Chapter 13

The East-Asian Happiness Gap: Causes and Implications

Abstract Despite spectacular economic growth, most East Asian countries (especially those with the Confucian cultures) score relatively low in happiness surveys. This chapter discusses the reasons for this East-Asian happiness gap, including environmental disruption, excessive competitiveness, repressive education, excessive conformity, negative attitudes towards enjoyment, and the emphasis on outward appearance. Implications on the desired direction of future growth especially regarding the relative importance of public spending on the environment and research and the non-material aspects of life are also briefly touched on.

13.1 The East-Asian Happiness Gap

The East-Asian countries/regions referred to here include Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Singapore. To some extent, it probably also applies to Malaysia and Vietnam, but not much to the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia which have rather different cultures.

While East Asia (with the major exception of Japan in the last three decades) has done extremely well economically, it has not done well at all in terms of the ultimate objective of life—happiness. In fact, an older international comparison (Cummins 1998) puts East Asians (China, Japan and Korea) as the very lowest group of countries, after the top group of Northern Europeans, followed by the English-speaking countries, Latin Americans, Southeast Asians, the Middle East, middle Europeans, South-Eastern Europeans, South Asia, Africa, and South-Western Europeans. Singapore had a per-capita income 64 times that of India (and more than 16 times even after PPP adjustment), but had the same happiness index. Korea and Japan ranked the lowest. (The PPP adjustment refers to using the actual purchasing power parity, instead of the foreign exchange rates, for making international comparison of GDP

This chapter is revised/updated from Ng (2002).

This chapter may have touched on some sensitive issues. However, I am myself an East-Asian by birth, education, and culture. Thus, I hope that the chapter will be taken as a self-examination aiming at improvement rather than as a criticism by an outsider.

or GNP per capita. The PPP-adjusted ones reflect more the actual purchasing power, not inflated/deflated by possibly excessively high/low foreign exchange values of the currency of the country concerned.)

For recent surveys, in all the 2018, 2019 and 2020 World Happiness Reports, none of the top twenty countries in happiness ranking are East-Asian. (Taiwan narrowly made the top 19th for the 2021 Report.) At the time of writing, for the latest 2020 Report (based on data over 2017–2019), Singapore (which has a per-capita PPP-adjusted GDP higher than that of the U.S.) came second (to Taiwan, which ranks number 25 worldwide) in the Asian countries/regions in happiness score; it ranked only at 31 (but climbing from 34 in the previous year) out of 153 countries in the world with data. Malaysia (82) and Mainland China (94) both ranked well below the mid-point of the 153 countries. Despite its economic stagnation, Japan (62) ranked much higher than before the three ‘lost decades’ (For the 2021 report based on the 2020 scores, Japan jumped further to number 40 in the ranking.)

In fact, this ‘rise of Japan’ in happiness despite economic stagnation may be described as a sister paradox, the paradox of happy stagnation, in comparison to the well-known Easterlin’s (1974, 2017) paradox of unhappy growth (discussed in several places earlier). Over the three decades of economic stagnation, the average working hours in Japan also decreased significantly while its happiness level climbed from second last (above only Korea; see Cummins 1998) to just below average (Diener 2000), and then above average (Leigh and Wolfers 2006), and finally to the respectable 62th and 40th out of 153 countries in the World Happiness Reports 2020 and 2021 respectively, as mentioned above. Perhaps people in Japan spent too much time working during their heyday of high economic growth, and then realized their mistake and work less?

This should make us pause to reflect on some fundamental issues like the ultimate ends, the worth, and the costs of economic growth¹; the reasons for the relative failure of the East Asians in achieving happiness despite their economic success; the implications on ways to increase happiness and for public policies. Due to the unevenness of the level of economic progress, this chapter is more relevant for the more developed parts of East Asia. (On the precise meaning of happiness, the argument that it is the appropriate ultimate objective, and related issues, see Chaps. 1 and 5.)

With the rapid growth in East Asia, researchers have discussed the (largely positive) effects of Confucianism on economic growth. However, the East-Asian happiness gap and its possible relation to the Confucian cultures have been largely neglected. I am quite aware that this is a sensitive area. I also do not have enough expertise in the area to give a complete discussion. However, since happiness is the most important and the ultimate objective in life, it is important to discuss this in the open so that perhaps suitable remedies may be forthcoming if more people become interested.

