

The *Dao* of Happiness in Contemporary China:

On the Encompassing Meanings and Affects of “*Xingfu*”

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ABSTRACT: The notion of happiness has been extended in recent decades from a quality of well-being to a value-laden concept employed in political campaigns, development plans, commercial advertising, and transnational psychology. In China, the term *xingfu* has extended through this tendency, articulated as an equivalent of deep-seated individualised “happiness,” while also carrying elements of livelihood and social welfare. Drawing on fieldwork in psychological workshops and diverse academic and political texts, this article conceptualises the semiotic and communicative attributes of *xingfu* in Chinese society today. I define *xingfu* as a contemporary *dao*, in the sense that it emerges as a consensual priority that alludes to seeming universal humanity, which may be employed to validate other political agendas, while it also activates diverse interactions and imaginaries that extend beyond preexisting or fixed priorities.

KEYWORDS: happiness, *xingfu*, China, positive psychology, Xi Jinping, Sara Ahmed, self-improvement.

Introduction

After an exercise of self-expression in pairs, instructor Jiang, a 55-year-old psychologist, clarified its purpose. The participants had to repeatedly ask each other “Who are you?” and then respond by acknowledging and peeling off “superficial” labels such as employment, family status, hometown, and age, until they would recognise their supposed profound immaterial and subjective dimension. This was a Saturday workshop in the city of Jinan at a psychological centre for counsellors and aficionados, many of whom were versed in such drills. Jiang stated that only by addressing their capacities and desires beyond social roles and obligations would the participants find the path to happiness (*xingfu* 幸福). This message resonated with the participants, as they elaborated in the subsequent class discussion. It was commonsensical for participants that *xingfu* – the common term for deep and enduring happiness – is the framework for self-perception and evaluation; at the same time, they experienced Jiang’s message as stimulating and empowering.

This scene, in addition to demonstrating how self-improvement expertise animates optimism through interactive drills (Hizi 2021), underscores the priority of *xingfu* in China today. Since 2019, more and more people in China feel disenchanted with the prospects of economic reform and social mobility (Tan and Cheng 2020) in response to Covid-19 lockdowns, rising living expenses, decreased

rate of economic growth, and exploitative work conditions. This has led to suspicion towards terms that signify people’s omnipotent self-development. The word “dream” (*mengxiang* 夢想), for example, although still widely expressed in educational settings and entertainment media in China, is now confronted with cynicism, which is amplified due to its association with the state’s “China Dream” campaigns (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢) initiated in 2013. *Xingfu*, however, is more immune to these suspicions, remaining a common and foundational denominator in an imagined better social reality and an antithesis to people’s stress and anxiety. The fact that, over the last three decades, *xingfu* has increasingly been used by policymakers in China, including Xi Jinping’s vision speeches, as well as its meanings having been shaped by market products, prompts little reservation among urban Chinese people about the objective itself, both in performative rhetoric and in deliberation over their life paths. For most of the people I encounter, the meanings of *xingfu* continue to exceed any particular institution or political agenda.

In this article, I draw on the literature on the evolving and culminating priority of happiness in China in the new millennium (Yang 2013, 2014; Kunze 2018; Wielander and Hird 2018; Hsu and Madsen 2019). While I am indebted to the rich insights and evidence on the usages, applications, and meanings of happiness in these sources, my approach diverges from previous studies in two main aspects. First, I treat *xingfu* as my prime object of observation

and analysis. Although the language of *xingfu* is related to various concepts regarding well-being, and is proliferating in relation to global political and economic processes, including Happiness Indexes and self-help industries (Nehring et al. 2016), I refrain from conflating *xingfu* with other happiness-related terms unless this connection is made explicit in my data. I draw on texts by Chen L. (2019) and Wielander (2018b) that analyse this concept, yet my project does not extend to documenting the diversity of Chinese voices on “happiness” (Wielander 2018a: 4, 11) or to unravelling “happiness” in relation to multiple values that define the “good life” (Hsu 2019a). Instead, I seek to explore *xingfu* as a linguistic device of meaning-making. Furthermore, although this article is written for an English-speaking audience, I do not treat *xingfu* as a proxy for the English signifier “happiness” but rather as the ultimate object of enquiry, since *xingfu* carries its distinct linguistic components with historical significance (Kipnis 2024: 13-8). When stating “happiness,” I do so only for pragmatic or specific comparative purposes.

The second attribute of my approach is examining *xingfu* as a key linguistic element in the lived constitution of Chinese society today, with its consistent and contradictory facets, while not treating *governance* as the ultimate endpoint of this analytical endeavour. Like the previous critical studies mentioned above, I evade any positivist attempt to measure or evaluate happiness as a coherent inner state. However, the significance of this analysis does not gravitate towards governance, even though the Chinese state is a key factor in the circulation of this term. *Xingfu* is conceived and expressed – even when it is uttered in state campaigns – in relation to ontological and moral questions about human capacities, thus remaining semiotically irreducible to existing structures. While state actors promote the language of *xingfu* to combat dissent (Yang 2015), its meanings diffuse beyond such dynamics. I therefore study *xingfu* not *through* but *alongside* subject-formation, recognising how it absorbs meanings through people’s social and ideological requirements (citizenship conformity, familial roles, market productivity, self-development) while simultaneously conveying a more comprehensive emotional-moral experience at both individual and group levels.

