Can a Revolutionary Be Happy?
The Debate on Happiness in 1960s China

ABSTRACT In 1963, China Youth published letters from youth on the topic of happiness. While some agreed that following the model of self-sacrifice exemplified by Lei Feng was the only way to be a happy revolutionary, others brought up contradictions in the approach to happiness promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. Through an investigation of happiness in Marxism and Maoism, the author analyzes the arguments put forward in the letters, concluding that by the early 1960s any notion of a unified revolutionary subjectivity was riddled with cracks. The young letter writers question the panreligious embrace of self-sacrifice, struggle, and misery, which can then be transformed into revolutionary happiness through willpower.

KEYWORDS happiness, socialism, Maoism, Marxism, 1960s

Writing in the mid- to late 1940s, Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69) attacked the mandatory happiness of life under capitalism, which, he argued, was coerced. Stating that “no science has yet explored the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable, an equable, practical frame of mind,” Adorno castigated the practice of psychoanalysis, which trains the suffering to accommodate themselves to the conditions that led to their unhappiness. In vivid metaphorical language, he criticized the erasure of sadness and despair: “The dark closets have been abolished as a troublesome waste of space, and incorporated into the bathroom.” He bemoaned the “unruffled calm” required of job applicants and the suppression of the “unhappily furrowed brow.” For Adorno, Sigmund Freud’s liberatory theory was only an apology for oppression, traces of which were evident in the empty and mechanized quality of those who had undergone analysis. The admonitions to be happy existed equally in the realms of entertainment, politics, and economics, where in Adorno’s view the capitalistic demand for profits tendered an accommodating attitude.

While others have followed up with further critiques of the complicity of psychoanalysis with capitalism and the general tendency within the culture of capitalism to valorize happiness, a parallel deconstruction of happiness under
socialism—especially in relation to the Soviet Union—has taken place. In the edited volume *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, authors trace a simplified, standardized version of happiness promoted by the state and embraced by individuals. In the positive emotions encouraged through literature, art, film, advertising, and daily life practices such as cooking, the volume recognizes a complex and intriguing confluence of motivations and influences. Happiness was encouraged by state and other authorities anxious to confirm the success of the political system, but individuals also longed to be part of a successfully realized vision of communal harmony. As Catriona Kelly has noted, Russians remembering their childhood under socialism recall a happiness “born of security, familiarity, and a sense of certainty and a sense of purpose that seemed missing in the new millennium.”

Susan Reid’s chapter on the Khrushchev era argues that, as in the capitalist West, the vision of pleasurable home-based consumption and domesticity was an important aspect of Soviet-style happiness. The construction of a happy Soviet world that suppressed recognition of the misery of poverty is like the capitalist society described by Adorno, which obliterated sadness and cultivated happiness in the pursuit of profits. From the Soviet examples, we can see that both the obvious and the subtle emphasis on happiness—which comes not only from government authorities but also from people who want to believe in a better life—is not limited to capitalist societies.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that the happiness of the population was also a cause for concern in 1950s and 1960s China, where the criteria for mental well-being were actively debated. In an earlier essay, I investigated the ways in which Chinese institutions and social practices encouraged happiness in the 1950s, comparing them to similar efforts in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Europe. Both capitalist and socialist societies had similar, if not identical, strategic reasons for promoting, building, and constructing happiness as the most acceptable public emotion. Emerging from the Enlightenment, socialism and capitalism embodied the modern ideals of progress and improvement characteristic of scientific rationalism, which drove their embrace of happiness as the most efficient emotional state.

I begin this study of the debate on happiness in early- to mid-1960s China with a summary of the Marxist approaches toward a thorny affective knot: the relationship of happiness and pleasure to material wealth. The utopian blueprint of socialist societies assumed that, once the relationship of production was changed, citizens would be liberated and happy. But the Chinese debate suggests that young people questioned the ideological framework within which happiness was discussed. By placing the debate within a historical context of socialist debate, we see that the discussion is not a uniquely Chinese event but, rather, is an attempt to grapple with conceptual problems innate to socialism as it was practiced across the world. Recognized by theorists and philosophers as contradictions at the
heart of Marxist ideology, the core issues in the debate were avidly discussed over the twentieth century. The early to mid-1960s, when the debate took place, immediately preceded the Cultural Revolution, a time when radical Maoism reached its height. Eventually, the youth-related movements established during the Cultural Revolution—the Red Guards and the Rustication Movement, when over a million youth settled in the countryside—contributed both to the developing chaos and to the eventual failure of the Maoist vision of continuing or permanent revolution. The central role of youth suggests a powerful temporal element: what is at stake is the future, and the attitude of the young is crucial. Key texts in the national journal Zhongguo qingnian 中國青年 (China Youth) propose that, when it came to motivations for happiness, Chinese youth perceived a contradiction embedded in the Marxist approach to pleasure: was it possible to take pleasure in the material comfort brought by wealth and still be a revolutionary? Was it possible to reject constant self-sacrifice in favor of enjoyment of life? In their letters to the journal, they discussed the requirements of revolutionary ideology as it pertained to the subjective feeling of happiness. As they were asked to do, the young writers placed the Marxist discourse on happiness within the context of the revolutionary models promoted by Chinese leadership. Whereas the title of the series points to the study of the revolutionary labor icon Lei Feng as a way to think through the contradiction, to some of the participants in the discussion Lei Feng’s characteristic valorization of self-sacrifice in the name of collective improvement seemed inconsistent with the emphasis on production and the creation of a more advanced material society that was developed in the 1950s. Thus, even as China was moving toward the Cultural Revolution, young people questioned the logic behind the nation’s revolutionary ideology. What their discussion suggests is that the spiritualization of human pleasure in the material, evident in the theories about happiness that proliferated in the twentieth-century socialist world, was also a Chinese strategy designed to address the contradictions of Chinese Marxism.