¹ For some forerunners discussing the welfare costs of economic growth by well-known economists, see Mishan (1969/1993) and Scitovsky (1976/1992).

The low ranking of East Asian countries in happiness is consistent with some other measures. For example, according to the Durex report in 2014 (<http://library.northernlight.com/FB20001017290000041.html>), the satisfaction in sex life, Japan topped the least satisfaction list by a wide margin. Other countries/regions with low sex satisfaction include Hong Kong and Singapore. The average age of first sex (so-called ‘loss of virginity’) is also highest in Asia (21.8 years old) in contrast to the lowest continent’s (South America) Figure of 17.4.

An older Durex survey of 18 thousand adults in 27 countries and regions reported in the mass media world-wide on 17–18 October 2000, Japan also had the lowest average number of sex over a year, 37, far behind the second lowest (Malaysia) of 62 and the low figures for other East-Asian regions (Mainland China 69, Taiwan 78, Hong Kong 84). In comparison, the overall average of 96 is exceeded by, among others, India (95), Brazil (113) and U.S. (132, the top figure). (Document available at <http://library.northernlight.com/FB20001017290000041.html>.) More recent figures (Beauchamp 2015) show a similar pattern: The lowest figure of 45 times for Japan is far below the second lowest Figure of 73 for Singapore, and less than one third that of the highest 138 times of Greece. The figures of 78 for Hong Kong, 88 for Taiwan, 96 for Mainland China are all within the lowest ten worldwide.

Japan is also the only country in the world where a higher percentage of people report being dissatisfied with their sex lives than satisfied. The least satisfied (in sex) countries/regions are, in descending order: Japan, France, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand. ‘It’s not surprising that the Japanese are having infrequent, unsatisfying sex. For years, Japan reported some of the longest average working hours in the world. [But lower hours in recent years; see above.] In and of itself, this makes sex less likely ... Asian countries have a much higher mean age of virginity loss than nations basically everywhere else.’ (Beauchamp 2015). According to Chatsbin (<http://chartsbin.com/view/xxj>), the top countries/regions of highest age in having first sex are all Asian (in descending order with ages in brackets): Malaysia (23), India (22.9), Singapore (22.8), China (22.1), Thailand (20.5), Hong Kong (20.2), Vietnam (19.7), in comparison to the lowest figure of 15.6 years old in Iceland.

Scholars in Asia also agree that Confucianism has the tendency to promote abstinence. The three traditionally influential religions/beliefs of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in China and other East Asian countries ‘all promote the reduction of material desire to pursue happiness/well-being’ (Gao et al. 2010, p.1043). What we want to discuss next is the reasons for the East-Asian happiness gap, especially for given levels (and growth rates) of per-capita income and education level (See Veenhoven 2014; Ngoo et al. 2015; Kim 2018 for further evidence on this gap; Lim et al. 2020 on some empirical analysis.)

13.2 Some Reflections

I do not profess to have the complete explanation and answers. However, since I believe that, ultimately, happiness is the most, if not the only, important thing, I wish

to venture some reflections. Incomplete and immature as they may be, these bricks may still serve to attract jades.

13.2.1 Why Still the Rat-Race for Money?

If happiness is the ultimate objective and more incomes no longer increase happiness, why do people still engage in the rat race for making more and more money? This may be explained by: the environmental disruption effects, relative-income/consumption effects (emphasized by researchers from Easterlin 1974 to Rojas 2019), the inadequate recognition of adaptation effects, and the irrational materialistic bias, as also discussed in the previous chapters (Chap. 7 in particular). To some extent, it is individually rational to make more money, as higher incomes still contribute marginally to happiness through the importance of relative standing. At the social level, the relative-income effects between individuals cancel each other to leave no effect overall. In addition, the environmental disruption effects of higher production and consumption may really make people worse off. We may have welfare-reducing growth but for the positive effects of the advancement in knowledge. (On welfare-reducing growth despite individual and government optimization, see Ng 2003.) After the survival and moderate comfort levels (wen bao 温饱 and xiao kang 小康), since the positive effect is really very small in terms of long-term real happiness, it is still irrational even at the individual level to sacrifice things more important for happiness such as family, friends, health, and even safety and freedom in order to make more money as many people obviously do, including myself to some extent. But why do people have such irrational preferences? To a large extent, this may be explained by our accumulation instinct and instinct for competition for relative standing (nature) and the effects of the omnipresent advertising and peer influence in our commercial society (nurture). (See Ng 2003 for more details.)