In identifying and conceptualising this quality of *xingfu*, I treat it as a contemporary “*dao*” (道) of Chinese society. The term *dao* (way) is associated with early political texts in China from the Spring and Autumn Period (approximately 770–470 BCE) onward, signifying the behavioural paths through which people can achieve a morally good or fulfilling life and constitute viable communities. By following the *dao*, one executes the best conduct in specific situations while also contributing to realising a meaningful life. In early Confucian texts, *dao* is notably ascribed to moral and effective political rulership based on several key virtues, such as benevolence, filial piety, and wisdom, while in Daoism, *dao* also signifies a generative force within the natural flow of the world, thus grounding a life philosophy (Crane 2013: 28). Overall, what constitutes the *dao* depends on situations, worldviews, and political standpoints, accommodating multiplicity (Small and Patt-Shamir 2024), while maintaining the idea that there is a holistic approach that could become a dominant framework for individuals and groups. *Xingfu* today is a *dao* in the sense that it is treated as an irresistible factor and consensual goal that unites ethics and livelihood, extending a longstanding congruence in China between sentiment and reason (Liu 2011; Sundararajan 2015: 89,

192). Furthermore, similar to *dao*, people may imagine *xingfu* in relation to different additional endpoints, be they spiritual elevation, material prosperity, or governance.

I refer to *xingfu* as a *dao* with some reservation and irony. In contrast to the famous observation that opens the *Dao de jing* (道德經), “the *dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *dao*” (Lau 1963: 57), *xingfu* is in a state of hyper-utterance and recognition, ceaselessly reemerging through popular discourse, digital media, and state propaganda. Nevertheless, I suggest this association, since *dao* itself is an idealising imaginary rather than a palpable form of behaviour that can be realised uniformly across the population or throughout individuals’ lives. Like the notion of *dao*, *xingfu* today is widely treated in China as the purpose of self-cultivation and a desired state that should guide life choices. It extends to being perceived as a quality of social interactions and statecraft, while it semiotically alludes to the nature of humanity, supported by “science.” *Xingfu* is an elusive concept that is reproduced performatively by individual citizens, educators, advertisers, entertainment productions, and politicians in “a circular logic” that “demands one’s capacity for happiness in order to be happy” (Kunze 2018: 46).

These applications of *xingfu* differ from findings on the meanings of happiness elsewhere. The philosopher Dorothea Frede (2013) laments that in the West there has been an ongoing divide between morality and happiness, bolstered by Christian traditions. This has tied happiness semiotically to subjective euphoric experience. Frede emphasises the dissolution of the ancient Greek notion of eudaimonia, which combines morality, positive feelings, and the “good life,” and that no longer serves as an endpoint for ethical action, a transformation that hinders the possibility for virtue ethics (ibid.: 141). While the influence of Christian traditions extends beyond Western societies, manifested in labour organisation (Weber 1958) and psychotherapy (Foucault 2012), China deviates from this model, where the craze for *happiness* is continuously entangled with questions about meaningful life and desired social processes. *Xingfu* is expressed in moralistic undertones about the direction of social change combined with the individual’s orientation in the world. Thus, rather than being simply an expression of individualisation that shifts people’s attention away from the public good, *xingfu* has become a national priority and objective of development, while paradoxically being informed by the commodified and individualised effects of market expansion.

In the following sections, I describe the recent upsurge of *xingfu* in Chinese official and popular discourses, showing how this is located in a global trend while constituting a particular local nexus of meaning and practices, influenced by psychological expertise. I then introduce theoretically the ways in which *xingfu* is experientially associated by social actors with different objects and meanings, aided by the works of Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010) and Theodor Schatzki (1996). Subsequently, I discuss the existential quest for meaningful lives that has become central in deliberations over *xingfu* in China, hence shaping the moral and contingent nature of the term. Finally, I exemplify how *xingfu* is deployed in political agendas that foster nationalistic measures, showing its hegemony as a vehicle for ideology combined with its openness to diverse agendas. By including these different layers, I illuminate the plurality and fluidity in the language of *xingfu*, while advancing

a theory of *xingfu* (and not of “well-being”) as a lived device and object of meaning-making, thereby refraining from overly paradigmatic reductions of this term.

Happiness and *xingfu* in China, past to present

The happiness vocabulary in China has a long genealogy. In the early imperial periods, two key terms for happiness or joy were 樂 *le* and 喜 *xi*. Michael Nylan’s extensive study on positive feelings in ancient China, drawing on an array of Confucian and Daoist sources, points out an important difference between these terms. While *xi* commonly depicted short-term and sensual pleasures (Nylan 2018: 42-3), *le* carried a more ethical component, emanating from activities that foster friendships or good taste, such as art. Both terms conveyed pleasure that emerged in a tangible situation, yet only *le* had an aspect of self-cultivation. The term *xingfu* was rarely used at the time, with the character 福 *fu* conveying wealth and prosperity. In the late imperial period, the relationship between good feelings and morality in China was seen in new perspectives. The writing of neo-Confucian scholar Wang Yangming 王陽明 combined with Romanticist influences granted importance to sentiments and desire as intertwined with moral intuition (Elvin 1985: 173). This drew attention in philosophical and artistic texts to lived gaps between ritualistic gestures or societal expectations and people’s genuine will. This tendency reached a culmination at the turn of the twentieth century, fuelled by psychoanalytical theories that associated positive emotions with individual competency and self-realisation (Larson 2008). Numerous political, intellectual, and artistic texts of this period sought to unmask and unshackle the individual actor as a source of unique desires that tend to be inhibited by traditional institutions or feudal exploitation (see Davies 2008: 238).

