Introduction

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Since the start of the new century a great deal of popular attention and new scholarship have focused on the subject of well-being. National policy based on happiness research has emerged in China, Bhutan, France, and the United Kingdom. Taken together, statistical reports on the effects of wealth, inequality, gender, age, education, migration status, and the like on levels of reported happiness have produced no clear results, however; many surveys ("How happy are you, on a scale of 1 to 10?") have produced diverse, conflicting results about which countries or cities are happiest. One reason for this uncertainty is that the English term *happiness*, around which many of the surveys have been designed, is inadequate for encompassing how people around the world feel about a good life. To improve our results we need to use other research methodology to get a sense of how self-reporters understand their own well-being in the first place.

In the United States, for instance, happiness has historically been conceptualized not only as the experiencing of pleasant emotions but as the target of a *pursuit* (per the 1776 Declaration of Independence), a state of being that is the result of an individual's efforts. But around the time of American independence, Immanuel Kant was speaking of making ourselves *worthy* of happiness, regarding happiness as a gift we receive rather than a goal we achieve.

An even more fundamental debate concerns the moral implications of one's definition of happiness. Thomas Aquinas argued in thirteenth-century Western Europe that while only imperfect happiness is possible on Earth, it can be found through the exercise of virtue and the contemplation of truth. Much

earlier than Aquinas are the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* and the Chinese notion of *fu*; although not identical, both encompass health, wealth, friends, and family—but they also rely on virtue and honor.[1] Clearly, among the many notions of well-being as happiness, virtue is a commonly shared element. Few definitions of happiness are morally neutral. However, opinions about the content of this virtue (goodness) may differ.

Though people have deliberated about the components of happiness and good lives for a long time, the current field of happiness studies in social science research has been mostly the domain of psychology and economics, and it has operated in a culturally specific frame of reference. Hedonic psychology focuses on increasing measures of pleasure and decreasing amounts of pain.[2] Positive psychology attempts an appraisal of whether people actually live good lives, and the field labors to refine an objective list of good-for-you items and activities.[3]

Research into subjective well-being compares self-assessments across countries, age, gender, and a host of other factors. As previously mentioned, this research is used to produce the happiness indexes and cross-national rankings that are so popular today. These studies attempt to post global comparisons by asking respondents to assess their own happiness, life satisfaction, or location on a ten-rung ladder of life. In fact, a large proportion of the data used in the *World Happiness Report* relies upon this Cantril Ladder question: "Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top.[4] Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally stand at this time?" The question offers a very specific vision of what a life looks like, and its central analogy—climbing up a ladder—does not necessarily make sense to everyone.

The content of virtue and the understanding of its place within a "good life" would fit into the cognitive-evaluative approach to happiness studies. This body of research focuses on how people assess their lives using socially constructed standards and concepts. Such an approach in sociology and anthropology relies on interviews and fieldwork to shed light on how ordinary people in the United States and elsewhere define their "pursuit of happiness."[5] In cross-cultural psychology, the approach uses experimental methods to examine cultural differences, including what emotions people desire to have (ideal affect).[6]

Of these four approaches, the cognitive-evaluative approach has received the least attention by far in both the academic and public spheres. Yet this is the only one of the four that hopes to get at the social construction of happiness. This is important, because this construction is really the foundation for any rigorous investigation of the topic. How a person assesses her level of fulfillment certainly affects her numerical rating on a survey. If in one place people assess their lives by how agreeable their relationships with their parents are (which we find in China), while in another people are responding to a happiness survey question that asks about a feeling of coziness (such as the Danish *hygge*), we know that we can take the comparison of the two sets of results only so far. While the subjective appraisal of one's own life satisfaction is worthy of attention, we also need details about what exactly is satisfying to people, if we hope to truly understand (and so compare) the survey numbers.

