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SPECIAL ISSUE

Being careful what you wish for

The case of happiness in China

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This article takes ethnographic material from rural China and Taiwan and relates it to recent theories and findings in the psychology and economics of happiness. In brief, psychologists suggest that humans are not on the whole very good at "affective forecasting," that is, at predicting their own emotions; this is consequential when, for example, they pursue money in order to be happy—not realizing that having more money will probably not, in fact, make them happier. Drawing on ethnographic findings, I suggest that people in China and Taiwan are often, in fact, as concerned with predicting the emotions of others as in predicting their own emotions. I then consider this in relation to Chinese family projects where the pursuit of wealth—"for family happiness"—appears to be a shared goal, as well as considering families in which this shared goal has to some extent, and sometimes for very different reasons, been lost.

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Let me start by drawing a contrast between happiness as a motive (something I want) and happiness as an outcome (something I get). I may be motivated to do certain things—for example, buy chocolates or ask someone out on a date—because I believe or hope that these actions will lead to me being happy in some sense; but whether I really *will* be happy as a result of them is another matter, of course. I could accidentally buy what for me is the wrong kind of chocolate, the kind with pieces of orange in it, in which case I will be disappointed. As for asking someone on a date: even if things go well—that is, it's not that I end up on the wrong kind of date—the experience may not bring me the happiness I had hoped for. The former case is about life going wrong. The latter (and perhaps more interesting) case is about life going right but still failing to live up to expectations.

This possible disconnect between what we aim for and what we get—emotionally speaking—has been the focus of sustained research by psychologists, economists,

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and others in recent years. The findings suggest, in brief, that our "affective forecasting" skills are very imperfect (see, e.g., Wilson and Gilbert 2005; Gilbert and Wilson 2009). We tend to overestimate the extent to which supposedly wonderful life events will make us happy *and* the extent to which supposedly catastrophic life events will make us unhappy; the same holds true, it seems, for more everyday kinds of good and bad experiences. There are different explanations for this phenomenon, including the fact that people do not generally know much about things they have not yet lived through. Moreover, cognitive biases may lead them to *focus* on particular aspects of (prospective) experiences while downplaying others: for example, to focus on how much their friends will admire a new pair of shoes while ignoring what it will feel like to wear them.[1]

Such findings, whatever else they may do, raise interesting questions about the psychological foundations of classic utilitarianism and thus of standard economics. It may be rational for us to pursue happiness or more generally whatever it is that we want —"utility"—through the means we have. But what if our predictions of what will make us happy (or more generally satisfied) are unreliable? In that case, the risk is that our actions will misfire: we may well end up with things—including emotions—we were *not* actually wishing for.

One especially consequential version of this forecasting problem relates to the pursuit of wealth. When the developed Western economies in the post-World War II era are taken as an example, there is some truly striking evidence, assuming one accepts it. Per capita income has gone up dramatically, leading to sharp improvements in living standards. It seems, however, that people are no happier on average than they were back in the 1950s (for an overview, see Layard 2005). Why, one might ask, have they worked so hard to get rich if the end result is no more happiness than they had when they started? Richard Easterlin suggests that, among other things, they fail to grasp how short-lived the psychological benefits of extra wealth will be and thus "allocate an excessive amount of time" to trying to get it (2003: 11176; see also Easterlin 2001). They would be better off following the advice of Richard Layard, an economist who embraces a version of old-school utilitarianism. Summing up the evidence, he concludes that happiness/wellbeing is a function not of wealth per se but of having strong and stable families; solid communities and friendships; secure employment and income; good health; personal freedoms (including holding significant rights vis-à-vis government); and religious beliefs, or at least a guiding system of personal morality.[2] He argues that we should allocate collective time/energy/public funds to sorting out such matters rather than increasing GDP. Indeed, as noted in the introduction as well as other contributions

1. For an accessible introduction to the psychology of happiness, see Gilbert 2007. A very thought-provoking commentary on some of the analytical and methodological issues surrounding research by psychologists and economists on happiness can be found in Kahneman 2011: 375–407.

2. Framing this in quantitative terms, Layard suggests that six variables "can explain 80% of the variation in happiness" between the fifty countries in the World Values Survey in four different years: the divorce rate, the unemployment rate, the level of trust, the rate of membership in non-religious organizations, the quality of the government, and the fraction of people "believing in God" (2005: 70–71).

to this collection, policies along these lines have gained significant traction in places as diverse as Bhutan and the United Kingdom (see Cook's article for a detailed discussion of the latter case).

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And yet most anthropologists reading this snapshot of interdisciplinary work on happiness are likely to have serious reservations about it, and not without reason (again, see the introduction, as well as the article by Freeman; see also the recent commentaries in Barbara Rose Johnston et al. 2012). Aside from the challenge of defining and measuring "happiness" in a way that will work across cultures— good luck with that—anthropologists will surely object to the idea that happiness can be assumed to be the priority for humans everywhere that it was for Jeremy Bentham. As the arch anti-utilitarian Marshall Sahlins once remarked, "A people"—by which he means irrational Westerners, and especially irrational Americans—"who conceive life to be the pursuit of happiness must be chronically unhappy" (2002: 17). His broader point is that desires, the things we are motivated to aim for in the first place, are always culturally and historically constituted.