Marxism and the Materiality of Happiness
Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) were more interested in freedom and emancipation than in happiness. Yet they both mentioned happiness sporadically in their writings, subscribing to the idea that illusory happiness—mostly from religious belief—is common, while true, authentic happiness is much more difficult to obtain. Marx wrote: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.” Real happiness, according to both Marx and Engels, must come from liberation, which itself
must come from the reorganization of the relationships of production. Arguing that the happiness of the individual cannot be separated from the happiness of all, Engels attacked the way in which the industrial revolution shackled the proletariat, depriving it of happiness: “Communism has only arisen since machinery and other inventions made it possible to hold out the prospect of an all-sided development, a happy existence, for all members of society. Communism is the theory of a liberation which was not possible for the slaves, the serfs, or the handicraftsmen, but only for the proletarians and hence it belongs of necessity to the 19th century and was not possible in any earlier period.”

Marx also wrote, briefly, that his idea of happiness was to fight.

The problem of real versus illusory happiness has been troubling for Marxist theorists. The subjective nature of happiness makes it impossible to verify, and any political stance can claim that it holds the key to fulfillment. As Ross Abbinnett explains in his study of concepts of happiness since the Enlightenment, the ideologies that formed the major Western political landscape— Nazism, socialism, liberalism, communism, religious fundamentalism, and postmodernism—all offer different ideas of what happiness should be and how it should be achieved.

In fact, Abbinnett argues, the political ideologies of Western modernity all have been structured around specific representations of happiness:

Thus, the nucleus of Nazism and fascism is the aesthetic paraphernalia of the Aryan race and its promise of ecstatic unity with the Fatherland. The ideological appeals of Marxism and socialism have been configured around mythologies of the natural equality of men and the universal community of their productive labour. Liberalism, and its more extreme variant, postmodernism, presents the story of a free desire through which humanity is able to exceed all limitations to its happiness. And religious fundamentalism, in its various forms, promises the reward of eternal unity with God.

Contending that scholarship has underestimated the importance of happiness to the coherence of these ideologies, Abbinnett claims that each ideology gains its power from forming the subject as susceptible to representation. Siding with Adorno, he argues that the post-Enlightenment individual has been “cut off from the satisfactions of God and ethical life, and subjected to a regime in which work and desire have been synthesized into modalities of the commodity form.”

The atomized individual, therefore, lives in a social world where “putative satisfactions are experienced as sources of anxiety (political affiliations, conformity to fashion).” This perspective on the plights of the modern individual is an important aspect of the “culture industry” that was critiqued by Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) in the early 1940s. Like Marx and Engels, Adorno suspected that some who declared they were happy were not happy at all but,
rather, were caught up in the illusion of happiness. To address the conundrum, he
distinguished between pleasure and happiness, arguing that the culture industry
promised momentary distractions that were fundamentally different from those
offered by, among other things, true art.

Adorno and Horkheimer disagreed on the conditions necessary for the lib-
eration of human beings, a difference of opinion so serious that it prevented a
planned continuation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from realization. Whereas
Horkheimer found the scarcity of abundance limited the possibilities for libera-
tion, Adorno did not agree that a shortage of material goods created any prob-
lem; more important than material security was the way the culture industry
under capitalism creates and sustains domination and the role of authentic art
in liberation. This disagreement alludes to the problem of “unsatisfied mate-
rialism” that lurks behind the question of happiness in Marxism: “If I were to
put this crudely, the recurrent question of the relationship of the left to plea-
sure—and of whether it is possible to be a happy socialist—indicates a doctrinal
difficulty that Marxism has always had with enjoyment that is not won through
the conduct of revolutionary struggle or the strictures of collective work.”