As the philosopher Charles Taylor has shown, people employ different "social imaginaries," fundamental assumptions that shape their maps of their social world—their expectations about people and life in general.[7] Social imaginaries deeply rooted in diverse cultural traditions cannot merely be transposed onto one another, as the sociologist Richard Madsen has argued.[8] As the anthropologist Gordon Mathews has noted, surveys about happiness can be understood only by taking into consideration that people are assessing their lives in the context of a particular cultural moment, which in turn is informed by stable cultural patterns as well as faster-changing social moments.[9]

Therefore, it is necessary to pay close attention to (and take very seriously) the frames of reference that people use to view the world. Any meaningful measure of a society's (or city's or group's) happiness must also grapple, then, with cognitive-evaluative realities, including moral conundrums.

HAPPINESS IN CHINA

Of the many Chinese words that can mean happiness, *fu* (福) is one of the most ubiquitous. *Fu* can be prayed for, enjoyed, and created, but it is not easily translated. It connotes more than purely hedonistic satisfaction; it is directly tied to the value of a virtuous life. But traditionally it also concerns the elements of prosperity, high status, health, and longevity. Through the twentieth century, in literary sources as well as common usage, *fu* took on a new role, not as the sum of life's positive elements but rather as one element of a triumvirate: happiness-prosperity-health, or *fu-lu-shou*. Based on recent

conversations with colleagues in China, our current best translation of *fu* would be "blessed happiness" or "having blessed happiness," phrases that indicate that good fortune arises from luck (*yuanfen*) as well as personal striving; *fu* also retains a sacred quality. A wealthy thief would not be considered to have *fu*.

Fu is a property of individuals in relationship, especially family members. The written character itself incorporates symbols for the mouth, family, and farmland—illustrating happiness as a family working together so that everyone has ample food. Strictly speaking, individuals are not *fu*; families are. And they can pass their familial *fu* down to future generations. Individuals, though, can possess a personal *fu* if their families are *fu*. The gods and one's ancestors also play an important role in delivering *fu*. Thus it is a concept that encompasses a lot of different elements that in reality might be in conflict one another. There is probably no perfect *fu*, only better or worse mixtures of these elements.

In contrast with more individualistic notions, *fu* is something that one can determine for someone else. An unmarried female professor to whom Richard Madsen spoke, for example, said that the ideal of *fu* includes having sons who can carry on the family name. In this respect, she said, her mother—who still lives in their distant village—does not have *fu*, because she had only girls. Because the professor was not married, her marital status was another big non-*fu* factor for her mother. And her mother didn't understand her daughter's professional lifestyle (which is also non-*fu*). So her mother, the professor said, could not be *fu*. But her mother did want her to be happy, and the professor wanted her mother to be happy. There is, therefore, a difference between having *fu* and being happy.

Fu is as grounded in the ethical and religious sources of good fortune as in its material aspects. Therefore *fu* is not simply luck. Or morality. Or an undefined, general concept of "the good life." Or a fleeting emotional high. It has always been related to some defined and specific standards (such as having sons), even if the standards change over time. So at the core of what is translated into English as *happiness* is a complex and polyvalent idea. To return to the widely used Cantril Ladder question, the analogy does not successfully evoke the elements of *fu*. Ladder climbing is an individual activity; there is no room for a family on a ladder. The question itself implies that going up is better than going down, which connotes the desire to progress in one direction; it cannot encompass a cyclical or continuous view of life. Thus it is a mistake to assume that this image can reflect how people measure their well-being in China.

There are many other words for happiness in Chinese, and their constellation encompasses a long and wide-ranging tradition of thought. The word used today in most official discourse is *xingfu*. *Xing* means undeserved, and before the twentieth century *xing fu* (undeserved happiness) was used to describe an ignorant pursuit of *fu* through petty means—such as a pursuit of wealth rather than duty or virtue. The contrast to *xing fu* was *le* (joy), which transcends material conditions. In chapter 1, Lang Chen chronicles the history of this word and shows its changing relationship to the other words that have constituted the discourse about the good life.

As Chen argues, the set of cultural, cosmological, and political assumptions that once underlay this term had collapsed by the end of the nineteenth century. Filling the void, a new definition of *xingfu* arose, first used by the Japanese to translate the English *happiness* and subsequently transmitted to China. The term now embodies many, often contradictory, ideas, including utilitarianism as well as Kantianism and Marxism, but it also has maintained its resonances with earlier Chinese cultural traditions. It is thus a deeply ambiguous term, interpreted in many different ways. Chen's archeology of *xingfu* thus exposes many of the tension-filled layers of modern Chinese political ideology and popular culture.