Take the case of happiness in rural China and Taiwan. In fact, the people I have met there during fieldwork *do* indeed seem highly motivated to pursue happiness, pleasure, and wellbeing, and there are many Chinese terms, notions, folk sayings, and practices that relate explicitly to happiness in one form or another.[3] Chinese weddings, for example, are redundantly organized around the ideal of "double happiness" (*shuangxi*) and the "sweetness" (*tianmi*) that should accompany a "joyous event" (*xishi*) of this kind. Nowadays a whole industry surrounds this. And yet, in traditional Chinese weddings, a *lack* of joy was also meant to be part of the proceedings. As Throop (this collection) says of Yap, the idea that suffering and *un*happiness, in certain circumstances, are especially virtuous is one that has a definite traction in China. Chinese brides (being filial daughters) were expected to be at least superficially miserable about separation from their natal kin via marriage, and thus to sit grim-faced through the accompanying rituals. In some parts of China, they even sang wedding laments in which their marriages were portrayed as a kind of death (Blake 1978; Johnson 2003). Speaking more broadly, the primary focus of weddings (and of the marriages they ritually instituted) was not the happiness or other emotional state of the bride—nor, for that matter, that of the groom. As Freedman explains, "The chief parties to a [traditional] marriage [were] the most

3. Note that I have never started fieldwork with the specific aim of studying happiness or wellbeing, per se, nor have I asked my informants to speak directly to the question of happiness. Nevertheless, more general questions related to life aspirations, wellbeing, and personal fulfillment have been central to all of my fieldwork projects, as a result of which I have collected a good deal of data about what actually makes people happy/satisfied, what they appear to enjoy in the course of life, and (to frame things negatively) what it is that makes them notably unhappy, anxious, and so on. For an excellent (historically informed) discussion of Chinese happiness/pleasure, see Farquhar 2002. For recent discussions that seek to bring Chinese folk models of happiness/wellbeing into direct dialogue with quantitative research, see Ip 2011 and 2013.

senior direct agnatic ascendants of the boy and the girl [to be married]" (1979: 263). For these elders, the emphasis was on sorting out a new affinal connection, one that would benefit all concerned. In short, marriage sealed a relationship between families, not individuals, and *responsibilities* to elders and ancestors lay at its core. This does not mean that happiness was a matter of indifference; but nobody imagined that the emotional fulfillment of the bride and groom was what it was all about—at least not in the traditional system.

As is well known, however, the landscape of Chinese family life and kinship has changed in recent decades along with ideas concerning the emotions surrounding it. The best account is provided by Yunxiang Yan, who documents an increased focus on "private life," and more specifically on the emotional bond between wives and husbands. This is reflected, for example, in the creation of private spaces, such as separate bedrooms in rural homes, where intimacy and marital happiness can be nurtured (Yan 2003: 112–39). In short, people *do* now appear to care about the bride (and the groom) being happy.

Much more could be said about all of this, but here I simply underline two relatively straightforward points, uncontroversial ones for anthropologists. Yes, one can say that the pursuit of happiness exists in China, but, first, many social/cultural particularities surround this, and these are bound to deeply shape the actual experience of happiness. Indeed, the general understanding of "being happy," for Chinese people through history, must presumably have been closely linked (albeit often in complex and even paradoxical ways) to whatever one was meant to be doing with one's life. As Sangren has shown, for example, in the traditional Chinese family/kinship system there was a particular cultural logic to the (constructed) desires of individual agents, for example as when daughters sought "recognition" from the parents who would inevitably send them away to another family; in this context, happiness for married-out daughters was surely hard work (Sangren 2003). Moreover, second, the social/cultural particularities of Chinese emotional life do not exist in a historical vacuum: some of the most important of them have been seriously transformed in recent decades (again, as shown by Yan).

Beyond these two points, however, I want to make a third one, and this takes me back to the question of affective forecasting. The examples I began this chapter with are about *me* forecasting *my* emotions, and possibly getting it wrong. In the case of Chinese weddings, however, a great deal of attention is paid to what *other* people might feel if this or that thing were to happen. (Of course, I am not suggesting this is unique to China: that happiness is often conceived as relational, and that it routinely entails moral responsibilities, are among the key points made by the editors for this collection as a whole. Note that Gardner's article, with its discussion of the relational *and* temporal aspects of migration trajectories between Bangladesh and the United Kingdom, is directly relevant to the points I am raising here.) Suppose, for example, that a young Chinese woman ends up marrying a particular man—not the one she would have chosen herself. Her decision to do so and/or her acquiescence in it happening are likely to have been premised, at least in part, on affective forecasting. The elders around her may have told her what they thought and felt, or even just instructed her what to do. But she may also have let the unwanted marriage take place based on her *own* guess or assumption about *what her parents will feel* if prospective fiancé *x* (the one she likes) is chosen instead of prospective

fiancé *y* (the one they prefer). Conversely, her mother and father may disapprove of a particular match for their daughter on the grounds that they expect it *will not lead to her being happy* in the long term, whatever she herself may think in advance of it. In such cases, to reiterate, affective forecasting—which, by definition, may be mistaken—is relational rather than being contained within individuals; more specifically, it is intergenerational. As soon as one frames the business in this way, it becomes clear just how complicated it must be in practice, and thus how inadequate simple models of rational maximizing are for capturing real world decision making by socially embedded agents.[4] For not only do we predict what people around us might feel about given outcomes; we also, in many cases, explicitly manipulate each other on the basis of such predictions. The parents who want their daughter to avoid a given outcome—an unhappy marriage to the good-looking but unreliable *x*—may try to persuade her directly to do what they want, or they may threaten her, or they may work behind her back to undermine the love match. What they hope to achieve via these manipulations is a degree of intergenerational coordination: of attitudes, intentions, decisions, and actions. Simply put, they want her to want, or at to least to accept enough to act upon, what *they* want. And their own preferences for the future are based in part on their (reliable or unreliable) predictions of *her* future emotions. But what if they are wrong?

