

Comparative Study of Happiness with Modern Western Culture and the Three Chinese Traditions

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Abstract:

Given the current studies of happiness or subject well-being are mainly based on western culture, this paper aims to 1) provide a comprehensive understanding of genuine happiness and give readers a guidance on how to achieve a happy life from broader culture perspectives; 2) provide a reference for future research. Towards these ends, this research compares and contrasts the different notions of happiness between modern western cultures and the three great Chinese traditions (namely, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism).

Firstly, two major types of western views on the notion of happiness are identified and analysed. Secondly, through both study of ancient classic books and other scholars' findings, the concepts of happiness as well as the ways to a good life under the three Chinese traditions are equally examined. Lastly, three domains of differences about happiness between the modern western and Chinese traditional cultures are identified and discussed. According to the modern western cultures, the notion of happiness is mainly regarded as the pursuit of pleasure which is based on the hedonistic view and achieved by dominating and mastering others with self-centred principle, whereas from the Chinese traditions' side, living a good life or achieving happiness means to realize self-transcendence and to lift up oneself to a higher level of wisdom and compassion enjoying harmony relationships with all beings.

Keywords: Happiness, Subjective Well-being, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Eudaimonism, Hedonism

1. Introduction

What is happiness? In modern societies, some people may regard happiness as the maximization of pleasure. However, this seems like a recipe for exhaustion rather than a true happiness. Although the meaning of happiness may be universal and seems easy to be understood, it remains complex and culture-bond. Knowing meanings and concepts are moulded by culture¹, the impact of culture on the notion of happiness is fundamental for not only defining the specific meaning but also providing guidance for the particular way to achieve happiness.

However, most of the researches for happiness or subjective well-being tend to be taken from the perspectives of modern western culture, "even for the cross-cultural studies, they usually involve applying measures derived from

¹ Jerome, Bruner *Acts of meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p12

western cultural and comparing results from different cultures within a priori western theoretical frameworks.”² Rather than providing a comprehensive study of happiness including equal consideration of all the major western and eastern cultures, this paper will discuss and compare the notion of happiness from not only modern western cultures but also Chinese traditional perspectives with equal weight.

Concerning Chinese traditional cultures, there is no doubt that the three schools of great philosophy, namely Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have fundamentally moulded not only the Chinese culture but also the mentality of Chinese people for thousands of years. As each of these three traditions has distinct ideas on human happiness, in order to understand the notion of happiness of orthodox Chinese culture, we need to explore the different views on human happiness from the each of the three Chinese traditions respectively.

The present review is an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of genuine happiness by examining the fundamental differences of the views on happiness between western and Chinese traditional cultures in order to give readers a guidance on how to achieve a happy life. Meanwhile, this paper tries to partially tackle the drawbacks of current studies of happiness which are western culture dominated, and provide a reference for future research. To this end, we will first explore the western notions of happiness. Secondly, views of Chinese traditions, which are respectively Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, which will be investigated mainly through the study of the major early classics. Third, we will present the major differences between western and Chinese traditional ideas of happiness.

2. Happiness in the Modern Western Culture

Concerning the modern western meaning of well-being or happiness, there are two widely accepted approaches which are respectively hedonic and eudaimonic. “Eudaimonia” is the ancient Greek word which presents happiness and positive function. On the other side, “Hedonism” just became popular in western culture more recently.³ These two types of definition of happiness have distinctive features. The main difference between these two conceptualizations is that the hedonic happiness is based on positive feelings and pleasure, while the eudaimonic happiness emphasisees on positive functioning, virtue and skill.⁴

² Lu, Luo “In Pursuit of Happiness: The Cultural Psychological Study of SWB” in *Chinese Journal of Psychology* 2005, Vol. 47, No. 2, 99-112, p100

³ John, Christopher “Situating psychological well-being: Exploring the cultural roots of its theory and research” In *Journal of Counseling & Development*, (1999) 77(2), 141–152. p.142

⁴ Corey L. M. Keyes, et al “Feeling good and functioning well: Distinctive concepts in ancient philosophy and contemporary science” In *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, (2009) 4(3), 197–201. p198

The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy defines “hedonism” as “an ethical position which claims that pleasure or happiness is the highest or most intrinsic good in life, and that people should pursue as much pleasure and as little pain as possible”.⁵ This philosophical concept of happiness is advocated by Aristippus, an ancient Greek philosopher. Aristippus taught that to experience the greatest amount of pleasure is the goal of life, and the totality of one’s hedonic experience is that happiness. This early hedonism has many followers. DeSade argued that the ultimate goal of life is the satisfaction of sensation and pleasure. Hobbes believed that happiness is derived from the successful achieving of our human appetites. Utilitarian’s such as Bentham stated that the ideal society is built on the individuals’ temptation of maximizing their pleasure and self-interest. Thus, as a view of happiness, Hedonism has been interpreted in many forms ranging from a relatively narrow emphasise on physical pleasures to a wider scope of appetites and self-interests. Similar to the philosophical position, in the domain of psychology, hedonism presents that “human actions are determined by the desire to secure pleasure and to avoid pain”.⁶