In everyday language, *xingfu* encompasses things going well for someone—often envisioned in terms of family, wealth, and luck. *Xingfu* therefore has a strong component of good material circumstance while also referring to good mood and happy feelings. There is a general understanding that for things to go well, one must be fulfilling moral obligations to family and community; carrying out these duties is tied to good fortune.

The state has appropriated *xingfu* to legitimize its achievement of economic growth and stability. As the sociologist Anna Sun argues, the notion of happiness is something given to the people by the state. Citizens, then, are recipients of happiness made possible by the state, in the Confucian language of benevolent politics (*ren zheng*).[10] As the use of *xingfu* in official discourse became more frequent through the early 2000s and still was quite common in the 2010s, a woman in her early twenties told me that to ask whether someone is *xingfu* sounds almost sarcastic; the term has been overused to the point of sounding disingenuous. The state has also added language from positive psychology in a therapeutic mode of governance wherein people who have not been successful in this economy—laid-off workers who have remained unemployed—are asked to manage their own feelings and focus on empowering themselves to get out of poverty.[11]

The Chinese state has been actively monitoring assessments of happiness. *The China Daily*, a publication owned by the Communist Party, reported that in 2017 the *World Happiness Report* listed China as 79th out of 157 countries (awarding Norway the top spot), up from 83rd in the world the previous year.[12] There have been cross-national, national, and provincial surveys of happiness in China, and since 2007 Chinese institutes have conducted numerous surveys underwritten by the government and covering millions of people (mostly in provincial capitals).[13] Changes to happiness over time have been assessed to measure peoples' response to social factors and to government projects (Has the new overpass increased commuter happiness?) and policies (How do people feel about the air quality?).

A frequently cited set of studies by the economist Richard Easterlin and his colleagues used some of these cross-national and national data to show that, despite rapid economic growth, China's increases in its gross domestic product have not boosted self-reported happiness. Happiness steadily declined between 1990 and 2010 (although there has been a modest uptick since 2004). Easterlin, Wang, and Wang's explanations for the decline include macrolevel changes in unemployment, weakened social safety net provisions, and growing income inequality.[14]

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND DISLOCATION

We can disaggregate the elements of the traditional *fu*—prosperity, high status, health, and long life, all in the context of relationships—and look at the factors that make each element problematic in China's current social environment.

Take, for example, prosperity. Rapidly changing living and consumption standards make for ever-growing standards of prosperity. Some conclude that income is the major source of happiness for Chinese people, yet others extrapolate that rapid economic growth has not improved their quality of life. And popular media in China portray both sides. There is the much-discussed example of the twenty-two-year-old woman on a popular Chinese dating show who said, "I'd rather be crying in a BMW than laughing on the back of a bicycle." Her comment incited heated debate: While some expressed admiration for what they saw as her candor and called her lovely, others called her disgusting. (Still, that she became a celebrity and a talk-show guest for a time may be the most accurate reflection of public sympathies.)

On the other hand, one of the most popular prime-time television dramas in Chinese history, *Brother's Happiness*, depicts Brother Fu, who after finding life in modern Beijing superficial and fraught with drastic changes in moral standards, returns to a simple and happy life in a small town. The show seems to have tapped into a reaction against changes in ethics that have accompanied the rapid economic growth. One blogger wrote that Brother Fu "lives a happy life because he is not eager for quick success and instant benefits." Another blogger commented, "People in big cities are slaves to their desires."

What about high status? A diverse and changing society calls into question what constitutes high status: a government position? artistic or professional success? being considered a celebrity? What about high moral status? People in China emphasize the importance of being a good, honest person. But the prevalent use of bribes and gifts in China means that almost any upper-level success has to be achieved by at least partly dubious means. At one extreme, China's new entrepreneurs have a vulgar reputation; they are said to "laugh at poor people but not at prostitutes." They have also been involved in inhumane acts, such as deliberately adding toxins to food (more about this shortly), abusing human rights, illegally seizing land, and even killing accident victims—all in the name of making or saving money. On the other hand, Chinese private entrepreneurs have also served as models of morality, playing important roles in charity organizations and community organizations, which are often organized around family lineages. Some have established nongovernmental organizations to manage community or charity affairs themselves. (Those who have grown up in lineage arrangements and kinship networks are more likely to commit themselves to civil service for the public interest.) Any study of how people define happiness and a good life, then, must understand the role of virtue and vice in ideas about status.