Along with this development, the term *xingfu* reemerged in China at the turn of the twentieth century. As Chen L. (2019) demonstrates, this term had a life of its own, independent of the traditional deployment of its two characters; political reformers at the time drew on utilitarian philosophy combined with the attempt to produce a society with greater welfare for its people. Hence, *xingfu* was an appropriate term, containing a materialistic component absent in most earlier signifiers for happiness, while it also signalled a break from earlier political and moral philosophies, which were highly criticised at the time (Chen L. 2019: 32). By the time of the Communist Revolution, political leaders associated *xingfu* with the imagined utopian liberation of the Chinese proletariat from oppressive social structures. A popular slogan in the 1940s aimed at making China a “*xingfu* and prosperous socialist society” (*fanrong xingfu de shehui zhuyi shehui* 繁榮幸福的社會主義社會) (Wielander 2018b: 26), which was continuously supplemented with literary and cinematic accounts where actors found emotional self-realisation in revolutionary commitments (Wang B. 1997: 151). Party publications at the time began addressing the topic and meanings of *xingfu* extensively, emphasising its effortful and revolutionary aspects rather than a life of material prosperity or individualised satisfaction (Chen T. 1969: 94).

In spoken language today, Chinese citizens use four main terms for happiness: 快樂 *kuaile*, 高興 *gaoxing*, 開心 *kaixin*, and *xingfu*. Although their differences are occasionally blurred in colloquial

usage, the former three terms tend to signify more short-term feelings, depicting a present state or a reaction to an event, even though they may also be employed to describe personalities or lifestyles (Bram 2021: 229).¹ *Xingfu* pertains to a more existential state of being and a meaningful objective, combining its connection to livelihood with contemporary therapeutic undertones, and hence is also the common term used in surveys for well-being. In addition, people’s reflections on their *xingfu* receive the spotlight in entertainment shows, newspaper columns, and self-help books as both the title of various products or items and as the topic of in-depth deliberation.² Questions such as “Are you happy?” (*ni xingfu ma?* 你幸福嗎?) or “What is happiness?” (*xingfu shi shenme?* 幸福是什麼?) have become buzz phrases since 2012, occupying airtime and online space for numerous debates and expressions of seeming life wisdom (for an additional description of this upsurge in this language of happiness in Chinese press and media, see Wielander 2018a: 2, 9; Chen L. 2019: 19-20, 35-6). *Xingfu* is also a celebrated goal of official discourse, where Xi Jinping continuously states it as a key aspect of development.³ It is difficult to obtain a coherent assessment in these sources, as well as in the reading of scientific surveys, of whether Chinese people are becoming more *xingfu* along with economic transformation, or whether “unhappiness” is rather a so-called modern malaise. However, people are responding in less neutral ways to inquiries about their *xingfu* as the years progress (Lu, Xiong, and Yang 2013: 25), which demonstrates the rising stakes of being *xingfu* and, possibly, how the perceptive lack of *xingfu* turns into misery.⁴

Xingfu and psychology in China

The priority of *xingfu* has been bolstered by the expanding practice of psychology in China in the new millennium. Since the 1980s, the “opening up” of China facilitated new academic ties that introduced therapeutic methods to Beijing and Shanghai (Chang et al. 2005). It was not until the 2000s, however, that psychology moved out of academic and medical institutions to gain wider social access. In 2002, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security established the National Exam for Psychological Counsellors (*xinli zixunshi zhiye renzheng zige kaoshi* 心理諮詢師職業認證資格考試) to increase the number of practitioners, while also expanding counselling services into new social settings. This new institution, which was soon accompanied by designated training programmes, has allowed individuals in various therapeutic, public service, and high-pressure

1. A paramount example is Jia Pingwa’s 2007 novel *Happy Dreams* (*Gaoxing* 高興), which depicts a migrant worker in Xi’an who cultivates positive feelings as he meets the opportunities and challenges of urban life.
2. One of many shows that carry *xingfu* in their title is 向幸福出發 (*xiang xingfu chufa*, Head towards happiness), a show on CCTV 3 (entertainment) running from 2010 to date, that examines the lifestyle, worldviews, and happiness of seemingly ordinary people.
3. For example, see Xi Jinping 習近平, 2014, 習近平談治國理政 (*Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng*, Xi Jinping discusses the governance of the country), Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe.
4. This comprehensive study by Lu, Xiong, and Yang surveyed the happiness of tens of thousands of Chinese citizens of different social groups between 2003 and 2010, where they reported one of five conditions: “very happy,” “happy,” “unhappy,” “very unhappy,” or “neither happy nor unhappy”; the latter selection decreased from 49.8% in 2003 to 17.7% in 2020.

