur personal or political ill will (*Lun Yu* 12.2)"; and to Fan Chi, "At home be deferential (gong 恭), in handling public affairs be respectful (jing 敬), and do your utmost in your relationships with others (zhong 忠) (*Lun Yu* 13.19)".

It can be seen that *ren* (仁) cannot simply be reduced to a good that everyone possesses, like *li* (禮), *jing* (敬) or *gong* (恭), but refers to the intuitive capability for distinguishing right from wrong, which can be the foundation of a more comprehensive, nurtured capability. This inborn capability brings together the making of a person by mutual enhancement in the areas of *li* (禮), *jing* (敬), *gong* (恭), and the like (Tan, 2003). In other words, the interpretation of *ren* (仁) as an innate capability is the root of that as a sum of all these virtues.

3. Virtuous character and the happiness-income paradox

The emphasis on *ren* (仁) as *the* path to happiness might, to some extent, explain why the Chinese have been reported to be unhappier than they have previously been. Seen from the perspective of Confucianism, it would seem that they have generally moved away from the state of *ren* (仁). This could either be a straightforward cause of unhappiness, granted that Confucius was right, or it could be a source of *reported* unhappiness, assuming that the idea of *ren* (仁) is deeply ingrained in Chinese culture and, even if is not explicitly endorsed, still condition the self-perceptions and self-evaluations of modern Chinese people.

While there is no denying that society has been economically progressing, with remarkable advances in modern technology, this process has hardly been conducive to qualities like innocence, conscience, or ritual propriety; and the social values that are essentially related to *ren* (仁) have been widely neglected. According to Alitto (2009), Confucius' *ren* (仁) is grounded on the "innate nature clinging to the idea of self," which fundamentally is the nature that makes humans human, but at the same time might be in conflict with that what makes humans "rational" in the process of modernization (where "rational" is understood as "tending to act self-interestedly"). It implied that the person who was inherently able to feel the enjoyment of life her entire life was happy. As long as she could survive, no matter what crises she encountered, she could strongly feel happiness simply by breathing and being present in the moment.

Since China implemented the open-to-the-world reform, Chinese social conventions have been encroached on by ideals from Western culture. The gradual loss of values that have been constitutive of the identity of Chinese people may have contributed to making them less sensitive and consequently less able to enjoy life. Moreover, even if it has not had quite as fundamental an impact, it may have created a tension between their different standards of self-evaluation, likewise leading to a reduction in their reported happiness). A survey on the *2004 Report on the Quality of Life of Chinese Residents* showed that nearly 80% of Chinese residents felt happy in life, and rural residents were happier than urban ones (Ru et., 2005). A similar phenomenon which is now termed the "happy peasant and frustrated achiever" problem, has been identified based on research in Peru and Russia (Graham, & Pettinato 2002). Confucius seemed to have addressed this when speaking of different aspects of *ren* (仁), saying "[b]eing firm, resolute, honest, and deliberate in speech is close to authoritative conduct (ren 仁) (*Lun Yu* 13.26)", but also "It is a rare thing for glib speech and an insinuating appearance to accompany authoritative conduct (ren 仁) (*Lun Yu* 1.3)", with the former referring to the status of *ren* (仁) in peasants and the latter in achievers. Though one should be wary not to romanticize difficult living conditions, it is not unlikely that peasants and rural residents have retained a life directed by something akin to "the original heart-mind", while achievers and urban residents may have been deeply influenced by the more and more complex contexts surrounding them, with outward social customs and replacing deeper or lasting notions of what life itself was supposed to be about.