Health and long life continue to be highly valued; this remains deep-seated as people grow up surrounded by symbols and iconography celebrating longevity. People are proud to have old people living in their neighborhoods. It is not unusual for someone to say, "Old age is a self-evident good."[15] The elderly are repositories of experience, and that is to be respected. It reflects well on a community (and the larger society) to have old people around because it means that the society is sufficiently wealthy that people live to an old age; it also means that the society is able to nurture such experience, that is, the society's culture is refined enough that people appreciate such experience.

What about the indispensable element of relationships, especially family relationships? In 2015 almost 73 percent of Chinese visited, tidied, and burned offerings at the graves of their ancestors during the official tomb-sweeping holiday (*qingming*).[16] This practice is considered virtuous, because it fulfills a person's duties to her ancestors. It also provides the assurance that ancestors are watching over her in this life. It is one way people ensure continuity from one generation to the next.

OUR APPROACH: FIELDWORK, INTERVIEWS, AND SURVEY

We take a somewhat different approach from most of the research completed to date on the subject of self-reported happiness. We are interested in whether people's assessment of their life is primarily a judgment of their social relationships. We also take special interest in the moral and ethical understandings that embed individuals in specific communities, and we attempt to describe respondents' underlying (if elusive and often conflicting) efforts to contribute to their own happiness, their family's well-being, and the good of society. This kind of approach requires extensive in-depth interviews and fieldwork.

This book focuses on the urban middle class in China, members of which have some capability in shaping and carrying out their notions of a good life. The way they talk about happiness does not necessarily represent China as a whole, and most of the empirical material in the book cannot be widely generalized. Our research does not include either the abject poor or the ultrarich and is therefore missing some very important accounts of life in China today.

Our team began with in-person group meetings (nine in three years) to discuss theories of happiness and to assess the published happiness and China studies. Each author carried out a specific fieldwork project, and that person's chapter contains information about the specific methodology used. The fieldwork was carried out in urban areas: Davis, Farrer, and Madsen in Shanghai (a cosmopolitan city whose residents' version of the good life is widely aspired to), and Hsu and Chen in a more spread-out geography, including cities in northern, central, and southern China. The studies encompass a range of generations, from unmarried young adults to the middle aged to the elderly.

Informed by findings in our ethnographic work, we wrote the Blessed Happiness Survey (BHS), some of which we report on here. Note that "blessed happiness" is a reference to *fu*. Being blessed has the connotation of having desirable things in life, not only through a person's own effort but also by

having them bestowed upon him. The BHS included four features that distinguish it from previous surveys: social contact questions, emphasis on behavior rather than opinion, the inclusion of three aspects of happiness (emotion, assessment of a good life, and meaning), and questions seeking details of participation in rituals remembering the deceased.[17] We commissioned Horizon Research to field the BHS nationally, and the firm conducted 2,561 face-to-face interviews from November 2015 through February 2016. Although this book focuses mostly on our fieldwork, we also report some basic results from the survey.

Our cognitive-evaluative analysis of happiness in China begins with the perspective that evaluating one's personal well-being is a substantially social act. People compare their own situation to what they understand to be the ideal in their community. These notions are developed by way of interactions and experiences that teach us what is good/desirable/right or bad/undesirable/ wrong. The differentiations are gut level, and they are formed early, preceding the categories we hold as adults. Consider a child reaching for a piece of fruit—or a piece of chalk—and making a motion to eat it. Although putting something interesting in your mouth as a toddler is a morally neutral act, an attentive adult indicates that it is desirable ("Apples are good for you!") or undesirable ("No! Chalk will make you sick."). In that moment, an action motivated by a biological urge (to eat or to explore the world) is transformed— by social interaction—into something imbued with social meaning and associated with specific concepts and feelings. The object of the urge is now either valuable or objectionable.[18]

Social life is made up of layers upon layers of these types of experiences with others, where definitions and features of what is good (and in which situations) are conveyed and used in processes of moral deliberation. An individual may accept or reject any of these definitions, but even rebellion is carried out in reference to demarcations that arise from social exchanges. Individuals are active in choosing among multiple definitions or in choosing to blend them.