* * *

Now let us return to the pursuit not of love but of wealth. As already noted, research broadly suggests that "money does not make people happy," but the detailed findings are naturally more subtle than this. It turns out that—with some important qualifications—people of limited means *are* generally made happier by moving beyond the strains and uncertainties imposed by poverty. In this sense, someone who is poor and desires money as a route to happiness is not being irrational. What is surprising (assuming one accepts the premises and findings of the research) is the point at which the link between wealth and happiness begins to tail off. There is much discussion of this cut-off point; but summing up the state of the field back in 2005, Layard concluded that above about US$20,000 per year (to be more specific, once a country has achieved this figure for annual income per head), "higher average income is no guarantee of greater happiness" (2005: 34). Obviously, in many places around the world, this would even today be considered a very high income; but in the United Kingdom, for instance, it is only slightly above the annual pay for someone on the national minimum wage. In other words, most people living

4. In this article I do not have space to engage fully with the psychological critique of standard economic modeling; for a very interesting cognitive anthropological contribution to this critique, see Quinn 1978. Note that Quinn's point—an absolutely crucial one—is that the people she studied often use relatively simple heuristics to take decisions about economic life rather than engaging in probability calculations, and so on. Similarly, although I am noting here how "complicated" affective forecasting is in practice, it might also be argued that people often break through this complexity by using simple heuristics (e.g., for selecting husbands) that are readily available in their social environments.

in developed Western economies would, I think, find a happiness cut-off point of US$20,000 surprisingly—even astonishingly—low.

So how does this translate to the rural Chinese and Taiwanese cases that I know through fieldwork? Before turning to ethnography, a few things must be noted by way of background. The people I have met during fieldwork have almost all had relatively low incomes, not only by comparison with Westerners, but also by comparison with their urban compatriots. If the economists of happiness are broadly correct, then these people might reasonably anticipate some years of increased happiness, assuming their incomes continue to rise as they have (on average) done in recent decades.[5] It is also important to stress that the pursuit of wealth is a highly salient topic of public discourse in both China and Taiwan—although the background to the two cases is different. In China, people are keenly aware that chasing money (and also power in various forms, because the two are closely interlinked) is a pervasive social fact at this particular historical moment and something that everyone must engage with in one form or another. Ordinary people routinely debate the moral and ethical implications of this reality (see, e.g., Zhang 2013). The situation in Taiwan is different. One could say that it too is a place where money chasing is pervasive; however, the "economic miracle" happened there some time back—basically, a generation or more ago. Nowadays, people in Taiwan are, if anything, anxious that the economy has stalled and may well stall further owing to a range of politico-economic factors beyond their control. Moreover, whereas Taiwan used to be a capitalist success story posed against the economic failings of China's communism, the mainland's "socialist market economy" now appears to be leaving Taiwan in its wake. Folk discourses surrounding the pursuit of wealth have been heavily shaped by these historical considerations.

The final point to note by way of background corresponds to what I have noted above with respect to marriage. Individuals in China/Taiwan may ponder what kinds of economic outcomes would bring them—as individuals—happiness, well-being, and so on. But the ebb and flow of life is explicitly framed, much of the time, in relation to what *other* people think and feel. Crucial decisions about education, career paths, investments, major purchases, and so on, are routinely taken collectively in some sense. And it should be noted here that collective family success or happiness may, of course, be *invoked* in ways that ultimately benefit some members of families over others (e.g., elder over younger generations, men over women), just as invoking "brotherhood" within lineages may benefit some lineage members over others (see Watson 1985). This links back to a general Chinese ethos in which individuals are presumed to be morally committed to, and prepared to work hard for, long-term projects of advancing *family* prosperity, regardless of short-term (or even long-term) personal cost (see Harrell 1985).[6] But how durable is

5. As I note at the end of this article, however, recent findings about levels of Chinese happiness/wellbeing, and more broadly about happiness in developing economies, present a decidedly mixed, arguably "paradoxical," picture in relation to this.

6. In his thought-provoking discussion, Harrell accepts that in comparative terms Chinese people appear to work incredibly hard. This may relate to a "work ethic" into which they are socialized, as well as to the existence (under particular historical circumstances) of material incentives that encourage work. But Harrell concludes that

this commitment in practice? Is it transmitted across generations without difficulty? Would it survive, for example, the kind of disillusionment that might come to younger generations as they learn that prosperity and material wealth do not (always) equate to happiness? And what if the affective forecasts on which long-term projects of advancement are based turn out to be mistaken?