On the other hand, the eudaimonic tradition holds that rather than by pursuing pleasure derived from the satisfaction of physical desire, a person can only live a good life by realizing his potential.⁷ Aristotle, one of the most influential scholars in the western philosophy, advocated this notion and strongly denied hedonism by saying:

The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals.⁸

Eudaimonism, thus, is a way of life which is in accordance with virtue rather than pursuing pleasure. Drawing from Aristotle, Ryff & Singer describe the eudaimonic happiness not simply as the pursuing pleasure, but as “the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one’s true potential”⁹

According to Ryan and Deci, with the eudaimonic approach there are six distinct aspects of human actualization which are respectively “autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness”.¹⁰ These values have been emphasized with the notion of eudemonism and most of them echo the spirits of individualism in the western world.

⁵ Nicolas, Bunnin & Jiyuan, Yu *The Blackwell dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p298-99

⁶ Ibid., p299

⁷ Raymond J., Devettere, *Introduction to virtue ethics: Insights of the ancient Greeks* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p25

⁸ Aristotle *Nicomachean ethics* (T. Irwin, Trans.). (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1985), p7

⁹ Carol D., Ryff “Psychological well-being in adult life” In *Psychol. Sci.* (1995) 4:99–104, p100

¹⁰ Ryan, Richard, and Edward Deci. "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-being." In *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 141-66. p146

As many contemporary western scholars argue that the dominant approach of viewing happiness is basically hedonistic,¹¹ contemporary western culture mainly defines the notion of happiness based on a hedonic perspective. Besides, concerning the subordinate eudaimonic view, the modern western concepts of happiness also focus on individualistic qualities such as autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness.

The meanings of modern western concepts of happiness are moulded by the culture. And the modern western culture is obsessed with achieving individual happiness. In the modern western world, institutions, the media and Social customs, are all committed to cultivating and emphasizing free will and personal reason.¹² In particular, American culture promotes relentless seeking of personal interests and advocates generously rewards of individual success.

Embraced in such a historical and cultural environment, a distinct feature of happiness in modern western culture is the personal accountability which articulates that happiness is the individual natural right belonging to everyone. In addition, everyone should be responsible for his own happiness. Happiness is seen as a personal achievement and related to many positive personal associations, such as life satisfaction, self-esteem and health.¹³

Another distinctive feature of the perception of happiness in the modern western culture is explicit pursuit which fundamentally claims that happiness is the meaning of life, therefore, everybody should strive to pursue happiness and should not jeopardize happiness in any circumstance. To pursue happiness actively and explicitly is the way to achieve an independent good life. And this requires the individual to realize potential, master external environment, and achieve personal goals. It is quite popular, today, the western media advocate to actively strive for happiness bearing the mind of taking the necessary risks and costs on a daily basis. Moreover, by implementing democracy and social equality, the western governments promote personal rights, encourage and reward people who actively strive to pursue and achieve their personal goals. In short, within the modern western culture, the happiness, which composes two distinct features: personal accountability and explicit pursuit, is best described as the results of freely, actively and constantly pursue of a good personal life.

In the next sections, we are going to explore the different views of happiness from the perspectives of Chinese traditional cultures such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism before making the comparison between western and Chinese traditional views of happiness.

3. Happiness in Chinese Traditional Cultures

¹¹ e.g., Joshanloo 2013; Schwartz 2009; McMahon 2008; Tatarkiewicz 1976

¹² Hazel R., Markus, H. R., & Shinobu, Kitayama "The cultural psychology of personality" In *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (1998) 29, 63–87. pp64-67

¹³ Ed, Diener, E., & Marissa, Diener "Cross-cultural correlates of life satisfaction and self-esteem" In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1995) 68, 653–663. p658

The word Happiness (“*xingfu*”, 幸福) just appeared in the Chinese language recently. In Chinese ancient thoughts, another word “*fu*” (福) is perhaps the closest equivalent of happiness. We can find the definition in the book of “*Shang Shu*”, which defines “*fu*” as a blessing with “longevity, prosperity, health, peace, virtue, and a comfortable death”¹⁴. Thus, the Chinese traditional concept of happiness seems to include “material abundance, physical health, virtuous and peaceful life, and relief from death anxiety”¹⁵. As discussed above, the core ideas of the notion are greatly influenced by the three great schools of philosophy. Therefore, in the following passages, we will explore the views on happiness from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism respectively.