Sociologists have emphasized the way that people act out, piece together, and use multiple narratives, stories, and symbols as they incorporate diverse, sometimes contrasting, notions of "a good life" into how they live.[19] In our study, we work to unravel a bit the tangle of reasoning that people in China rely on in determining what makes up a life well lived. By investigating how they define happiness, we examine the shared evaluative frameworks by which

they assess and organize their lives. We pay attention to how their lives match up to their expectations and what are the preoccupations central to their experiences. Talking about happy and unhappy families, good and bad places to eat, desirable and undesirable work situations, and priorities and secondary aims in significant moments like weddings led us to uncover common conceptual structures.

THE ROLE OF PLURALISM

Individuals in China face the fragmentation of values inherent in pluralism. Thirty years of socialism reached deeply into moral life, and now people talk about the moral vacuum that the era has left behind. No other country can tell this particular story. Even today, Chinese bloggers continue to post statements about Mao Zedong's writing, including *Class Struggle Theory*, saying it should be widely read because struggle makes people stronger and leads to advancement. Nevertheless, ordinary people no longer frequently speak like this in everyday life. We examine the points of convergence, as well as the contradictions, in the way ordinary people think and talk about the challenges of a new pluralism.

What follows is my own perspective on the moral strands extrapolated from the interview material, observations, and documents and described in the chapters that follow. These strands can be roughly grouped into three: the happy and prosperous family, the greater good, and individual fulfillment. They are in some ways like threads of symbolic material that people weave together as they construct their versions of happiness and the good life. Therefore, rather than leaning heavily on one or another category, individuals take up certain strands at certain points in time, even while feeling tension between two or all three of them. Sometimes they feel that one strand could lead to another and that, with some creative weaving, they might be able to have it all.

The Happy and Prosperous Family

A traditional definition of the good life in China has centered on family. Happiness includes being a good person, and the mark of a good person is taking responsibility for reciprocal relationships, especially repaying one's parents for all they have done. This includes caring for their health, spending time with them, and being obedient. The mark of growing to adulthood in China

is not independence and leaving home but rather is learning to ease the minds of parents and contributing to the overall happiness of the family. The happy family requires self-sacrifice for the sake of the collective, and the goals are shared prosperity and abundant offspring. Happy events have been understood to include "the birth of a (male) child, examination success, promotion, the milestones of old age, and a good death."[20]

Many generations living together under one roof (*sishi tongtang*) has historically been a measure of the good life, and although it might not be what everyone desires, intergenerational living is a reality for 70 percent of the population, according to our survey.[21] Reasons for this include housing shortages and high prices, as well as the need for grandparents to take up child care and household duties while both young parents go to work. Some people express that when an older person's sons (or, these days, sons and daughters) are attentive, that person can be happy, even while living far away from them. And parents of adults considered *in*attentive might find happiness elusive, no matter what good things have happened to them. Additionally, there can be tension in a modern intergenerational household, as adult children may still resist obedience in order to find their own way in the world. While it's not always the ideal of *sishi tongtang*, people are improvising solutions and getting by, and the values of filial piety and plentiful intergenerational contact are alive and well.

Young adults today labor to demonstrate their maturity by remaining close to parents (geographically and emotionally), even while balancing their other economic, political, and social responsibilities, as I argue in chapter 2. Ideal happiness comes as an offshoot of fulfilling their present or future roles as a benevolent parent, dutiful child, faithful spouse, and loyal sibling. The young adults depicted in this essay say this loudly and clearly. But they also speak of the difficulty of achieving the moral ideal of family happiness in society today. Divorce rates are rising. Intense competition for good jobs drives people away from home. Different life experiences cause estrangement among generations. The vicissitudes of a churning political economy make success or failure seem arbitrary, and there is much talk of how happiness is contingent upon fate. The Chinese pursuit of happiness today requires that one somehow balance responsibilities to the most involuntary of institutions, one's family, with the effort demanded by a job in a dynamic, globalized market economy. The contradictory requirements create dilemmas for both younger and older generations.