In considering such questions, I want to draw a broad contrast between two ideal types of families that I will label respectively as "progressive" and "declining." By the former, I simply mean families that are optimistic when it comes to economic life, and more specifically optimistic that the quality of life for younger generations is going to keep improving. This gives individuals a psychological incentive to work hard—that is, because by working hard, and making short-term sacrifices, they assume that things can and will get better financially: that progress can be made. Moreover, they collectively *want* things to get better because they assume or hope (at least at the level of the collective) that this will be a good thing—that is, that more wealth will, indeed, bring them a better quality of life and—in general terms—more happiness overall. A declining family, by contrast, is one that has to some extent given up on this desire to pursue wealth per se as a route to happiness, as I will elaborate below.

* * *

So what does a progressive family actually look like? From my fieldwork over the years, I could cite many examples. For instance, there is the Chen family, who live in the rural Taiwanese town of South Bridge.[7] The husband and wife at the head of this family grew up in relative poverty, and received basic levels of schooling. After marriage, they both worked hard at various jobs before eventually setting up their own small business in a market stall. They made a decent amount of money from this and lived frugally in the countryside. As a result, they were able to save, to invest, and eventually to provide their only son with a first-rate university education in law. At the time of my initial fieldwork, he was just starting out on his professional career. By Taiwanese standards, this family would not have counted as wealthy by any means, but things were getting better. And, I might add, they seemed very happy. Why? In terms of Layard's happiness criteria (cited above), the Chens appeared to be set: the marital/family relationships were solid, they had many friends, they had reasonably secure and nonstressful employment (which, moreover, they seemed to enjoy), their health was good, and they were religious. Furthermore, the narrative arc of their lives was basically an optimistic and, again, "progressive" one. Mrs. Chen's health, which used to be problematic, had improved. They had always been religious, to some extent, but had become even more so, having found a cult to which they were deeply devoted and which (they said) brought them true peace of mind. They had an only son who was obedient and loyal, and whose advancing

basically "Chinese will work hard when they see possible long-term benefits, in terms of improved material conditions and/or security, for a group with which they identify" (1985: 217). When this is lacking, the reality is that they often *don't* work that hard.

7. See Stafford 2006 for a discussion of this family. For the sake of the privacy of my informants, personal and place names, and some other details, have been changed in this and all other illustrations.

career they followed with pride. My sense is that their concern was not for him to succeed, as such: they wanted him to have a good life and to be happy, and assumed (i.e., predicted) that some degree of success was a prerequisite for this. Meanwhile, his assumption (i.e., prediction) was that his parents would be made happy if he were to succeed in school and work, and so he set about doing so. His plan was to provide for them in the future even though, in fact, they almost certainly would not need any help. The Chens' main aspiration for him, they told me, was that he would end up living nearby.

This, then, looks like a family in which the intergenerational coordination of goals and intentions is smooth, and life is basically headed in a progressive direction. The parents, by means of steady work, have constructed a future for their son that they believe will be in his interests, and the son—also by means of steady work—seems determined to make his parents happy by not derailing their imagined future for him (and them). I should add, however, that when I met them there were a few cracks in this narrative. The son, although a good student, did not actually pass the examinations that would have allowed him entry to an especially lucrative career. Furthermore, he had shown no signs of getting married (something his parents considered essential for a good life), or even of thinking about it any time soon. During my fieldwork, there were some tense moments: at one point the son stormed off and left for a few days as a way of letting off steam. It could also be said that by praising and encouraging his educational successes, his parents had risked some of the negative consequences that can follow from this: that is, that their son would become burned out by the pressure (cf. Kipnis 2011), that he would move further and further away as he became more and more successful (cf. James Johnston 2013), and/or that schooling itself would effectively turn him into a different type of person than they themselves were (cf. Stafford 1995). More broadly, I would note that the Chens had a rather ambivalent relationship to the ideals of Taiwanese capitalism. When I met them, they were classic small entrepreneurs: they worked incredibly hard, appeared to enjoy making money, seldom spent much of it, and invested their savings carefully. But they prioritized spiritual fulfillment over material success, and had passed up opportunities to make more money—including, in one case they described to me, out of ethical concern for the impact it would have on a fellow villager in a similar business (someone who was not a close friend). So although they certainly count as a progressive family in my terms, this does not mean that they were unthinkingly and/or unproblematically on the track of pursuing wealth as a route to happiness.

To cite another example, consider the Zhangs from rural northeast China.[8] Like the Chens, Mr. and Mrs. Zhang (both of whom lost parents during childhood) grew up in relative poverty. As children and young adults living during the collectivist era of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, their lives were extremely difficult in many respects. Nor were they able to have any children of their own after they married. However, Mr. and Mrs. Zhang adopted a daughter, and this daughter eventually married a *yanglaoxu*—that is, a son-in-law who formally agreed to look after the Zhangs in old age. (I know little about the background to this match, but bear in

8. See Stafford 2007 for an extended discussion of this family. Again, personal and place names have been changed.

mind that it might not have been the adopted daughter's first choice: as a matter of definition, a son-in-law who will agree to care for his parents-in-law, as opposed to caring for his own parents, has a low status.) Neither the daughter nor the son-in-law were highly educated, but they were both working extremely hard when I met them, and in the context of China's post-Mao economic boom they were doing rather well for themselves as construction day-laborers in the nearest city. So the elder Zhangs had a hard-working daughter and her husband living in their home, plus two lovely grandchildren. The future was looking much better than the past, and everyone seemed committed to the collective goal of family improvement.