13.2.2 The East Asian Happiness Gap: Its Causes

Even if high incomes no longer increase happiness, perhaps, dynamically, we need rising incomes just to sustain happiness at an unchanged level, the so-called ‘hedonic treadmill’. The East Asians have not only high income levels but also high rates of growth in incomes. On these counts, they should be happier than others. Despite these, they are less happy than others. This may be called the East Asian happiness gap. Since our measures of happiness are not foolproof, we cannot be completely confident of the existence of such a gap. However, there is sufficient evidence for provisionally accepting the hypothesis of a gap before it is overthrown by more solid evidence.

Some explanations of the East Asian happiness gap are related to the explanation of the rat-race in the previous subsection. First, the higher congestion, pollution,

and other forms of environmental disruption caused by high growth in production and consumption, especially in the heavily congested cities and industrial areas may partly explain why the rapid growth in East Asia is not an unmixed blessing, to say the least. These problems also exist in the West, but are more serious in East Asia due to the higher population density and less adequate environmental protection. Some more genuine indicator of progress that take account of congestion and environmental disruption that are largely ignored by the conventional GDP may show that the growth rates are not as spectacular. Certainly at the margin, it is undesirable to poison our air and water to have additional inessential output. The human costs in ill health in many cities are intolerable. In East Asia's major cities, air and water pollution are the sources of many premature deaths, bronchitis, and respiratory symptoms.² The severity of smog in Chinese cities, especially in Northern China including Beijing, and especially over late Autumn to Winter, is well known. As reported, while China has made progress cutting smog, the damage to the health of millions of people may already have been done, especially as the population ages, according to a U.S.-based research agency (Stanway 2018). According to the annual State of Global Air Report by the Health Effects Institute, the annual figures of air-pollution related deaths per 100,000 in 2016 are 117 for China and 21 for the U.S., a difference of more than five and a half times (MaCarthy 2018). Also, the under-reporting of such figures is probably more serious in China.

Secondly, the East-Asians are reputed to be highly competitive. This partly explains their economic success. However, the very high degree of competitiveness may be detrimental in achieving happiness both at the individual level and, even more so, at the social level. One important aspect of competitiveness is trying to surpass others. An individual may succeed in surpassing others but for the whole society, an individual on average cannot surpass others. Much effort in achieving relative distinction, if spent on areas without significant external benefits, may thus be largely wasted socially. (Thus, people should compete in areas with external benefits such as contributions to knowledge and society.) Another aspect of competitiveness is not being contented with one's current achievement and wanting to do better. While this may propel progress in objective terms such as production, it is likely to be detrimental to contentment and happiness.³

Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism are more emphatic on the virtue of contentedness while Confucianism is, at least relative to the previous three, more emphatic on the virtue of achievement. While Buddhism and Taoism are still believed in parts of East Asia, their influence has largely waned, especially relative to the importance of Buddhism and Hinduism in India.

It is true that we need some degree of competitiveness just to survive and a little more to make progress. However, too high a degree of competitiveness may be detrimental to happiness. In fact, one of the reasons the East-Asians have a high degree of

² On some regional evidence in China, see Yang et al. (2020). On the feasibility and importance of environmental protection, especially using economical ones, see Guo et al. (2020).

³ On the positive and negative effects of envy and a distinction between malicious and benign envies, see J.C.K. Ng et al. (2020).

subjective competitiveness may be due to the high degree of competitiveness that has existed objectively for many generations. The competitive environment favors those with a high degree of competitiveness which in turn increases the competitiveness of the environment, completing a vicious cycle. However, the cycle is not unchecked as excessive competitiveness also generates detrimental effects.

Thirdly, the educational method and general cultural influence of the East Asians are also highly productive in competitive achievements (especially in formal examinations) but likely detrimental to real creativity and personal and social happiness. According to the 2015 report (the 2019 results are only forthcoming, as of June 19, 2020) of TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study; <https://timss.bc.edu/timss2019/index.html>), the East-Asian countries/regions (Mainland China not included in the study) lead the world (49 countries tested) in both math and science in student performance, with Singapore (618), Hong Kong (615), Korea (608), Taiwan (597), Japan (593) at the top in math, and with a big gap of 23 points with the next country of Northern Ireland (570); this gap was the same as the 2011 report. In comparison, England scored 546 (just after Northern Ireland) and the U.S. scored 539; the lowest score by Kuwait was 353. The corresponding figures for science are: Singapore (590), Korea (589), Japan (569), Russia (567), Hong Kong (557), Taiwan (555), U.S. (546), England (536), Kuwait (337) [The 2019 results are now available from the site given above, with no substantial changes to the 2015 ones reported here, e.g. in maths, the top five are still the same countries/regions: Singapore (625), Hong Kong (602), Korea (600), Taiwan (599), Japan (593), with the top Singapore pulling ahead further.].