Despite the tensions, family remains central, as Deborah Davis shows in chapter 3. Her essay unpacks the different meanings of happiness expressed in contemporary middle-class weddings in Shanghai. Brides and grooms recounting their weddings there focused on their parents: the couples achieved happiness when their parents were satisfied with the celebration. Rituals emphasized not only the couple's exclusive loyalty to one another but also the bride's departure from her natal home and entry into that of her in-laws.

Financial success is an important part of the ideal of family prosperity. Davis finds in Shanghai that consumption is a vehicle for the performance of happiness. Weddings, as the quintessentially happy event, are a set of elaborate rituals that perform in this way. Brides and grooms are purchasing $10,000 Vera Wang dresses and using drones to deliver rings. Even though couples typically describe their weddings as unique, they almost all follow a common pattern with just a few individualized touches. All agree that they are part of a happy occasion, while different generations of friends, family, and the married couple put different meanings on their commonly performed happiness. Wedding gifts are very much about cementing ties between members of the older generation (friends and family of the bride's and groom's parents).

The Greater Good

A second moral strand people draw upon in their symbolic constructions of a good life is the greater good, consistent with traditions in Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist thought. It is a notion of virtue that may include material and social deprivation and is therefore not exactly encompassed by *xingfu* or *fu*. A well-known Confucian adage states that true joy (*le*) is derived from living in accord with the Way, even if a person has only coarse grains to eat and a stone for a pillow.[22] For Buddhist monks and nuns today, as in the past, the pursuit requires leaving the home (*chujia*) as they deeply enter the world to serve the larger good. In Daoist thought, things of the universe are one, and therefore we have a "primordial connection" with every aspect of the world; because we are "fundamentally one with all things," we should care for them as extensions of ourselves.[23] There is also the long Confucian tradition of regulating one's own behavior first, then that of one's family, to effect a society that is harmonious overall.

Partly related to the boom in the market is a bolstering of civic awareness and concern for the preservation of the humane. Thus some people with whom we spoke considered contributing to a beneficial Chinese society to be part of

their definition of a good life. People spoke of trepidation about the effects of unbridled economic growth—issues like clean water and safe food hold particular attention. In the 2008 Chinese milk scandal, twenty-two companies added a type of plastic to infant formula and milk products in an effort to fool nutrition testers, killing six babies and causing illness in 300,000 of them. Exercising individual ethics within the context of institutional structures is unsettling for people in China, who try to face their fears about the condition of society when making personal decisions as well as in their work. If there is a moral order in China today, what people are feeling reflects the obstacles they are running up against as they pursue what "ought to be."

There have been many responses to this fear of social and moral disorder, and some center on the universal burden/pleasure of eating. James Farrer's essay (chapter 4) explores the differences between happy and unhappy meals in today's Shanghai. The business banquet, for instance, often features expensive food (usually charged to a corporate or government expense account) and raucous drinking games, all designed to express deferential gratitude to the host and solidarity with his (women are usually not invited) associates. For most people, this is a prime example of an unhappy meal, a hypocritical expression of happiness in a hierarchical relationship endured for utilitarian purposes. Alongside the fear of polluted food is the influx of outsiders, symbolized by "gutter oil"—oil that is produced by recycling leftover dishes and leftover cooking oil—which is less of a health concern and more a revulsion at untrustworthy strangers' preparing the food. Farrer describes restaurateurs who are responding to concerns by creating small culinary utopias, allowing customers to take refuge and escape the threats of the larger society.

There are also those who devote their careers to combating the bad aspects of society and helping to create a good one. In chapter 5, Madsen explores happiness from the point of view of the public world of work and government, which are seen to impinge upon the family and undermine some ideals of family happiness. Madsen's work investigates a profession that mediates the pressures of markets and the demands of government on the one hand and the needs of families on the other—social work in Shanghai. The social workers labor on behalf of the greater society, specifically by healing family relationships, so in a certain way they take up both moral strands.