occupations to become counsellors without a prior background in psychology. The fact that training in counselling has become a path for non-practitioners (and is often even demanded in some state organisations) has blurred the line between counselling as a treatment and as a toolbox for self-use in trainees' own social circles, as indicated by surveys on the objectives of new examinees (Tang and Fang 2009). Through this influence, therapeutic sensibilities and deliberations have become more mainstream as well as commodified service. Popular teachers and authors of psychological expertise play a role in depicting social values and processes (Hizi 2024) and buttressing the centrality of *xingfu*. One paramount example is the teaching of Yu Dan 於丹, a professor at Beijing Normal University who became a popular teacher and author of a self-help book, and connects Confucian teachings with the capitalist world while applying *xingfu* as the incentive and outcome of ethical behaviour (Zhang Y. 2014). More recently, Peng Kaiping 彭凱平, the Chair of Psychology at Tsinghua University and an advocate of positive psychology, has become a common face on state-run internet sites and entertainment television, offering advice for a happy life.

In addition to analysing scholarly and political primary texts, press articles, and entertainment media, I draw on findings from psychology workshops in which I participated. I focus primarily on one psychology centre in the city of Jinan, a second-tier industrial and educational hub in the highly populated Shandong Province in northeastern China. Jinan is a provincial capital that experienced the second wave of psychological services and expertise in China, after they extended beyond the upper-middle class of first-tier cities. The psychology centre Heart's Secret offers annual membership to dedicated enthusiasts (most of whom are also licensed counsellors) for RMB 1,200-1,400, and in turn provides discounted access to workshops and training courses, while most workshops also cater to a wider public. Most participants are between 25 and 45 years old and married with children. It was not uncommon for me to sit in on activities between a participant with a five-digit monthly income and a university student or a worker earning RMB 3,000 a month. In a second-tier city such as Jinan, psychology programmes have not become excessively stratified, but rather cater to different niche groups, and they are expansive enough to include new clientele.

In 2015, I was a member of Heart's Secret, and attended 21 weekend workshops (one or two days long), 12 evening classes on weekdays, and three four- to five-day workshops, which were run during national holidays. I was invited to this programme through a local acquaintance, and despite their initial curiosity, most participants regarded my identity as a foreign researcher as congruent with their interest in the science of psychology. In addition, some participants explicitly addressed me as a "happy" and individualistic person by virtue of my foreignness and mobility, thus regarding me as a valuable interlocutor for this setting. As I will elaborate, deliberation and performances of *xingfu* are frequent in this and other psychological-pedagogical settings, taking shape in tandem with the reflection on how to realise a unique and robust "self." Frequently, instructors and participants in these workshops comment that engagement with psychology signifies a committed pursuit of and even demand (*yaoqiu* 要求) for *xingfu*. Through observing these expressions in interactive pedagogical settings, I identify the lived meanings and discursive contours of *xingfu*. I

further explored this during my semi-structured interviews with members (20 altogether) and additional friendly conversations with them. The selection of these individuals evolved through a combination of their interest in my research and their desire to discuss their personal and existential concerns, along with more practical factors. In this paper I draw on a discursive analysis of interlocutors' statements that elicits, at one level, explicit mentions of *xingfu*, and, at another, any statement that pertains to well-being and self-realisation. I processed a discursive analysis of the phrasing and rhetorical devices (questioning, accentuation, crescendos, etc.) with non-discursive elements such as intonation, bodily gestures, and interactional effects.

Theorising expressions of *xingfu*

Participants in Heart's Secret's workshops express the objective of *xingfu* in multiple drills during the workshops. Most workshops begin with a circle of self-introduction in which participants share the reasons for their attendance, which include goals such as "understanding myself" (*liaojie ziji* 了解自己), "becoming a better self" (*zuo geng hao de ziji* 做更好的自己), and feeling "more *xingfu*." Another round of sharing takes place at the conclusion of activities, where participants communicate their emotional states after the activity. Some participants repeat a principle or motto from the teaching, some share an insight that they "gained" (*shouhuo* 收穫), and others state feel-good therapeutic terms such as *xingfu*, "acceptance" (*jiena* 接納), "optimistic" (*leguan* 樂觀), or "tranquil" (*pingjing* 平靜). *Xingfu* specifically is a trope in which people address their challenges and objectives, as well as a concept that signals the value of this pedagogical setting and with psychology more generally, as a valid scientific intervention that understands and addresses core aspects of universal humanity (Hizi 2024).