However, commenting on a previous similar report in 2000, Yuan Tzeh Lee (a Nobel laureate and President of Academia Sinica in Taipei) said, ‘Most Taiwan students are good in examinations. Their performance in science and mathematics are good at the stage of high school. However, after graduating from high schools, they become exhausted, as if going to retire ... The educational system in Taiwan is very repressive of curious students interested in pursuing creativity. This is very bad.’ (My translation back from my Chinese translation of a report in *China Times*, 7 December 2000, p. 7.) At least to a large extent, this remark is also applicable to other East-Asian regions and also with respect to happiness, not just with respect to creativity.⁴

Fourthly and relatedly, East-Asian culture (especially its educational system) is over-emphatic on conformity, order, and the collective interests to the detriment of individualism, freedom, and hence happiness. It is true that individual freedom must not be excessive either, as the welfare of others may be adversely affected by the relentless and unrestricted pursuit of individual freedom. However, while the West may be somewhat over the delicate balance to be too emphatic of individualism in some aspects, the East-Asians are likely to err in the opposite direction by a wider margin. An important explanation of this big difference is probably related to the relative effectiveness of the legal system in the West which can be relied more to

⁴ See also Qu et al. (2020) on the happiness ‘cost of academic focus’ on Chinese school children and their parents in America.

control the excess of individual freedom. This means that, with the legal system strengthened (as obviously very successful in regions like Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, until the recent couple of years in the last one), East-Asians may move towards the direction of freedom and individualism to increase happiness.

Happiness researchers remark: ‘... in the Latin nations, such as Colombia, there is a tendency to view pleasant emotions as desirable... In contrast, in Confucian cultures, such as China, there tends to be relatively more acceptance of unpleasant emotions and relatively less acceptance of pleasant emotions... In China the ideal level of life satisfaction was considered to be neutrality—neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’ (Diener and Suh 1999, pp. 443–4). Eastern researchers also agree on the ‘abstinence’ (禁慾) tendency of Confucianism. For example, ‘in Confucian culture ... abstinence is an important factor’ (傅佩榮 1989, p. 51; my translation) and ‘hedonistic striving for happiness is regarded as unworthy and even shameful’ (Lu and Shih 1997, p. 183; see also Fang 1980, p.153.). The three traditionally influential religions/beliefs of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in China and other East Asian countries, as also mentioned above, ‘all promote the reduction of material desire to pursue happiness/well-being’ (Gao, et al. 2010, p. 1043. On the effects of societal values on happiness, especially the relationship between income and happiness, see Lim et al. 2019). How can one enjoy life happily if one is brought up to be adverse to pleasant feelings? (One indication of the abstinence tendency is the high average ages of first time in having sex for East-Asian countries/regions mentioned in Sect. 13.1)

Fifthly, East-Asian culture is too emphatic on appearance, on not losing face and less on the real content and true feelings. The importance of ‘face’ (面子; mian4 zi3; the numbers here refer to the tones) is well-known. The emphasis on outward appearance in contrast to inner content may be ‘spotted’ (可窺一斑) in the example of the styles of buildings. The Temple of Heaven (天壇) in Beijing is extremely impressive looking from outside but rather ordinary inside. Most Western churches look rather dull from outside but are well furnished and decorated inside. When my father (born and grew up in China and lived in Malaysia for decades) first saw our flat/apartment (rented) in Australia, he thought that the building (brick-veneered) looked unfinished. When he went inside, he found it very comfortably furnished. Many flats in East Asia have a very small bathroom and kitchen but relatively large ‘visitors hall’ (客廳) which is known in the West as the lounge room or living room. This difference in the naming of the same room also betrays the difference in emphasis between the East (to impress the visitors) and the West (for the comfort of the family). To what extent is this a reflection of more visitors rather than a difference in emphasis remains to be investigated.

For another example, when advising their children regarding marriage, most Western parents put happiness first. In contrast, many East-Asian parents emphasize the family backgrounds (門當戶對) and other objective aspects. It is more important to them (at least relative to people of the West) for the marriage to look good in appearance than for the children to actually have a happy life.