3.1 Happiness in Confucianism

To explore the ideas of happiness in Confucianism tradition, I focus on the Confucius view about a good life and how Confucius propose to achieve it. Confucius believes following the Way (*Tao* 道) is the true nature of happiness and living in harmony with the Tao results in a good life.¹⁶ Rather than thinking wealth and material comforts are the sources of happiness, Confucius believes that following the Tao is sufficient for a happy life.

The Master said, “How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find insupportable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!” (The Analects 6:11)¹⁷

If the joy is not founded on the Tao, there will be no form of complete and reliable satisfaction or joy could be sustained for a long time. “The Master said, ‘One who is not benevolent cannot remain long straitened circumstances, nor can he remain long in easy circumstances.’” (The Analects 4:2) On the other side, the sense of satisfaction and happiness which is grounded on the Tao, could be maintained in the worst of times. Confucius present his understanding of various stages of the Tao and his purpose is always to understand and find happiness in following the Way. “The master said, ‘To be fond of something is better than merely to know it (the Tao), and to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it.’” (the Analects 6:20) Through the understanding of what the good life is and the effort which one make in attaining this ideal, one can attain the happiness of following the Confucian Way. True happiness only occurs when we dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly in following the Way and lose ourselves in spontaneous

¹⁴ Y., Wu, The new transcription of “*shang shu*” (Taiwan: Shan Min Books, 1991), p58

¹⁵ Lu “In Pursuit of Happiness: The Cultural Psychological Study of SWB”, p101

¹⁶ Philip J., Ivanhoe *Oneness : East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected* (USA: OUP, 2018), p130

¹⁷ The version of *The Analects* used in this paper is *Sayings of Confucius* translated by D. C. Lau

games.¹⁸ This is what Confucius achieved “I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line.” when he enters his age of seventy. (The Analects 2:4)

Then, what shall we do to achieve the happy life? According to Confucius, people need to carry out a life-term, demanding process of self-cultivation to develop a set of virtuous character and form a harmonious relationship with all the people.¹⁹ During this process of self-cultivation following the direction of the Tao, the joy comes out from inside. This self-cultivation is based on learning.

“Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar?” (The Analects Chapter 1)

The “learned something” that Confucius mentioned is not limited to book learning but also social relationships and the virtue of humanity. This is best explained by Zi Xia, one famous disciple of Confucius, as he says:

I would grant that a man has received instruction who appreciates men of excellence where other men appreciate beautiful women, who exerts himself to the utmost in the service of his parents and offers his person to the service of his lord, and who, in his dealings with his friends, is trustworthy in what he says, even though he may say that he has never been taught. (The Analects 1:7)

According to Confucianism, the virtue is the purpose of learning. On the other hand, the positive attitude of learning is essential for the attainment of virtue. Learning is an important condition to make people be able to live a happy life. As Confucius says:

To love benevolence without loving learning is liable to lead to foolishness. To love cleverness without loving learning is liable to lead to deviation from the right path. To love trustworthiness in word without loving learning is liable to lead to harmful behaviour. To love forthrightness without loving learning is liable to lead to intolerance. To love courage without loving learning is liable to lead to insubordination. To love unbending strength without loving learning is liable to lead to indiscipline. (The Analects 17:8)

Among the Confucian set of virtues, the highest and most important virtue is “ren” (仁) which is more often referred to benevolence or compassion. This character “仁” consist of two elements: “亻” (ren) means the human being, “二” (er) means two, these two persons refers to “self and other” which articulates the proper human relationship rather than an individual quality. In general, the cultivation of ren is based on the developing of caring and enthusiasm relationships within a family. Familial relationships among parent and child, wife and husband, brother and sisters are maintained with love,

¹⁸ Joel, Kupperman “Confucius and the Problem of Naturalness” in *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp26–35

¹⁹ Philip J. *Ivanhoe Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Revised Second Edition, 2006), pp42-47

trust, generosity, and spontaneous devotion to specific duties rather than relying upon compulsion or justice. Instead of keeping a warm and caring relationships within one's own family, Confucius's goal is to extend this intimate familial connection throughout the world, in Confucius term which is "all under heaven" (*tian xia* 天下). As Confucius says: "All within the four seas are brothers". (The Analects 12:5), these relationships among the Confucian virtuous people can bring each other a sense of warm, meaning and happiness.