Terms for happiness signify an innate feeling with semantic consistency while they are shaped through the registers and affordances of specific settings. The affective capacity of the term "happiness" and its derivatives are elaborated by Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2010), who examines what happiness and other emotions "do" in communication. While Ahmed's monograph on happiness (*The Promise of Happiness*, 2010) is the most frequently cited in the critical literature on happiness, I also draw on her earlier theory of affect (Ahmed 2004a, 2004b), since it offers a framework that brings together the semiotics and performance of emotional concepts. Ahmed understands emotions as signs that both convey meaning and prescribe the ways in which social actors respond to particular situations, objects, and images. Emotions emerge in the interface of individual perception and the social circulation of these associations (2004a: 119), producing moral meanings vis-à-vis the bodily feelings of this encounter, which in turn gradually become habituated in people's reactions. For example, the normative reaction towards a national flag can be promulgated through political speeches, media images, and ceremonies, while also becoming a defined emotion (pride, joy, love, etc.) that people ascribe to their "inner" psyche. As distinct from theories of rituals or Judith Butler's theory of performance (1993), Ahmed conveys a dynamic and contingent process that is developed through ongoing circulation and where meaning is constantly under development, either through new

associations or by changing levels of intensity. Emotive terms play a central role in this process:

What I am offering is a theory of passion not as the drive to accumulate (...) but as that which is accumulated over time. Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time). Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect (Ahmed 2004a: 120).

The more specific emotions are socially linked to particular signs, the more they could be reinforced through communication and amalgamated into shared emotive standpoints (Ahmed 2004b: 10). Furthermore, emotional concepts themselves become value laden through this process, making them desired or rejected (or disavowed) depending on their associations. In the case of happiness, today it tends to invite approximation while unhappiness is understood as a character flaw (Ahmed 2010; Yang 2015; Richaud 2021).

Ahmed’s insights can assist in understanding how the language of happiness underlines specific subject positions, such as individualised and self-reliant citizenship, as well as socioeconomic competence (2010: 11). But this theory also entails transforming meanings across different social contexts and the possible discrepancies between feelings and social concepts. This is relevant for understanding *xingfu*, an emotive *dao* that appears both as a hegemonic priority in Chinese society and as a riddle to be constantly addressed, performed, and pursued through and beyond fixed trajectories. When engaging with happiness discursively, my interlocutors (workshop participants) do not merely celebrate a fixed model, but also try to produce performative congruences between bodily states, behaviours, and cultural inputs. Spending time with one’s family members or pursuing a non-married life away from familial pressures, advancing in one’s career or immersing oneself in leisure activities at the expense of social competition, and aspiring for an individualistic society or cheering for the ascendancy of China as a global power – all these different possibilities were expressed by my interlocutors through the language of *xingfu*, embellished with vivid and emotional expressions.

Ahmed’s theory is hence relevant for semiotics and epistemology, whereby actors constantly configure how they should behave and what they should value through streams of communication and media. As Theodore Schatzki (1996) emphasises, practice contains, in addition to the execution of social roles, a process of making the world intelligible. When trying to make sense of particular situations, people negotiate between their understanding of the external signals and their behaviours, thus configuring their actions, beliefs, feelings, and purposes (ibid.: 100, 111). This endeavour seeks to achieve “coherence” between the individual and the world, either by adapting temporarily to the behavioural codes of the given situation or by seeking to adjust one’s worldviews and values in accordance with influential inputs. In Heart’s Secret workshops, participants associate *xingfu* through speech and intellect with signs and objects that include personal qualities (individual autonomy, open mindedness, emotionality), states of being (tranquillity, optimism), as well as activities of self-improvement, leisure, and travel. To

paraphrase Annemarie Mol’s point on “good taste,” experiencing *xingfu* here means enacting *xingfu*, “while absorbing the linguistic repertoires that help to fine tune,” as well as recognising and expressing this emotion (2009: 277).

In specific historical periods, specific terms become signs that both buttress the existing sociopolitical system and carry a torch of moral progress. The term *dao* in early Confucian and Daoist texts, albeit abstract, was employed to combat corruptive moral elements in leadership and social ethics and restore “appropriate” customs. In Daoism, *dao* lacks this moralising tone and signals a more spontaneous and non-disciplinary flow (Liu 2011), but this call still informs social ethics in contrast to problematic behaviours or Confucian teaching. *Xingfu* today is similarly becoming a matter of progress at the levels of morality and the social experience. It is about making reality intelligible and transformable at the same time, as exemplified by Qiaozhen, a 24-year-old woman who was a member and part-time office worker at Heart’s Secret. Qiaozhen frequently raised life dilemmas in workshops and more casual conversations. She studied psychology as an undergraduate and had also obtained a counselling license. During our last one-on-one dinner before I concluded my fieldwork, our conversation had a more festive tone than usual. “Do you have a view on life’s meaning? What actually counts as *xingfu* for you?” she asked. In the subsequent dialogue, Qiaozhen expressed perplexity regarding her pursuit of *xingfu* combined with some insights on the topic: one must have rich experiences and activities outside the “routine” (*changwu* 常務), not just settle for “eating and drinking,” and not be immersed in “survival” (*shengcun* 生存). For Qiaozhen, *xingfu* was tied to recognising her individuality and cherishing things she had “neglected” (*hulüe* 忽略) while she was trying to meet others’ expectations. These tropes of moving beyond the mundane and conventional practice are entwined for her with the celebration of the pursuit. In the eyes of Qiaozhen and many Chinese youth, who embrace individualised sensibilities and are highly aware of generational gaps, *xingfu* is chronically lacking in the current social reality. However, this tension coexists with a wider sociopolitical affirmation of *xingfu* as a signature attribute of social development, encompassing all social actors and their multiple requirements. The current sociopolitical reality affords constant engagement with *xingfu* while ascribing it to different projects and objectives, as long as they do not undermine the governing regime.