Of course, happiness is also affected by biological factors. However, since they are less amenable to policy influence (except in the future when genetic engineering may

be safely used), they are not emphasized here. (On the use of brain stimulation for pleasure and genetic engineering for our own transformation, see Chap. 12 above.)

While cultural differences are important, their role must not be exaggerated. Cultural differences do make a difference as to what factors may affect happiness (e.g. Christopher 1999) but not with respect to the concept and ultimate value of happiness as such. Moreover, there are largely universal factors determined by biology. Thus, Maslow's (1943, 1954/1970a/1987) need-gratification theory of well-being is largely universal (Sect. 10.1 above). Also, I believe that, at the ultimate level, happiness as the rational end (Chap. 5 above) is culturally independent. It may be thought that my personal views on happiness are largely due to the influence of Western culture. However, I can vouch that I was brought up in largely Eastern influence, attending only Chinese schools and university in Malaysia and Singapore before my time of post-graduate study. Even now, my cultural influences are more Chinese than Western. For example, I still read most non-economics books and magazines in Chinese and listen mostly to Chinese music. I can read and write in Chinese almost twice as fast as in English.

Some researchers exaggerate the cultural difference. For example, Lu and Shih (1997, p. 181/2) mention that 'the word happiness did not appear in the Chinese language until recently', suggesting that the concept of happiness is alien to the Chinese people until recently. This is certainly very misleading. It may be true that the modern *phrase* for happiness in Chinese (快乐; kuai4 le4) appeared only recently. However, the ancient *words* for happiness in Chinese (either kuai4 or le4) appeared from time immemorial. For example, le4 appeared in such ancient expressions as 'Friends coming from afar, am I not happy?' (有朋自远方来, 不亦乐乎?) and '[I am] so happy, no more thought of Shu' (乐不思蜀), with the clear meaning of happiness. I suggest that such primitive concepts as happiness are universal and should exist in all cultures from time immemorial, probably not long after the evolution of *homo sapiens*, if not earlier; likely advanced animals also have such concepts, even if they may not be able to verbalize them.

13.3 Some Implications

As the study of happiness has made much progress (e.g. including a journal specializing on the study of happiness, the *Journal of Happiness Study* having produced 22 volumes with many issues each), the importance of happiness and the preliminary results on the failure of higher income/consumption to increase happiness imply that a lot more resources should be used for happiness study. How could the measures of happiness be made more reliable and comparable interpersonally? (Chap. 6 above.) Does the East-Asian happiness gap really exist? Are people of East-Asian origin but living in the West also less happy? How could happiness be increased? Such questions are very important but very much under-researched.

Despite the failure of higher incomes to increase happiness, I continue to believe in the usefulness of economic growth. However, the direction of growth has to be

appropriate. First, the protection of environmental quality has to be a top priority. We want clean growth, not dirty growth. Secondly, we want growth that can really increase our happiness. This includes less on largely mutually canceling competitive private consumption and more on areas of public spending that can really increase our welfare. Among others, this includes more public funding for research to find out more. The desirability of higher public spending applies to many other areas including environmental protection, public health, education, and research (More in Chaps. 14 and 15).

Another implication is the need, both at the individual and the social level, to put more emphasis on things that are much more important to happiness than money, including health, relationships, and spiritual fulfillment, as discussed in other chapters of this book. In particular, for the developed parts of East Asia, more reflections on the East-Asian happiness gap are needed. Perhaps it is desirable to realize more about the illusions of the irrational accumulation instinct, to resist more the temptations created by the omnipresent commercial advertising, to reduce our competitive nature, to divert competition from consumption to social contributions, and to make *less* money in order to enjoy life more. East-Asians may not only achieve more happiness this way, but also, by reducing and redirecting their lopsided growth, contribute to a better global environment. (This touches on the issue of international cooperation to address the problem of international competition, a negative-sum game, on which see Ng and Liu 2003.)

However, there are still large parts of East Asia where the majority of people are still very poor by any standard and where economic growth will likely increase the happiness of people significantly. For purely economic development, more emphasis to the development of such areas, including the western regions of China, may be desirable. For the more developed areas of East Asia, factors really important for happiness such as public health, the environment, and above all, the advance in science, technology and knowledge in general, are more important than the purely economic factors such as GDP.

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