To fulfil this goal, one needs to apply the spirit of *ren* through the practice of ritual (*li* 禮) within the family and larger society. For Confucius, rituals also have very extended scope ranging from grand religious ceremony to ancestors and other spirits (The Analects 3:11) and daily courtesies to manage daily interaction between people (The Analects 2:8). In human life, rituals are critical as they show a common normative practice, cultivating and expressing virtue. In addition, rituals can help us overcome self-centred tendencies and cultivate benign tendencies, and at the same time provide us with a common social language that enables us to expect and realise an harmonious humane life.²⁰ Confucius believes that in order to have a happy and harmonious life people have to cultivate themselves with a prolonged process in which their individual needs are justified, shaped by the requirements of ritual. As Confucius says: "To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence." (The Analects 12:1) Rather than satisfying of one's own desire, the happiness of Confucius arises when we are in harmony with a scope beyond of ourselves and when we have fully integrated ourselves into larger entities and processes which allow us to be guided with a more meaningful and ideal scheme.

For Confucius, happiness is a natural result of a well-lived life. By following the Tao and adapt oneself to larger scopes and patterns, people can achieve a more meaningful and joyful life than any forms of satisfaction with only individual purposes. Living in accordance with the Way, moving one's attention out of the personal sense of self and achieving harmony with others can help people be freed from a broad range of negative emotions, such as worries and anxieties, and bring people the sense of warm, comfort, peace and joyful in any circumstance they encountered.

3.2 Happiness in Taoism

The understanding of a happy life in Taoism is different from that of Confucianism. Chichao Liang, a famous Chinese scholar, points out that the fundamental difference between Taoism and Confucianism is that Confucian thinking focus on human, and Taoist thinking is on nature.²¹ In other words, Confucianism puts great emphasise on personal conducts and inter-relations

²⁰ Philip J., *Ivanhoe Confucian Reflections: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2013), pp145-48

²¹ Chichao, *Liang History of Chinese Political Thought: During the early Tsin Period* (London: Routledge, 2000), p73

within human society, whereas Taoism pays more attention to individual and its relationship with nature.

According to Laozi, the Tao, which stands as laws of nature, are all-powerful. Laozi says:

There is a thing formed in chaos
Existing before Heaven and Earth.
Silent and solitary, it stands alone, unchanging.
It goes around without peril.
It may be the Mother of the world.
Not knowing its name, I can only style it Tao. (Tao Te Ching Chapter 25)²²

“Tao” is eternal and unchangeable and existed before everything. In comparing to the Tao and laws of nature, in the eyes of Laozi, man is deemed as insignificant and weak. Therefore, according to Taoism, the best way to live a happy life is to follow the “Tao” which is similar to the idea in Confucianism. The difference is that for Taoism, it is important to live harmoniously not only between human beings but also with Nature. Although each person has the freedom to pursue happiness within the human world, one should not violate the natural order of Tao. In addition, as human beings are a part of nature, in order to live in a sustainable happy life, we have to pay attention to the natural world.

Comparing with the Confucian ideas about learning as an essential practice for happiness, Laozi thinks that life is limited and insufficient to get all the knowledge within one’s life span. Rather than devote oneself in limit and incomplete learning, Laozi chooses to reduce his intention to pursue knowledge and just do in accordance with the Tao. As Laozi puts:

The pursuit of learning increases daily.
The pursuit of Tao decreases daily,
Decreasing more and more
Until it reaches the point of inaction.
Inaction: then nothing cannot be done by it,
Therefore the capture of the world should always be done by inactivity.
As for activity, it is insufficient to capture the world. (Tao Te Ching Chapter 48)

Therefore, the best way to have a good life is to live naturally and just follow the Tao inactively. This will make people happy. For Taoism, the knowledge of the truth or condition of life is not necessary. No knowledge means no worries. Without knowledge which is always imperfect and incomplete, people can feel the real happiness.

Great completion appears to be imperfect,
Yet its usefulness is never exhausted.

²² The *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi used in this paper is the version translated by Ellen Marie Chen, 1989
<https://terebess.hu/english/tao/e-m-chen.html>

Great fullness appears to be empty,
Yet its usefulness is unlimited.
Great straightness seems bent.
Great craftiness seems clumsy.
Great eloquence seems to be stuttering. (Tao Te Ching Chapter 45)

The less the knowledge one has, the closer to the completion. As long as following the Tao, one can attain happiness which is irrelevant to what he or she looks like by others. Therefore, we can find that Laozi put more emphasise on the inner or private life than the social or public life. "The neighboring states will be so close that they can see each other and hear the sounds of roosters and dogs. But the people will grow old and die, without having visited each other." (Tao Te Ching Chapter 80) In Taoism, people prefer to live close to nature, but keep independent from each other. Not like Confucianism in which people focus on the art of social relations, in Taoism, people care more about the quality of their inner life.