4. Confucius' notion of Happiness – le (樂)

As suggested above, one explanation of the happiness-income paradox might be that pleasure is contingent upon external matters and that our initially sensitive and receptive heart-mind has been modified to become insensitive eventually. Standard happiness economy proceeds from the assumption that higher income diversifies one's opportunities and choices, and so maximizes preference satisfaction (Weimann et. al, 2004). However, apart from problems about hedonic adaption and insatiable preferences (with more wealth comes a wish for still more), there can also be a reason to doubt that mere accumulation, that is, mere quantitative maximization of pleasures or goods, can ever be transformed into

sufficient quality of life. In any case, Confucius was highly critical of accumulating, or merely striving for, material wealth: "To act with an eye to personal profit will incur a lot of resentment" (*Lun Yu* 4.12). This is not just a point about the negative instrumental side effects of gaining personal profit. Confucius seems primarily concerned with the effects that striving for material wealth will have on one's character. According to his line of thought, one's mind will be gradually affected by this focus on quantifiable goods; the innate heart-mind becomes, bit by bit, merged with these values, and in the end, loose themselves without noticing or necessarily feeling any pain in the process. This may be one of the sources of the apparent unhappiness documented by recent empirical studies.

Confucius maintained the importance of happiness *stability*, be it in an affluent or an impoverished situation. For example, Confucius once remarked: "I am happy (le) with eating coarse rice, drinking only water, and lying down with my bended arm for a pillow. To me, those riches and honours are floating clouds if they are acquired by unrighteous means (*Lun Yu*, 7.15)". Also, in response to one of his disciples, Zigong's, inquiry about whether it is virtuous to be in the state of being "poor but not being adulating, rich but not being arrogant," Confucius answered: "That's fine, still not as good as the poor are happy (le) and the rich are courteous (li 礼) (*Lun Yu*, 1.15)". In addition, he highly praised the way of happiness that Yan Hui, his favorite disciple, enacted: "Incomparable indeed was Hui. A handful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink, and living in a mean street: these, others would have found unbearably depressing, but for Hui's happiness (le), they made no difference at all. Incomparable indeed was Hui (Lun Yu, 6.9)".

As can be seen, Confucius' level of happiness and that of Yan Hui are described as being not prone to fluctuations, no matter how grave the external situation may have been. Superficially, Confucius led a life that closely resembles that of an ancient Stoic. Like the Stoics, he did not resist a wealthy life categorically, rather insisted that the basic needs of human life should be satisfied in accordance with ethics (Luo 2019 claims that Confucius' happiness consists mainly in ethical pleasure, that is, in the satisfaction of ethical desire). However, he took happiness to be dependent upon the nature of human beings through which it was obtained and cared for a positive emotional state, whereas the Stoics are thought to have strived for indifference to, and extinction of, the emotions (though this interpretation has been contested; the Stoics may have been closer to Confucius' view in merely advocating emotional moderation and stability (see Baltzly 2019).

As such, Confucius' happiness may not have been derived from the satisfaction of external matter, but from the affirmation of mind and ethics – with "an all-encompassing, empty and impartial mind" in the process of meeting the innate desires (Alitto, 2009). Generally speaking, Confucius' happiness (*le*) may be composed of three dimensions: At the very bottom level lies happiness (*le*) with *ren* (仁), which is a sort of psychological affirmation (*xin an* 心 安) – being at rest in any situation, basing happiness upon the original heart-mind by following what the inborn nature desires. In the middle lies happiness that comes

from being immersed in activities, where a person is motivated by her persistence in craving for knowledge; and in the highest level is a sort of "ethical spontaneity", where the person freely follows her way (Dao 道), without moral or emotional perturbance.

Concerning the first dimension, *le* () could be thought of as an accompaniment of *ren* (仁), a psychological disposition corresponding to innate desire. As mentioned above, *ren* (仁) is an appropriate balance between one's mental self and innate desire, so when individuals have achieved this state, *le* () will naturally follow. At this level, *le* () is a state of awareness that is crucial for the survival of a living being; it is optimistic mindfulness that emerges from inborn desires as a result of feeling the pleasures of surviving and coping with life. It is not influenced by externals but is a matter of pleasure, supervening "innate desire clinging to the idea of self." According to an episode in *Lun Yu* (論語), Confucius remained mentally unperturbed, even though he was suffering from a severe predicament (during the tough period in Chen Cai 陳蔡), where food sources were lacking, but he was mindful of the fact that biological life continued and there was nothing else that was more important than life. In daily activities, he enjoyed the pleasures derived from the satisfaction of basic desires, which, as above mentioned, were different from leading an ascetic life – as the former could be seen as a natural process, whereas the latter was a matter of artificially self-restricting activities. Confucius was capable of feeling pleasure anytime, anywhere, as did Yan Hui.