Again, however, there are a few complications in the narrative arc. In common with many other young couples in modern China, the adopted daughter and her husband felt a tension between the need to provide for the elder Zhangs and the need to provide for their children. To frame this well-known problem in somewhat unfamiliar terms: Exactly whom did they want to make happy? Her parents, their children, or themselves? Generally speaking, they were investing in the future rather then repaying her adoptive parents for support received, thus leading to family tensions. The adopted daughter knew very well that she was *not* complying fully with what her elders wanted, and there was a constant negotiation around this. Meanwhile, the fact of their frantic work schedules meant that (in spite of working nearby) they were increasingly "leaving their children behind" in the countryside: a well-known phenomenon in contemporary China. Was this a reasonable tradeoff: that is, pursuing wealth for the whole family's future while—in effect—leaving the children in the village to be raised by others? Would this increase their happiness and wellbeing in the long term? Would it lead to the children having a happy/fulfilled life? Moreover, I would note that the elder Zhangs had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the ideals of China's socialist market economy, however much they may have encouraged their daughter and son-in-law to succeed in it. Mr. Zhang was a committed Communist and someone who was seriously troubled by the changes he saw around him as market forces intruded on rural life. In short, as with the Chen family, the Zhangs were not just unthinkingly or unproblematically on the track of pursuing wealth as a route to happiness.

And were they happy? In another article, I have discussed Mr. Zhang's chronic insomnia and his general anxiety about life, which derives from a number of sources (Stafford 2007). Compared to the Chens from Taiwan, he and his wife have more concerns about money, their network of friends and relatives is more fragile, their health is worse, and (significantly in terms of Layard's happiness criteria) they are not actively religious. But Mr. Zhang would be the first to admit that his standard of living is much better now than it was in the past, and that he and his wife are fortunate to have ended up with such a hard-working daughter and son-in-law. I have even heard him, with the help of a small glass of strong northern *baijiu*, become rather at peace with his life, and make glowing statements about the good friends, neighbors, and relatives on whom he relies—not to mention the Communist Party.

Of course, the general emotional fulfillment (or otherwise) of the Chens from Taiwan and the Zhangs from China is not something that can easily be captured in routine ethnographic observations. Their "happiness," to the extent they have it, must be a complex phenomenon: shaped not only by their underlying material

circumstances but also by a long list of conflated variables, only a few of which I have mentioned. Moreover, their attempts to make money cannot be assumed to follow from an explicit theory that wealth will bring happiness. Notably, in many cultures/societies, including China, some people work hard because work *itself* is valued—that is, it is not just a way of producing things, or of increasing wealth for oneself or for others; it may also be its own kind of "good" (cf. Potter and Potter 1990: 180–95; Harris 2007).[9] Also, as we might predict for families such as the Chens and the Zhangs, one of the most compelling motivations for intense economic activity is the possibility of slipping back into poverty. The elder Chens and Zhangs have an observable retrospective anxiety about their difficult pasts, something that modulates their optimism about the future. Whatever else they might want out of life (spiritual fulfillment, etc.), they certainly want security: both security of income, and the security of living in strong families and communities that will provide support when difficulties arise.[10] But what I primarily want to draw attention to in these examples is the fact of familial optimism, and a preparedness to try to succeed, whatever may be the contributing factors to this. In particular, I am interested in the outlook of the second generation—that is, of the Chens' son and the Zhangs' adopted daughter—and in the apparent willingness of this generation to study and/or work incredibly hard in order to have, among other things, more wealth. And yet, of course, actually *having* more wealth might be disappointing in the end: that is, it might not bring these individuals and their families what they are hoping for, and in some cases it might even bring them some things they definitely do not want.

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In order to reflect on this possibility, I now turn to a different fieldwork setting, in southwest China near the Burmese border. From my research there in the community of Protected Mountain, I could provide examples of progressive families whose situations are not unlike those of the Zhangs or the Chens.[11] But what is especially

9. As Harris notes, work is conceived of differently in different times and places, and its value is not necessarily linked to material rewards. The conceptualization of work/labor may entail the "celebration of human energy, creativity, and [the] capacity to make and expand relationships through work". For example, in the particular Andean case that Harris addresses in her paper, "work is sacralised, seen as an obligation, both because it is part of a continuous mutual nurturance between humans and deities, and because rights to land are articulated through collective work" (Harris 2007: 148). For their part, Potter and Potter (1990) stress the role of work as one of the most important ways of expressing emotion in Chinese culture.

10. Interestingly, as incomes have gone up in rural China, so too has expenditure on the rituals of gift exchange and reciprocity, which, in effect, produce and sustain relatedness and networks of social support (Yan 1996; Stafford 2000). Although this expenditure on reciprocity could be interpreted as "consumption" (consisting as it does of expenditure on banqueting, gift giving, gambling, etc.), most ordinary people, in my experience, see it as akin to buying insurance: it is a protection against the effects of things going wrong in the future.

11. See Stafford 2004 for a discussion of two cases from this fieldsite.

interesting about Protected Mountain is its long narrative of economic rise *and fall*. Briefly, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local people went to Burma as laborers, and not a few of them eventually accumulated wealth as traders. Many of the more successful "sojourners" later returned to Protected Mountain to build beautiful courtyard houses in which to retire. However, history soon intervened. The Japanese occupation dramatically interrupted the Burma trade routes, and after the Communist victory in the Chinese civil war, the border was eventually shut down altogether. After 1949, the explicitly Confucian orientation of Protected Mountain created problems for local people, and during the Cultural Revolution the beautiful traditional detailing of many of the old houses and buildings was either destroyed or hidden behind mud. Today, things have improved. But there is still an air of decline about the place, a sense that things were better in the past than they will ever be again.