Rather than let people seek happiness by satisfying their desire from the social world, Laozi warns us:

Of fame and life, which is more dear?
Of life and wealth, which is more worthy?
Of gain and loss, which is more distressing?
Therefore, loving in excess incurs great cost.
Overhoarding brings heavy loss.
To know what is enough means to avoid disgrace.
To know where to stop is to avoid danger.
Thus one can last long and endure. (Tao Te Ching Chapter 44)

It is dangerous that we feel happy when something good happens as this kind of happiness will be turned into suffering when the circumstance changes. In addition to the damage of excess desire for our inner spirit, Laozi puts: "The five colours blind man's eyes. The five notes deafen his ears. The five tastes spoil his palate." (Tao Te Ching Chapter 12) That means the satisfaction of excess material or spiritual desire is harmful not only to our spirit but also to our physical body. Therefore, we cannot find reliable conditions for a happy life from the outside world, on the contrary, we can only attain these condition by following the Tao and live in a natural and simple life. Thus, Laozi advocates to reduce unnecessary desires and not pursue happiness by seeking external things. Thus, the Taoist way of achieving happiness is through freeing people from their desires.²³

In the sense of living a harmonious life with one another, Taoism and Confucianism share the same perspectives. Both traditions want people to live in accordance with the Way. Rather than emphasising on the governance of the ruler as it does in Confucianism, Taoism advocates a natural free style

²³ L., Lu "The Opinion of Happiness and Subject of Well-Being of Chinese" In *Discovery of Applied Psychology* (2007) 9, 19-30.

of human life by denying any forms of the greatness of the ruler and their wilful actions in governance. As Laozi puts:

Banish sagacity; forsake wisdom.
The people will benefit a hundredfold.
Banish human-heartedness; forsake righteousness.
The people will recover filial piety and paternal affection.
Banish craftiness; forsake profit.
Thieves and robbers will no longer exist. (Tao Te Ching Chapter 19)

In comparing with the views of Taoism and Confucianism on happiness, we can find that although both emphasise the harmonious human life, Confucians prefer a rational and virtuous society through individual efforts of cultivation and influence. While as, Taoism advocate another optimism by escaping from society and embracing the laws of nature, the ideology meaning of happiness is beyond happiness itself. Concerning their realization of happiness, Confucianism derives the happiness from self-cultivation and virtue, while as Taoism's happiness comes from the freedom of spirit. Not like Confucianism which believes people should put effort to achieve happiness, Taoism way of realizing happiness is through freeing people from human desire, by letting things as it is, and facing life with a peaceful mind.²⁴

3.3 Happiness in Buddhism

“Seeking happiness outside ourselves is like waiting for sunshine in a cave facing north.” – a Tibetan Proverb²⁵

According to Buddhism, our desire is limitless and never can be satisfied completely. “happiness is a state that depends on inner conditions, each of us must recognize and bring those conditions together. Happiness is not given to us, nor misery imposed.”²⁶ In addition, according to Buddhism, it is an illusion to think that there is a permanent self which has clear boundaries with the rest of world. This illusion is the root cause of suffering rather than happiness. Self-centeredness and self-interest are the sign of a confusing mind with ignorance of the fact that others are its own extensions. On the contrary, the thought of no-self is an enlightened mind to lead to infinite love and compassion, eliminating the polluted states of the mind, such as greed and anger.

In Buddhism, all kinds of happiness which are derived from outside, such as material enjoyment, physical pleasure, or even affections from interpersonal relationships, are nothing but an illusion. Instead, real happiness should come from inside through mental training. According to Dalai Lama, when the

²⁴ Ibid., p28

²⁵ Matthieu, Ricard *The Art of Meditation* trans. Sherab Chödzin Kohn (London: Atlantic Books, 2010). p33

²⁶ Matthieu, Ricard "A Buddhist View of Happiness" In *The Journal of Law and Religion* 29, no. 1 (2014): 14-29. p16

spiritual “liberation” arrives, one can experience “the highest happiness” without any suffering. This is true, lasting happiness which is related to the mind and heart.²⁷ Only when we get the complete spiritual enlightenment like Buddha we can assure to realize the state of genuine and highest happiness.

The suffering arising from the craving-and-aversion mechanism is the main obstacle in reaching true happiness²⁸. This is because the hedonism cannot bring endurance and abundant satisfaction.²⁹ Aversion arises when the desire cannot be fulfilled. As long as we are attached by desirable things, we tend to avoid its opposite.