This level of *le* () might be compared to a child's happiness. Also, the happiness of the happy peasants and rural residents mentioned above seems to exemplify it. Whenever negative emotions emerge, such as sadness or anger, they as dismissed as "easy come easy go." In *Lun Yu* (論語) it is reported that "On a day when Confucius had wailed in grief, he would not sing (*Lun Yu* 7.10)". However, the next day, he would immediately return to a normal state without even being slightly emotionally disturbed by other things. In fact, le () may not be conceived as a conscious state but rather as a capability. It seems that Confucius had successfully transformed "feeling pleasure" into the function of "being pleasant." This capability would remain unchanged, whatever the vicissitudes of his past life, be it affluent or impoverished. This is a further way in which Confucius' notion of happiness resembles Haybron's contemporary "emotional state" theory of happiness (2008), which likewise take happiness to a propensity rather than an occurrent mental state, and emphasizes emotional stability (for partial criticism, see Author 2016)

The second dimension is happiness with engagement in learning, a psychological experience of self-growth and discovery, representing a level of *le* () arising from the perpetual craving for knowledge by combining one's ability to "be pleasant" ability with taking on a challenging task. Confucius reportedly said, "I was not born learned. I simply love ancient things and diligently seek knowledge from them (*Lun Yu*, 7.20)". "To quietly persevere in storing up what is learned, to continue studying without respite, to instruct others without growing weary – is this not me?" (*Lun Yu*, 7.2). "How would I dare to consider myself a

sage (sheng 圣) or an authoritative person (ren 仁)? What can be said about me is simply that I continue my studies without respite and instruct others without growing weary (*Lun Yu* 7.34)". "It is better to love knowledge than just to know about it; it is even better to take pleasure out of knowledge than just to love it (*Lun Yu*, 6. 20)". Clearly, the implication is that the pleasure that comes from knowledge is superior. Consider also the passage: "The Duke of She asked Zilu about Confucius, but Zilu did not reply. Confucius said, "Why didn't you just say to him: As a person, Confucius is driven by such eagerness to teach and learn that he forgets to eat, he enjoys (le) himself so much that he forgets to worry, and does not even realize that old age is on its way?" (*Lun Yu* 7.19)". This suggests that when a person is fully engaged in an activity, she does sense the passing of time and has achieved a state of mind comparable to what has in modern psychology been termed *flow*, characterized by intrinsic motivation and self-forgetfulness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

The first two dimensions of happiness put significant emphasis on following the original heart-mind. However, humans reside in different societies with different conventions. Hence Confucius had to add further aspects to his description of the way (Dao 道) in order for moral desire to be compatible with the inborn heart-mind (inborn desire) (Luo 2019). In *Lun Yu* (論語), Confucius states how he wants to be able to *freely follow the dictates of his own heart-and-mind, without overstepping the boundaries of what is right* (*Lun Yu*, II,4)". Apparently, this is a state of ethical spontaneity and harmony, in which his happiness arises from enjoying making perpetual progress toward possessing *ren* (仁) and assimilating conventional morality to one's personal principles. This level of happiness is not an emotional cheerfulness but rather a sort of permanently acquired capability of self-cultivation. This shows similarities with the "capability approach" of Amartya Sen, which is likewise presented as an alternative to "hedonic" notions of wellbeing (Sen, 1992). As the third level of happiness is also about maintaining a harmonious relationship, Confucius' view closely matches what is seen as a distinct feature of Chinese culture (Lu & Gilmour 2004), among all of the members, including the old and young and that they get to live a life without worry.

In sum, it can be said that Confucius saw happiness as dependent on human nature and on "walking the path of happiness"; he did not aim to "end the game of life," but rather tried to enhance the possibilities for its continuation and follow his way (Dao 道) (Carse, 1986). However, the challenge is how maintaining the balance he required, especially in contemporary societies dominated by the concern for material wealth.