Xingfu and the Chinese search for meaning

“The gentleman concerns himself with the Way; he does not worry about his salary” (*The Analects*, translation by Ebrey 2009: 18).

Qiaozhen’s expressive introspection connects two related questions that are prevalent in pedagogical settings in China, “What is *xingfu*?” and “Who am I?”, supposedly unravelling a genuine self with an independent will that strives to be *xingfu*. In psychological circles in China, this existential exercise is particularly salient, bringing together positive psychology, with its focus on a proactive quest for emotional well-being, and a conviction that people have

the ability to sustain agency and moral integrity vis-à-vis and above the practicalities of everyday life, similar to the Confucian statement above.

An underlying assumption in urban China is that material conditions do not determine happiness. Several workshops that I attended at Heart's Secret, as well as numerous academic articles by Chinese psychologists, mention the famous Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin 1974), according to which levels of happiness are not parallel to rising income levels, both within and across nations. The social psychologist Xing Zhanjun 邢佔軍 of Shandong University (Jinan) extensively discusses this phenomenon in Chinese society (Xing 2009), fuelling the discussion in various local studies. While the authors and workshop instructors I encountered do not deny that material subsistence is a prerequisite for emotional health, the focus in China is often on how to maintain and enhance *xingfu* in contemporary lifestyles characterised by rapid pace, self-interest, and materialism (Hizi 2024). For example, a study by Liu and Zhang (2011), which combines economics and positive psychology, discusses *xingfu* in relation to business, wealth, and entrepreneurial lifestyles. Based on a survey of urban businessmen, the authors advocate maintaining a separation between home and work to induce emotional balance. They construe "success" as one of the outcomes of a *xingfu* mental state rather than the other way around (ibid.: 105).

The key prescription is fostering attention, effort, and space to produce experiences that perceptively stem from the will of the individual. The teaching of humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, with their focus on a never-ending pursuit of self-realisation, is prevalent in psychological programmes in China, along with teaching to overcome existential crises, such as that offered by Irvin Yalom and Viktor Frankl. Frankl is particularly influential in workshops which I attended, with his methods of raising people's awareness of the meaning of their lives and their agency to pursue it under any circumstance (Frankl 2005). Paul Wong, a positive-existential psychologist working both in Canada and in the Chinese-speaking world, writes extensively about the contribution of Frankl, indicating that his attention to negative feelings should complement positive psychology's focus on positivity, together producing viable therapeutic methods (Wong 2009).⁵ Wong develops a prescription for "self-transcendence," by which people learn to overcome sheer self-interest and challenges in connecting to a higher calling (ibid.: 9). One of the prominent influences in psychological self-help in China, Harvard University lecturer Tal Ben-Shahar, is unsurprisingly also an enthusiast of Frankl. Ben-Shahar, who has delivered courses in Chinese universities following the popularity of his online courses on "happiness," promotes methods for producing greater "life purpose" through quick individualised exercises of journal writing, "gratitude" expression, and self-accountability (Ben-Shahar 2007: 10, 43, 70-1).

Xingfu, as a quest for meaning, is thus addressed in continuous dialogue with actual conditions, entailing both fatalism and the pursuit, in Wong's terms, of "transcendence." This dualism is nowhere more apparent than in the topic of familial obligations. Much of the content of psychological workshops in China, as I and other anthropologists have witnessed (Yang 2017; Zhang L. 2020), is dedicated to participants' relationships with their parents,

children, and significant others. Instructors often invite participants to resist attempts to please their family members and identify their individual will and existence. This involves thinking about *xingfu* – for oneself – and, even more importantly, for one's children. One 30-year-old female psychology aficionado and participant at Heart's Secret once told me that she believes that children should "hate [their parents] a little bit" (*you yidian hen* 有點恨) in order to suspend their emotional subordination to parental authority. At the same time, I have never heard participants or instructors suggest that emotional well-being could be independent from a good relationship with one's parents (Hsu 2019b). Instead, workshops offer advice on sincere and better communication with parents. Role-playing exercises in which participants proclaim "I love you!" to their parent, enacted by another participant, are a common sight in these workshops in Jinan and elsewhere in China (Hansen 2015: 142). By continuously emphasising the virtue of filial piety, which, according to them, is particularly evident in Shandong, the region of early Confucianism, my interlocutors convey it as both an obstacle to *xingfu* and as an inevitable factor for emotional flourishing, a contradiction that is rarely fully settled.

The engagement with *xingfu* entails an attempt to unravel a holistic principle for human life, which has recently been increasingly associated with the imagined essence of the individual self, while at the same time *xingfu* is coupled with diverse elements such as commodities and consumption, interpersonal relationships, and citizenship. As Jie Yang (2013) shows, the pursuit and language of happiness in China, following global therapeutic trends, underlines the growing individual responsabilisation during insecure welfare provision. On another level, *xingfu* is cited by state actors to display their caring authority and legitimise state policies. Thus, *xingfu* is not unidirectionally "internalised" through the priority of self-help, but rather manifests itself as a publicly shared objective and a vector for good administration.