According to Buddhism, if a person can reach a state of mind with which he can be free of the desire or aversion to external stimuli, then one will be able to obtain real freedom and peace. As Zen Buddhist Goenka puts: “once one learns to observe objectively without identifying with the sensations, then the process of purification starts, and the old habit of blind reaction of multiplying one’s misery is gradually weakened and broken.”³⁰ The state of happiness that Buddhism advocates does not rely on any external or internal stimuli.³¹ The concept of happiness in Buddhism is totally different from the concept of pleasure. In general, pleasure is both temporary and self-centred. Therefore, people can become more selfish if they are constantly pursuing pleasure rather than happiness and is most likely to have a conflict with others.³²

According to Wallace and Shapiro, the Buddhist conception of happiness or well-being emphasises on both mental balance and contentment.³³ In order to achieve these states, we need to identify and develop the inner causes and conditions of genuine happiness and reject the illusory nature of hedonic pleasures.³⁴

As John Makransky puts, “A loving, compassionate state of mind supports our own happiness and well-being and helps bring out this potential in other”³⁵, compassion towards others rather than being selfish is the way to achieve happiness of one and others.

²⁷ D., Webb “Happiness on the Tibetan Plateau” In H. Selin & G. Davey (Eds.), *Happiness across cultures* Vol. 6 (2012): 27–41. p34

²⁸ Y. H., Chen “Coping with suffering: The Buddhist perspective” P. T. P. Wong & L. C. J. Wong (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural perspectives on stress and coping* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 2006), p78

²⁹ M. G., Kwee “Relational Buddhism: A psychological quest for meaning and sustainable happiness” P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), in *The human quest for meaning: The human quest for meaning: theories, research, and applications* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p253

³⁰ S.N., Goenka *The Discourse Summaries for Vipassana Meditation* (India: Vipassana Vishodhan Vinyas, 1992), p39

³¹ B.A., Wallace & S.L., Shapiro “Mental balance and well-being: building bridges between Buddhism and Western psychology” In *American Psychologist*, (2006) 61(7), p691

³² M., Dambrun & M., Ricard “Self-centeredness and selflessness: A theory of self-based psychological functioning and its consequences for happiness” In *Review of General Psychology*, (2011): 15(2), p138

³³ Wallace & Shapiro “Mental balance and well-being: building bridges between Buddhism and Western psychology”, p691

³⁴ Ibid., p694

³⁵ John, Makransky “Compassion in Buddhist Psychology” In Christopher K. Germer and Ronald D. Siegel (Eds.) *Compassion and Wisdom in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), p62

Although Buddhism rejects the hedonic notion of happiness, the Buddhist view of happiness is not necessarily incompatible with negative emotions or situations, such as suffering, sadness, and tragedy.³⁶ As a Buddhist, rather than in favour of happiness and avoid the sadness, one should understand the essence of the paired concept. Instead of being opposite to each other, the suffering can invoke wisdom and therefore, be beneficial. According to the fourteenth Dalai Lama, one can purify his past negative karmas and generate determination to achieve liberation by enduring suffering.³⁷ Therefore, both of favourable and adverse situations should not be an obstacle for spiritual practice in Buddhist perspective. The later one is even more valuable for achieving enlightenment and true happiness.

To conclude, from a Buddhist point of view, the perception of self as different from the non-self or self-centredness is the root cause of attachment to desires which leads to the rise of craving-and-aversion and suffering. In order to eliminate the suffering, people need to recognize that the separation between oneself and others is just an illusion. With this enlightenment, one can reach the true happiness, a state of mind in complete peace and harmony and provides his infinite compassion to all beings.

4. Comparison with Modern Western Cultures and Chinese Traditional Cultures

We have explored the notions of happiness among modern western culture and Chinese three traditions, naming Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in previous sections. In this section, we are going to further discuss the major differences between the western and Chinese traditional views on happiness.

4.1 Hedonism Vs. Eudaimonism

As we discussed in the previous section, the hedonistic concept of happiness reflects the core values of modern western culture which is named as liberal modernity and romantic individualism.³⁸ In the contemporary western world, people believe that they have individual sovereignty over their own personal well-being. In addition, people emphasise on the balance of their emotions. And this balance is regarded as an integral part of the notion of happiness.³⁹ Therefore, in the contemporary West culture, happiness is mainly referred to the personal pleasure and other emotions. However, the Chinese traditional cultures are not in favour of hedonism as a way of realizing happiness. Regarding the Chinese traditions, pleasure and other emotions could not be the measurements of happiness due to its temporary and transitional

³⁶ M. Ricard "The Dalai Lama: Happiness from within" In *International Journal of Wellbeing* (2011): 1(2), 274–290

³⁷ Mitchell & Wiseman, *Transforming suffering: reflections on finding peace in troubled times*, p15-16

³⁸ R.M., Ryan & E.L., Deci "On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being" In *Annual Review of Psychology*, (2001): 52, 141–166. p145

³⁹ D.M., Haybron "Philosophy and the science of subjective well-being" In M. Eid & R. J. Larsen (Eds.), *The science of subjective well-being* (pp. 17–43). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

properties. For instance, Buddhism, which promotes compassion over other beings as a way of achieving happiness rather than pursuing personal pleasure, denies any form of hedonistic happiness, which tend to cultivate self-centredness. Rather than pursuing individual pleasure, for Confucianism, people believe living in accordance with virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, trustworthy, and so on, is a happy life, whereas for Taoism, the happiness means living a natural life by following the Way. All of these three traditions obviously run against to the hedonistic concept of happiness.

