

The Chinese Pursuit of Happiness: Meaning, Morality, and Everyday Life

Abstract

What is happiness? How do people in China get it? What are the social obstacles to having it? And what does this tell us about contemporary China's moral order? There is no straightforward translation of English "happiness" into Chinese, and the variety of Chinese words for happiness raises deep philosophical and historical issues that are being played out in the complexity of Chinese society today. Popular understandings of happiness are manifest in ambivalent discourses about family and friendship in private life and social service and political reform in public life. These popular understandings are overlaid by a politically orthodox version promulgated by Xi Jinping's writings on happiness in the China Dream. Together this research reveals a morally pluralistic Chinese society characterized by multiple goods and multiple definitions of happiness. This condition is common in all complex modern societies and certainly in the United States. What may be distinctive about China is the level of dissonance and tension between the competing visions of the good life brought about by its "compressed modernity." For the time being these tensions are contained within the integument of a powerful and intrusive state.