Xingfu and national projects

The prosperity of a country, the rejuvenation of the nation, and the *xingfu* of the people are not abstract; they must ultimately be reflected in the *xingfu* of thousands of families and the continuous improvement of the lives of hundreds of millions of people. (Xi Jinping, 2012)⁶

In political thinking in China, including politicians' statements, press releases, and scholarly articles, *xingfu* appears as an unquestionable goal associated with political agendas. Three main properties of *xingfu* in these sources are its comprehensiveness (*quanmianxing* 全面性) as a sign of excellent living conditions,

5. Paul Wong, "Two Different Models of Human Flourishing: Seligman's PERMA Model Versus Wong's Self-transcendence Model," *International Network on Personal Meaning*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.meaning.ca/article/two-different-models-of-human-flourishing-seligmans-perma-model-versus-wongs-self-transcendence-model/> (accessed on 10 December 2024).

6. Xi Jinping 習近平, "在會見第一屆全國文明家庭代表時的講話" (*Zai huijian diyi jie quanguo wenming jiating daibiao shi de jianghua*, Speech at the meeting with representatives of the first national civilised families), *People's Daily* (人民日報), 16 December 2012, www.qdxc.gov.cn/study/study/2016/1216/1505.html (accessed on 18 February 2023).

its contribution to “harmony” between different social actors or between citizens and their social realities, and its elevated position as an objective of effort and “struggle” (*fendou* 奮鬥). First, as a comprehensive attribute, *xingfu* indicates the satisfaction of citizens’ various needs as well as the outcome of wholesome social development. As Jun Yan and Menghuan Zheng suggest in an article that covers Xi Jinping’s “*xingfu* ideology” (*xingfu guan* 幸福觀), *xingfu* must be thoroughly promoted by state actors in terms of meeting citizens’ living requirements and covering every member of society (2019: 13). This view extends the utilitarian principle of the “greatest happiness to the greatest number” associated with Jeremy Bentham’s (1970) philosophy, which has influenced ideas of social development in China since the early twentieth century (Chen L. 2019). In Xi’s campaigns, *xingfu* also extends beyond livelihood to diverse and abstract dimensions of human life, including spiritual depth, cultural resources, and ecological conservation, along with immediate positive feelings and a sense of purpose (Wang R. 2019). This rhetorical alliance between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s vision and citizens’ *xingfu* seeks to legitimise the former’s moral authority (Morell Hjortshøj 2024) and its paternalistic-intimate image as the provider of palpable well-being (Kipnis 2024: 16). This principle is not only a propaganda device but also a main trope in debates about policy-making. In addition, textbooks for civil servants configure their commitment to the public good through the goal of people’s *xingfu*.⁷

Second, as *xingfu* is construed as a hallmark for the interest of the people, it is also construed in political rhetoric as a common denominator that could underlie a harmonious symbiosis between actors of different structural positions. As Derek Hird (2018: 146) notes when observing state ads for “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang* 正能量) in China, the state’s emotive propaganda spotlights two subjects, one that is oriented towards personal development and one that is committed to social progress through affinity with the body politic. As these two polar dimensions emerge discursively, they are also connected and reconciled through pedagogical voices in public education (Hansen 2015), state-run press (Triggs 2019), and entertainment media (Hizi 2018). In Xi’s terms, “the China Dream is essentially about a prosperous and strong country, national rejuvenation, and people’s *xingfu*.”⁸

This apparent synergy of perspectives, signified through comprehensiveness and harmony, is further bolstered through the trope of “struggle,” thereby emphasising the proactive and future-looking elements of *xingfu* while blending with a longstanding CCP keyword (Fumian 2021). Thus, *xingfu* appears as a natural pursuit while being indexed through the history of the People’s Republic of China. For example, Chen Zhigang (2018), a scholar of Marxism at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in an article in *People’s Tribune*, a CCP academic publication, conflates *xingfu* with the CCP enterprise:

It is precisely due to the spirit of difficult struggle and the view of *xingfu* of struggle that the CCP was able to create miracles in revolution, construction, and reform. Struggle is the guarantee for winning the great victory of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era (Chen Z. 2018: 30).

The language of struggle promotes here effort and self-discipline, validating the seeming accomplishments of the CCP while also encouraging citizens not to seek immediate gratification or unconditional support. One should struggle for *xingfu* while also enjoying the struggle; one should never feel satisfied by the current state of affairs, but nonetheless appreciate the accomplishments already achieved through the CCP.

Occasionally, *xingfu* is also deployed within more activist and radical agendas. This was demonstrated to me in a surprising encounter with Weihui, a 34-year-old single man who was a frequent participant at Heart’s Secret and a trained psychological counsellor. Weihui came from a lower middle-class family, the son of middle-school teachers. In his youth, he read many philosophical books and became interested in questions about the meaning of life before studying arts and later psychology at university. His peers at Heart’s Secret considered him a knowledgeable interlocutor, and he facilitated discussion sessions in many workshops. Moreover, unlike the absolute majority of participants with a counselling license, Weihui earned an income through his psychological knowledge, both in counselling and in his work for a local media channel that involved analyses of issues in social psychology.