It is clear that all the three Chinese traditional cultures reject hedonism as the definition of happiness. On the other hand, the fact that these traditions regard virtues as the way of achieving a good life implies that they have a more or less eudaimonic view of happiness. However, it is worth noting that there are fundamental differences between the Chinese concepts of happiness and the modern western eudaimonism. The former emphasise virtues which redirect personal interest to the collective harmony of society, environment and universe, whereas the latter emphasise virtues like environmental mastery and autonomy.

From the perspectives of Chinese traditions, the western virtues such as being an autonomous self and mastering of the environment are sometimes considered as the cause of unhappiness and destruction of collective for the reason of its ignorance of the inter-relationships and laws of nature. Although, Confucianism regards virtues such as filial piety as the important signs of individual maturity, in western cultures, social expectations and family obligations sometimes may put limits on the self-realization and personal potential.⁴⁰

Dambrun and Ricard argue that the western dominant hedonistic concept of happiness is based on “the perception of self as an entity with sharp boundaries” and is defined by the pursuit of pleasurable satisfaction and reluctance toward suffering.⁴¹ On the other side, the eastern traditions advocate authentic happiness by de-emphasizing the boundary of the self and implementing “the principle of harmony”.⁴²

4.2 Self-Enhancement Vs. Self-Transcendence

In each culture, the perception of self has paramount impacts on the conceptualizing happiness. In western culture, individualism has fundamental impacts on the concept of self. As discussed above, according to western perception of the self, autonomy, self-esteem, independence, and a strong ego are considered to be an important part of a good life. In contrast, individual self in Chinese traditions is viewed as a tiny part of the society and universe, therefore is regarded much less important than in western culture.

⁴⁰ J.C., Christopher & S., Hickinbottom “Positive psychology, ethnocentrism, and the disguised ideology of individualism” in *Theory & Psychology*, (2008): 18(5), 563–589. pp571-72

⁴¹ Dambrun & Ricard “Self-centeredness and selflessness: A theory of self-based psychological functioning and its consequences for happiness”, p143

⁴² Ibid., p145

Concerning Buddhism, the idea of the existence of a personal self is regarded as an illusion. Taoism encourages people following the Way rather than being guided by self-motivation. In Confucianism, the harmony of relationship within family or society is emphasized rather than the satisfaction of personal desires.⁴³

Based on the Chinese traditional views, the western view of happiness has been criticized as being too self-centred. Dambrun and Richard argued that the emphasise on pursuit of individual happiness may in return lead to both personal and collective dissatisfaction.⁴⁴ For example, they claim that the self-centred notion of happiness may be followed by many negative emotions such as hostility, sad and anxious, while a self-transcendent happiness can derive more positive states, such as respect, empathy and compassion which are advocated by Chinese traditions. Comparing to western conceptualization of happiness which is focus on self-enhancement, the Chinese traditional notions of happiness advocate self-transcendence aiming to realize one's wisdom ⁴⁵.

In summary, based on the different views of self between western culture and Chinese traditional cultures, the western notion of happiness aims to self-enhancement, whereas that of Chinese traditional cultures is self-transcendence. Rather than pursuing individual pleasure, the Chinese concepts of happiness give more weight on the virtues with aiming to realize wisdom, self-transcendence and harmony.

4.3 Master Vs. Harmony

The modern western view of humankind as a privileged creature with superiority in controlling over the environment and other creature is rooted in the western enlightenment mentality which believes raw nature is subordinated to human beings.⁴⁶ On the other hand, in the Chinese traditions, humanity is regarded as a tiny part of the universe and should be regarded as oneness with the whole nature. For instance, in Taoism, Zhuangzi says:

A man in the universe is like a pebble or a twig in the mountains. As such he can only obey nature. He may be useful in a small way, but it is beyond him to originate anything.” (Zhuangzi, Autumn Water)⁴⁷

In Buddhism, the oneness includes not only all sentient beings such as human, animals, plants, but also non-sentient beings, and they are all

⁴³ K.K., Hwang “The development of indigenous counselling in contemporary Confucian communities” In *The Counseling Psychologist*, (2009): 37(7), 930–943. p937

⁴⁴ Dambrun & Ricard “Self-centeredness and selflessness: A theory of self-based psychological”, p141

⁴⁵ M.R., Levenson & P.A., Jennings et al “Self-Transcendence: Conceptualization and Measurement” in *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* (2005): 60(2):127-43. p128-29