Given the circumstances, the fall of the grand families of Protected Mountain must be seen as a historical phenomenon, and as something brought by *outside* and largely uncontrollable forces: the Japanese occupation, the Chinese civil war, Maoist antitraditionalism, and so on. From this perspective, it's not that the families (or the individuals in them) lost the will or motivation to work hard in an attempt to succeed and improve themselves, or that they lost faith in progress and the advantages of wealth; it's more that they had the misfortune to exist at a particular historical moment when everything conspired against them—no matter how hard they tried. But the decline of such families is also, in some cases, portrayed as an *internal* phenomenon, and perhaps even as something that *naturally* happens to families once a certain degree of wealth has been achieved. This may, in turn, set up tensions inside families as hopes and aspirations stop being coordinated across generations, for example as children become disenchanted with the actual state of living with plenty.

In considering the phenomenon of "declining" families in Protected Mountain, however, I need to draw attention to two variants, both of which can be found there. On the one hand, people who accumulate wealth may positively decide to turn their efforts to *higher* things, and perhaps give up the chase for money along the way. Note also that this might be coordinated across generations: for example, a father could decide, having made money, that his children deserve something better than mere money making, and he could push them away from it. This could, in turn, be based on his assumptions about what will give them a good life, and what will make them happy and/or fulfilled. In the case of Protected Mountain, which, as noted above, was explicitly Confucian in outlook, the higher things in question were primarily scholarly and artistic. Drawing on the tradition of valuing "learning" (*xuewen*) over commerce, some families—at least as they tell the story today—began to invest their wealth in education; to cite the Chinese idiom, they "attained Confucianism by way of doing business" (*you shang er ru*). Obviously, a good deal more could be said about this phenomenon. Using the critical terminology of Pierre Bourdieu, one might say that these families grew to value the *symbolic* capital of learning more than the merely *economic* capital of wealth—thus investing the latter in accumulating the former. And in some cases, as Bourdieu would predict, the accumulation of "culture" actually turned out to be a good basis for making yet more money in the future. This analytical framing partly echoes Veblen's

stinging critique of the "leisure class" in human history ([1899] 1984). In brief, he claims that *not* working, while applying oneself to noble but ultimately unproductive pursuits, is just another way of competing for status within society. Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure—however nobly construed—are signs of unproductive decadence, and of the human desire to be seen to be better than others, regardless of the ultimate (personal or social) cost.

Veblen notwithstanding, the turn toward culture was largely construed in positive terms by people in Protected Mountain, as I have already said. But there are also instances in which the lack of focus on wealth production was seen negatively—not as a moral renunciation of money chasing but rather as an immoral descent into laziness and/or decay. This, then, is the second variant of a declining family. To borrow the economists' way of putting things, the sons and daughters of the rich (including those in Protected Mountain) sometimes decide to allocate more of their time to, for example, gambling and drinking and vice in general than to wealth production—perhaps in part because of their disillusionment with having had it. Or instead of pursuing proper Confucian learning, while upholding and enhancing family virtue, they might involve themselves in decadent artistic pursuits, or just do nothing at all. They may want to spend without earning, no matter what the consequences. Somewhere along the way, they seem to have lost the incentive—wherever it came from—to work hard for the sake of increasing family wealth. To frame this in relation to emotion and affective forecasting: they have given up striving to get what other people (e.g., their elders) want them to want, perhaps in the pursuit of what might seem (e.g., from the vantage point of their elders) selfish indulgence.

But what does a declining family actually look like in contemporary China and Taiwan? In Shanghai, Taipei, and other cities, there is now conspicuous consumption on an industrial scale, of course, and the rise of a generation gap between apparently hedonistic young people and their elders. In the rural places where I have carried out fieldwork, such tendencies have not been so obvious, in part because the families I worked with were mostly living on relatively low incomes. But the tendencies do still exist, albeit in modified form, the key point being that these are generally cases *not* of wealthy families turning away from wealth but rather of ordinary rural families finding their progressive narrative going off track. One common issue, for example, is the existence of problem gamblers or drinkers or drug takers, or those who end up spending more than they should on household goods or other things simply in order to show off. Predictably, hard-working elders are bitterly disappointed to find themselves with descendants who seem determined to destroy their progressive economic narrative. In some circumstances, this is bad enough to bring a family into serious decline, as in the case of one younger couple I met during fieldwork in northeast China who were at risk of financial destruction thanks to the husband's gambling problem. Interestingly, his daughter, still a young child, had a progressive attitude—instilled through a combination of her mother's influence and the influence of her schoolteachers—and she was harshly critical of her father for the chronic gambling that was, in her view, harming her family. I do not have enough evidence to know for sure, but I would guess that his behavior was partly a function of bitterness and cynicism concerning his own life prospects: What hope was there that a poor guy from rural China would ever make serious money in such a corrupt system? His rejection of the chase after money, his descent

into drinking and, in particular, gambling, was thus very different from that of elite Protected Mountain families who, in the past, decided to focus their time and energy on calligraphic skills.