Weihui expressed his political views in small morsels during workshops or social interactions with participants, but he elaborated on them through our repeated one-on-one conversations. He was a firm believer in the Confucian concept of *datong* (大同), signifying “great equality” or “great harmony.” He lamented that most Chinese emperors did not implement this idea and preferred to produce a stable hierarchical pyramid. In the modern era, in his view, *datong* was put into effect by Mao Zedong, although Mao did not evoke this specific term. Weihui saw the communist agenda of material equality as the ultimate implementation of the *datong* principle, a condition for a harmonious society. He also identified a natural affinity between communism and what he termed “Eastern cultures” as the latter prioritise the collective social body. He added that the idea of putting the person at the highest priority (*yi ren wei ben* 以人為本), a concept that is mentioned in numerous political texts on *xingfu* in recent years, is less relevant to social development than “the intention of humanity towards the world” (*renlei dui shijie de yitu* 人類對世界的意圖). Even more interesting to me than his ideological analysis was his vision for promoting *datong*. Weihui was sceptical about the intentions of Xi Jinping, who was, for him, maintaining social stratification. Instead, Weihui saw himself at the forefront of the promotion of *datong* by creating an international media platform. As for the role of psychology, his responses were not always consistent; at times he talked about psychology as offering techniques for persuading people to adopt the right agendas, while at other times he stressed the role of psychology as established transnational expertise through which people reckon with their material and emotional well-being. He once said that from the “Eastern” viewpoint, “philosophy and psychology unite under one

7. For example, see Zhang Rongchen 張榮臣 and Deng Chaohua 鄭超華, 2023, 自我革命: 中國共產黨最鮮明的品格 (*Ziwo geming: Zhongguo gongchandang zui xianming de pingge*, Self-revolution: The Chinese Communist Party’s most distinctive character), Beijing: Zhongguo minzhu fazhi chubanshe.

8. Xi Jinping 習近平, 2014, 習近平談治國理政 (*Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng*, Xi Jinping discusses the governance of the country), op.cit.

dao,” unlike “Western thinking,” in which “everything must be classified and divided.”

Currently, Weihui uses digital platforms such as WeChat and Douban for addressing and treating people’s emotional issues, while his utopian ideas prevail. In his agenda, psychology and *xingfu* should not be treated as individualised, liberal, and capitalist enterprises, a message that appears in various articles in the Chinese press and academic literature. One example is the work of Marxist philosopher Pi Jiasheng 皮家勝, who argues that socialism is the ultimate system for inducing societal *xingfu*, since it ensures that individuals’ pursuit of *xingfu* is conducive to the overall *xingfu* and vice versa (Pi 2003: 101). Pi give examples of why different aspects of life cannot be seen as prerequisites for *xingfu*, including wealth and freedom, since “*xingfu* cannot be for something else (...) only for itself” (ibid.: 37).

Thus, *xingfu*, based on the viewpoint and agenda of the readers, can be seen as justifying politics or as the ultimate objective of politics, without necessarily specifying how *xingfu* is experienced at the level of citizens. *Xingfu*, as an imagined holistic *dao* and a priority in hyper-cognition and constant configuration, not only offers empty slogans, opium for the masses, or self-absorbed vocabularies, but can also adjoin, in rhetoric, diverse agendas. These different meanings of *xingfu* coexist in urban China, indicating how a person-centred understanding can be co-opted by powerful institutions as well as how collective agendas can be addressed through person-centred and emotional tropes. State actors validate, promote, and direct the associations between *xingfu* and other signs and objectives, but they cannot, and do not always attempt to, undermine *xingfu*’s open-endedness. *Xingfu* often appears as a hollow signifier that can contain innumerable elements and possibilities, but it continues to resonate strongly in the population insofar as it alludes to what it means, and what it should mean, to be a person in China today.

Conclusion

Through the craze for happiness in China, this article discusses *xingfu* as a contemporary *dao*. The significance of *xingfu* is historically positioned in Chinese post-Imperial nation-building through the influence of post-enlightenment philosophy and modernist political theories, and more recently through positive psychology and extensive commercialisation. If the “*dao*” in early Daoism “cannot be named” or fixated, then *xingfu* is instead premised on constant evocation, circulation, and discursive performance while maintaining a semiotic link to supposedly universal, natural, and comprehensive life meanings for individuals and groups. It is an emotion of high stakes and is therefore constantly deployed by actors who try to extract and enhance its value and influence – in product advertisement, entertainment items, political campaigns, self-help expertise, and individuals seeking self-worth.

Through its cultural centrality and lived meanings, *xingfu* demonstrates the contradiction and plurality of inputs that shape Chinese subjectivities and socialities. *Xingfu* carries different agendas in different moments and contexts, and is, moreover, often expressed as a form of emotional or moral uplift beyond the mundane and

normative reality. Through therapeutic and commodified inputs, *xingfu* often appears connected to individual-centred well-being. However, it is simultaneously configured as a quality beyond sheer self-interest and hedonism, while also evaluating broader social and political practices. As this article illustrated, while the analysis of *xingfu* can teach us about techniques of governance in China, this viewpoint may be limiting and tautological if we frame *xingfu* solely through this lens. It is evident that almost nobody in China is immune to the valence of *xingfu*, and nobody is fully excluded from the possibility of reflecting on the term, even if there are numerous obstacles to its definition and realisation.

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