⁴⁶ A.R., Gilgen & J.H., Cho “Questionnaire to measure eastern and western thought” In *Psychological Reports*, (1979): 44(3), 835–841. p836

⁴⁷ G., Zhang & R., Veenhoven “Ancient Chinese philosophical advice: Can it help us find happiness today?” In *Journal of Happiness Studies*, (2008): 9(3), 425–443. p429

regarded as equal parts of an underlying unity. Concerning Confucianism, professor Tu Weiming says:

Confucianism sees humankind to have a deep and cosmic significance. This significance manifests itself in partnership with both Heaven and Earth forming the classic Chinese trinity of Heaven Earth and Humankind.⁴⁸

Thus, in the Confucianism perspective, the role of humankind in the universe is like a partner rather than a master over other creatures. Therefore, there is an obvious contrast between the views of the human role with western cultures and Chinese traditions as the former holds the idea of human's mastering and conquering over nature, while the latter reject these ideas by denying the sharp boundary between humankind and the rest of the world.

This fundamental difference has significant impacts on the ways of realization a happy life. On the western culture side, it is believed that the control and mastery of environment are good qualities to ensure a happy life. Concerning the fully functioning person for realizing his needs and values, Ryff puts:

(He) has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities.⁴⁹

On the Chinese traditions side, they value interdependence, the partnership with the environment and self-transcendence rather than independence and autonomy. For instance, Confucianism advocates interpersonal harmony and self-cultivation through learning of the wisdom and virtues of the sages. In Taoism, the ultimate suprema, the way, is regarded as the path of natural harmony that people should follow for a happy life, therefore it asks people to adjust themselves to the universal natural laws rather than conquering the nature. In the perspective of Buddhism, the idea of there is a self which is regarded as an entity to control and master others is the root cause of suffering rather than that of happiness.

In short, the attitudes of willing to control and master the world, which includes all the aspects of personal life, relationships with others and nature, are highly praised for the achieving of a happy life in the western cultures, while in the Chinese traditional cultures, the ideas of achieving harmony with others and the universe and aligning to the natural laws are advocated.

5. Conclusion

After examining the Confucian teaching on happiness, we can conclude that the Confucian happiness is achieved through learning, benevolence and inter-relational harmony. Confucianism emphasises on the collective welfare of

⁴⁸ <https://edenkeeper.org/2015/01/24/confucius-heaven-earth-humanity/>

⁴⁹ C.D. Ryff & B.H., Singer "Know thyself and become what you are: A eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being" In *Journal of Happiness Studies*, (2008): 9(1), 13–39. p25

the group, ranging from family to the entire human race, rather than individual welfare. For Confucians, happiness is regarded as deeply meaningful spiritual states rather than transient, sensual pleasures.

Similarly, Taoism rejects the view of happiness as a sort of bodily satisfaction, on the other hand, it differs from the Confucian idea of self-cultivation for moral greatness as a path to live a happy life. Instead, Taoism advocate people achieve happiness by freeing himself from personal desires and reaching a peaceful mind by following the natural Way. Thus, the ultimate happiness in Taoism is merging with nature, a kind of self-transcendence rather than a feeling of joy.

According to Buddhism, all phenomena, which depends on preceding causes and contributing conditions, is regarded as fluctuating and transitory, thus, seeking pleasurable stimuli, either external or internal, is the cause of suffering rather than genuine happiness. The root cause of seeing pursuing pleasure as true sources of happiness is the reification of self as an immutable, independent and unitary entity. Therefore, the Buddhist path to achieve true happiness, is the realization of one's full potential in terms of compassion and wisdom by eliminating individual desires and the illusionary concept of self.

In comparing the views of happiness between the modern western cultures and the above three Chinese traditions, we can find three main domains of difference: First, the main feature of modern western view of happiness is hedonistic. In contrast, all the three Chinese traditions hold a form of the "Chinese eudaimonic" view of happiness which regards the realization of virtues as the way of achieving happiness rather than pursuing temporary and transitional feelings and pleasure. Second, the western view of happiness reflects the human desire of self-enhancement which is focused on self-interest and thus self-centred. On the other side, according to the Chinese traditions, the happiness is self-transcendence rather than self-enhancement as they not only emphasise more on the relational and collective aspects of self, but also advocate self-free qualities such as wisdom and compassion. Third, the willing to control and master the world is another aspect of western view of happiness. In contrast, rather than dominating or controlling others and nature, achieving harmony with family, society, nature and the entire universe is the critical ideas of the three Chinese traditional cultures.

Above all, the ideas of happiness have a distinct contrast between the Chinese traditional cultures perspective and the predominant Western cultural perspective. This paper is among the first attempts to bridge the gap of the understanding of happiness between not only the West and East but also the past and present.

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