In any case, the kind of familial "decline" or "decadence" I have observed during fieldwork has more often been of a relatively low-key and subtle kind: that is, neither a turning to higher things nor a cynical rejection of life as it is. For example, the first family I lived with in rural Taiwan, the Lins, were among the wealthiest in the township (although, in Taiwanese terms, not unusually so). Mr. and Mrs. Lin lived with their three children in a large house facing the ocean, and spent more than most local people on food, entertainment, travel, and so on. Their wealth derived from hard—sometimes truly backbreaking—work in construction. At the time of my fieldwork, however, I spotted a tension, diffuse but observable, between the outlook of the parents and that of the children. In brief, the children (still young at the time) were inclined to avoid schoolwork or chores wherever possible, and to be a little self-indulgent, for example to eat as many sweets as they could. The parents did not like, and wished to change, these attitudes, and so there were many fights about it being time to study, and so on. I also sometimes felt that I observed in the children a mild—and largely inchoate—contempt for their hard-working parents, who were so obviously of rural Taiwanese stock. The children, products of high-quality "modern" schooling as much as of family life, spent most of their free time watching television programs about urban elites and seemed on track to be more sophisticated and "advanced" than their own parents … and possibly also much less hard working. One irony about this, already alluded to above, is that the advancement/sophistication of these children—which is precisely what most parents aspire to for their offspring (and certainly it is what they help pay for)—is also something that arguably turns them into fundamentally different kinds of persons than their parents (Stafford 1995). It was hard to picture these Taiwanese children eventually working, as their parents sometimes did, in muddy construction sites day and night. Were they themselves aiming for higher things? Did their parents assume that by providing comforts to their children, of one kind or another, they would be making them happy?

Notably, questions of these kinds could also be asked in relation to the Chens and the Zhangs, that is, in relation to the progressive families I have mentioned above. Might the Chens' son become, via education, more interested in pursuing art than in pursuing law? Might that path somehow lead him to abandon his (generally) Confucian outlook, his willingness to work hard just to please his parents? Might the ambitiousness of the Zhangs' daughter-in-law get the best of her, leading her to neglect the happiness not only of her adoptive parents but also of her own children? Through various experiences and interactions in the city, might she and her husband, at some point, lose their willingness to sacrifice so much for a common family purpose?

* * *

At this stage, let me briefly recapitulate the discussion so far. Some economists and psychologists argue that, beyond a certain level of income, wealth does not make us happy. The difficulty is that we sometimes behave as if it *will* make us happy—a potentially disastrous case of affective mis-forecasting. Of course, there is

significant variation in definitions and valuations of happiness across cultures, and in the case of China and Taiwan the significance of happiness (and of emotional life in general) has changed over time. Furthermore, when we look at examples of real Chinese and Taiwanese families, we are reminded not only that happiness is a complex psychological phenomenon, but also that the link between the willingness to work and the desire for wealth and/or happiness, as such, is not always obvious. One complication is that people are motivated not only by what they want but also often—and sometimes more importantly—by what the people around them want. In what I have called progressive families (such as the Chens and the Zhangs), the second generation *does* seem very highly motivated to work in order to have an improved life. This may be partly, even largely, because they are responding to their own assumptions/predictions about what will make older generations happy. And the older generations may be pushing them because of their assumptions/predictions about what will make younger generations happy. I have drawn a contrast between this and the situation in declining families, where the younger generations appear to be losing—or even actively resisting—the motivation for work and, perhaps, the general belief in progress. There are different scenarios for this, but some such people may come across as lazy, or self-indulgent. In terms of China's cultural tradition, they may also come across as strikingly *individualistic* in orientation, that is, as focused on their own happiness, pleasure, or utility rather than on family goals and family progress. The affective forecasting they care about, one might say, is of the purely personal kind rather than being intergenerational.

In his Malinowski Lecture for 2003, Yunxiang Yan explored this issue with reference to material from long-term fieldwork in Heilongjiang (Yan 2005). What he describes, however, is *not* a situation in which people are giving up on progress or rejecting material comfort. On the contrary, Yan describes a situation in which young people in the countryside appear to be chasing utility—basically in the form of money and material goods—at all costs. Among other things, some of them attempt to extract maximum bridewealth from their elders for their own personal benefit. They justify this partly on pragmatic grounds, but also with reference to a rather dimly comprehended, and deeply utilitarian, notion of "Western individualism."[12] This is not something that Yan finds it in himself to like, but he does clearly show some of the complex motivations behind the (individualistic and seemingly unfilial) actions of the young people he met during fieldwork. As he explains, they are motivated not just by a desire to be happy, but also by a growing sense that personal happiness and success is something they actually deserve. While this can be seen as selfish, some people in the local community do admire young women and men for the strength of character they show in standing up to elders and extracting what they need, or think they need, in order to face the future (Yan 2005: 644).

By contrast, who has a good word to say for the truly decadent? That is, who has a good word to say for young people who, unlike their parents, are not

12. Yan suggests that while Western individualism is normally assumed to centrally involve elements both of self-reliance and of duty to others, the version adopted by his informants in Heilongjiang is premised on a good deal of reliance on others (especially one's parents and siblings), and very limited duties.

prepared to work hard in order to improve their standard of living? For those who turn their backs altogether on the idea of wealth or financial security as the ultimate value? It is worth noting, again, that "decadent" young people of this kind might, in fact, be possessed of a kind of worldly wisdom. That is, having grown up in relative affluence—or at least in the absence of poverty—some of them may no longer believe that having money, as such, is a guarantee of happiness or fulfillment. Having observed the lives of the relatively affluent people around them, they may have decided that "progress" is not what they want or expect from their brief existences. What some would interpret as a lack of morality could therefore well be seen as a consistent (if arguably decadent, and potentially radical) ethical stance.