Conclusion

The Confucian notion of happiness differs markedly from the Western "hedonic" notions of wellbeing used in empirical research. It emphasizes long-term stability, harmony between a person's inborn proclivities and, being immersed in activities, maintaining a fundamental moral attitude. All of these aspects have been emphasized by certain Western notions as well, but not in the specific

combination, and mainly by strands of Western thinking about happiness that have remained alternative or marginal.

As we noted in the beginning, the standard explanations of the happiness-income paradox may be at least partially right. Indeed, there may be rather straightforward explanations. That the Chinese are less satisfied with their material success may reflect the fact that average income has not reached its satiation point. Wang (2013) suggests that Chinese are not affluent enough. This is plausible, considering that the recent societal changes have made income more salient and important for success. However, it is also plausible that some Chinese are less satisfied with the "way" they have achieved their wealth, especially in the absence of appropriateness (yi 義). In fact, both factors may be at work at the same time: the wealth is perceived as insufficient, and the way it has been obtained as unsatisfactory or inappropriate (consider again Confucius:) "*Wealth and position gained through inappropriate (buyi* 不義*) means – these are to me like floating clouds" (Lun Yu* 7.16).

The happiness-income paradox may reflect a loss of fundamental orientation or a growing dependency on highly contingent factors. That reported life-satisfaction has risen somewhat again during the last decade is not evidence against this. It can be a sign of a kind of more superficial "hedonic adaptation", that is, the adoption of standards of self-assessment more in tune with "hedonic" measures and less tied to the more traditional notions. The numbness (麻木不仁) that Confucius thought would result from abandoning virtuous habits may also be such an adaptation effect, which prevents contemporary Chinese people both from enjoying the simple pleasures *and* from experiencing this as a pain.

China has been, and is still, viewed as a collectivistic culture. However, this also seems to be changing. Cai, Kwan, and Sedikides (2012) have recently noted an increasing preoccupation with self, an indicator of individualism, in young Chinese adults as a result of the one-child only policy, increasing urbanization, and higher socioeconomic status. This might explain the negative findings (the "paradox"), which has probably led to widespread self-doubt, anxiety, and restlessness. However, it might also explain the recent, (allegedly) somewhat more positive findings, as it indicates a gradual abandonment of the Confucian ideal and an adaptation of new standards of successful living. Whether the findings should be seen as being really positive depends, again, on the extent to which one adopts a Western, "hedonic" notion of happiness. On the traditional Confucian notion, they should probably be seen more as a symptom of people have strayed from the path of true happiness.

Our reflections should be seen as a prelude to new kinds of empirical research, which are strongly needed in order to obtain real knowledge of the "happiness situation" in China. It may be of some help to supplement the use of "hedonic" measures, like life-satisfaction or affective happiness, with "eudaimonic" measures that appear closer to traditional Chinese notions of happiness. But even these may still be so foreign to the Chinese notions, such as being more individualist and more centered on original or outstanding accomplishment, that

they have to be further modified or supplemented with still others.[10] Qualitative studies that are not committed to special notions in advance may be what is most needed to obtain a deeper knowledge of the interplay between culturally-induced notions, self-understanding, standards of self-assessment and actual events, and experiences in the life of contemporary Chinese.

Finally, one fundamental difference between the Chinese and the Western approaches to happiness needs to be emphasized. The widely reported "unhappiness phenomenon" was never much of an issue in Chinese society. The very preoccupation with maintaining and controlling happiness, with gaining experiences and achievements, seems to be distinctive of the Western rather than the Chinese approaches. Hence in spite of the apparent evidence for a happiness-income paradox, it might be argued that the happiness situation has remained fundamentally the same. The Chinese, it could be said, is still broadly conforming to Confucius' idea of being immersed in activities and "walking the path of happiness" without caring much about how far this meets certain standards of achievement – being driven by such eagerness to teach and learn that he forgets to eat, he enjoys (le) himself so much that he forgets to worry, and does not even realize that old age is on its way" *(Lun Yu 7.19).* They may be unhappy according to Western notions but not particularly unhappy *about* this.

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[10] A recent study (Margolis et al. 2020) shows that different wellbeing measures are far from perfectly correlated and that empirical findings based on one particular type of measure may not generalize to all types of wellbeing.

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