In chapter 6, Chih-Jou Jay Chen focuses on reform-minded activists in China who derive happiness from their determination to make Chinese society better. They based their reform efforts on traditional Chinese values and

communist ideology, and define their happiness as the pursuit of justice and equality. They are bolstered by the moral ideal that intellectuals should serve the disadvantaged. However, this life isn't easy. The political beliefs and modes of action of activists, as well as personal career advancement, family values, and economic needs, are mostly incompatible with each other, resulting in a high degree of tension among them. Additionally, the activists and lawyers endanger their own security and freedom—risking imprisonment—when they organize on behalf of laborers and factory workers. They are further conflicted about risking the safety of their families. By studying these institutions in tension, we can understand an important aspect of happiness in private and public life in contemporary China.

Individual Fulfillment

Individual fulfillment is present in the way people talk about what they desire and what they see as a good life. Our fieldwork finds references among respondents to self-development, emotional expression, and the importance of mobility and career options.[24] Young adults in China desire to gain material and social resources, fulfill their dreams, and prove their self-worth. But their definitions of success include things other than making money. Young adults have soured on having to entertain clients, for example, even if they are still willing to endure it for career advancement.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese party-state has called upon its citizens to energetically engage with market-oriented economic reforms, as part of a nationalist agenda to promote progress. The initial collectivist call soon began to allow for more individualized efforts, as official slogans like "To get rich is glorious!" legitimated the accumulation of personal wealth. By the late 1990s, as the anthropologist Yunxiang Yan argues, a new cultural hero had emerged: the successful, fashionable, rich, and confident individual (usually a man) who enjoys a worldly life. Some young adults interviewed aspire to this archetype (see chapter 2), who is admired for his dedication to his work and his striving for excellence—as well as for his conspicuous consumption, because enjoying the worldly life includes not only producing but also consuming. People desire the latest products, experiences, and imports, but there is a concern among Chinese that business is penetrating too far into private life, and prevailing materialism is leaving some feeling empty and spent.[25]

Individual fulfillment may come from having fun with friends. While the Chinese describe the family meal as an expression of the bedrock centrality

of family in the moral universe, so-called ordinary people in China also describe it as neither unhappy nor especially happy (chapter 4). The happiest meals are with friends, perhaps an expression of a new importance given to the egalitarian conviviality of people who get together simply because they want to. Happy friendship meals are a haven from a corrupt society, while family meals are partially insulated but never completely isolated from that society. Additionally, individuals regard purchasing choices about food as part of self-expression and -definition, and there is a prevailing culinary nostalgia as people in metropolitan areas choose foods that evoke their hometowns or home provinces. And individuals choose particular types of what they term "clean and healthy" food as a way to protect themselves from the threat of social disorder, perceived as an effect of increased migration.

Individual fulfillment can also be derived from good deeds. Social workers see themselves as engaged in conduct that demonstrates a virtuous life (chapter 5). They are trained to see each client as an individual and an equal, but this individualistic, egalitarian approach comes into conflict with the demands of the state. The tension between the values of their government and of their profession makes social workers unhappy, even as they are pleased with the small successes they achieve in helping their clients. A common aspiration of individuals caught within these tensions is for a happiness that springs from integrity. Similarly, activists pursue ideals of public service in a way that is about fulfilling deeply held values despite the sacrifices this entails for themselves and their families (chapter 6). Today in China, individual fulfillment is a factor when people conceptualize or construct happiness in various areas of everyday life, including schooling, career, timing of marriage and parenting, and leisure time with friends.

Figure 1 depicts the three major moral strands that people in China combine into constructions of happiness and a good life: family prosperity, the greater good, and individual fulfillment. They are like three strands in a length of rope.

To extend the metaphor a bit further, people may be braiding these strands together and holding on to their rope as they weather the anxiety about larger social forces they cannot control. As they go about their daily lives, they may exert more energy in the maintenance of one strand or another in response to perceived threats. A 2015 study by the anthropologist Teresa Kuan found that parents in China devote their time and resources to education strategies for their children, paradoxically spending their effort and their money in an