Interestingly, this stance also has a scientific basis, if one believes the recent findings of economists about happiness and wellbeing in post-Mao China. Here the evidence suggests that, "paradoxically," the huge increase in wealth has *not* produced a growth in happiness—that is, in spite of the fact that the uplift from relatively low levels of income should normally have done so. (In other words, this is not a case of a rich country getting richer.) As Richard Easterlin and his colleagues succinctly put it: "There is no evidence of an increase in life satisfaction [in China] of the magnitude that might have been expected to result from the fourfold improvement in the level of per capita consumption that has occurred"—in fact, there is probably a decline in life satisfaction, some would say a very steep one (Easterlin et al. 2012: 9775; for background see also Easterlin 2008 and Easterlin et al. 2010). And why should this be? The most plausible explanation, it seems, is that in spite of rising incomes, people have been made unhappy by a rise in unemployment, by the dissolution of China's (formerly strong) social safety net, by rising material aspirations (which, in effect, can never be satisfied), and by growing economic inequality (Easterlin et al. 2012; see also Brockmann et al. 2008). Note that although the case she discusses is radically different in many of its particulars, the article by Freeman on the Gamo people of Ethiopia (this collection) has definite resonances with the Chinese experience: for example, they seem to be made unhappy by rising inequality. Even for relatively poor people, then, it seems that money is not the route to happiness in all circumstances.

* * *

Of course, the idea that "money does not make you happy" is an element in folk philosophies in many parts of the world, along with the notion that moral perils attach to economic activity in general (Parry and Bloch 1989). In contemporary China, one certainly encounters nostalgia for the Maoist era, when wealth was trumped by higher (collectivist) values, and a regret that today all of social life appears to have been reduced to a chase after money. However, this has to be set against the overwhelming evidence of what people actually prioritize in their own actions—that is, the pursuit of wealth—and the countervailing folk philosophies which encourage them to do so. The proportion of people in China and Taiwan who truly opt out of chasing money, as things stand, is surely very small. One reason for this is that every individual is a locus of affective predictions (reliable or not); to seriously challenge such predictions, for example by adopting a life-course that loved ones see as doomed to failure, is not an easy task.

The economist John Kenneth Galbraith, while not exactly extolling the virtues of decadence, as such, has put in a good word for idleness. As Veblen explained back in the late nineteenth century, idleness is sometimes simply another "good" which is there to impress others—especially those who still have to work for a living. But in a book which interestingly prefigures the conclusions of Richard Layard, and written almost half a century earlier, Galbraith argues (with considerably less cynicism than Veblen) that the modern capitalist system is built to address problems which are simply no longer relevant for those of us living in developed, affluent societies (Galbraith [1958] 1999). Everything is still oriented toward the production of goods, whereas in fact the last thing we need in the affluent world is more material goods. Like Layard, Galbraith thinks that sorting out inequality, unhappiness, and so on, would be a nobler goal than increasing productivity and generating wealth.[13] So why should we still find the failure to be productive so offensive? Why do we condemn it? As he observes: "The idle man may still be an enemy of himself. But it is hard to say that the loss of his effort is damaging to society" (ibid.: 215). An argument of this kind, not to mention a fully fledged defense of decadence, will probably not find much purchase in the China of today, nor in Taiwan. But as these societies become increasingly affluent, it seems inevitable that more and more people will find themselves working hard in the pursuit of money that is not, in fact, making them any happier. At least a few of them are bound to catch on.

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13. He says: "The Benthamite test of public policy was 'what serves the greatest happiness of the greatest number', and happiness was more or less implicitly identified with productivity. This is still the official test. In modern times, the test has not been very rigorously applied. We have somewhat sensed though we have not recognized the declining importance of goods. Yet even in its deteriorated form we cling to this criterion. It is so much simpler than to substitute the other tests—compassion, individual happiness and well-being, the minimization of community or other social tensions—which now become relevant" (ibid.: 214).

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Mieux vaut songer deux fois à ses souhaits: Le cas du bonheur en Chine

Résumé : Cet article rapproche des matériaux ethnographiques de Chine rurale et de Taiwan des théories et de découvertes récentes sur la psychologie et l'économie du bonheur. Selon ces recherches, les psychologues suggèrent que les humains ne sont pas très compétents en matières de "prévisions affectives", ou en d'autres

termes, que nous anticipons mal nos émotions. Cela peut porter à conséquence, par exemple lorsque des humains cherchent à gagner de l'argent pour être heureux sans réaliser qu'avoir de l'argent ne les rendra en fait probablement pas plus heureux. En m'appuyant sur des données ethnographiques, je suggère que les personnes qui habitent en Chine et a Taiwan s'intéressent autant à la prediction des émotions des autres qu'à la prédiction des leurs. Dans cette perspective, je présente des projets familiaux chinois où la poursuite de richesses - "pour le bonheur familial" - semble être un but partagé, ainsi que d'autres exemples de familles où ce projet partagé semble s'être perdu.

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