Other twentieth-century philosophers tried to reconcile happiness, pleasure, and ma-
terial abundance. Workers seemed happy to labor under difficult circumstances if
they had a chance at improving their material well-being, and that made them
reluctant to endanger their positions to help others. For the Frankfurt school,
psychoanalysis was important because it could be used, they believed, to under-
stand the psyche of workers and to address their resistance to revolution. Because
industrial workers were disinclined to embrace revolutionary ideology, György
Lukács developed the influential idea of “false consciousness”—later picked up
by Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) and Henri Lefebvre (1901–91), as well as the
feminist movement—to describe the inability to recognize one’s own exploita-
tion under capitalism (or patriarchy). Others joined in the shift toward a focus
on subjectivity, which seemed necessary to bring about social change. Antonio
Gramsci (1891–1937) heightened the role of ideology and representation, and
Louis Althusser (1918–90) analyzed ideology as a feature of consciousness.
In his attempt to synthesize Marxism and psychoanalysis, Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957)
brought out the importance of sexual liberation, an effort continued by Marcuse,
who elevated the importance of radical subjectivity, finding that it had a crucial
role in the transformation of social exploitation. However, he eventually gave up
on the possibility of transforming the working class into revolutionary subjects.

The key ideas of this over one-hundred-year-long discussion reappear in the
debate in *China Youth* in 1963. They include the fundamental nature of happiness
in relation to the individual and the collective; self-sacrifice, suffering, and their
relationship to happiness; the meaning of happiness that results from unrevo-
lationary attitudes; and the possibility of illusory versus genuine happiness.
Especially important is the debate over the role of struggle—serving the people, laboring under harsh conditions, maintaining vigilance against enemies, and keeping one’s mind pure and on track—that was the staple of the official ideology of revolutionary happiness during the 1950s and 1960s.

**Revolutionary Youth and Happiness in the 1960s**

In 1964, Yu Huimin 余惠敏 begins his article on happiness in Marxism by quoting Lei Feng 雷锋 (1940–62): “If I suffer a bit and yet can do something good for the people, this is my greatest happiness and good fortune.” 29 Yu follows with a quote by Ouyang Hai 歐陽海 (1940–63): “The victory of the people’s revolution will be won through the sacrifices of millions of people. Taking up the burden of sacrifice to achieve victory is the greatest pride and pleasure of the members of the Communist Party.” 30 Yu’s article came out a year before the popular 1965 book *Ouyang Hai zhi ge 歐陽海之歌* (The Song of Ouyang Hai), by Jin Jingmai 金敬邁 (1930–), memorialized Ouyang’s sacrifice. 31 The third revolutionary martyr Yu mentions is Dong Jiageng 董加耕 (1940–), a “model sent-down youth” whom Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976) invited to his birthday banquet in 1964. 32 Thus anchored by multiple references to Chinese revolutionary martyrs and icons of self-sacrifice, Yu Huimin goes on to explain “the view of the working classes toward the problem of happiness, which is to say, the Marxist concept of happiness. . . . We can clearly see that so-called happiness is none other than struggle, than labor, than creation.” 33 Although Yu’s focus on spiritual life is predictable, ambiguity enters the discussion: “From our point of view, happiness is not just a concept that includes a rich material life. Even more important, the concept includes a lofty spiritual life.” 34 Crucial to the notion of spiritual life is the proletarian prospective on class, labor, the masses, and communal subjectivity.

Yu recognizes the difficult balance of the material aspects of happiness with the intangibles collected under the concept of the spiritual—the highest happiness of which is suggested by the behavior of martyrs—and implies that material conditions could factor into satisfaction, if not to the same extent. The problem, then, becomes how to frame the material, in the form of wealth, in a way that affirms some value while diminishing its role in producing a sense of well-being. Yet this perspective could open the door to the obvious danger of valorizing the accumulation of wealth itself. Instead, therefore, Yu spiritualizes labor, noting that its real benefit lies in the pleasure of the work as opposed to the potential wealth it could bring. The author Wang Meng 王蒙 (1934–) identifies this approach in his novel *Bolshevik Salute*, a story about the fall of a fervent communist youth. After the main character, Zhong Yicheng 鍾亦成, is criticized in the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–59) and sent to the countryside to work, his greatest possibility for redemption comes through his experience of labor as pleasure:
Work, work, work! Millions of years ago labor turned monkeys into humans. Millions of years later in China, physical labor was exercising its great strength to purify thinking and create a new soul. Zhong Yicheng deeply believed in this. . . . He scooped feces out of latrines. The smell of the feces made him feel glorious and peaceful. One bucket after another, he mixed the liquid with earth, feeling from his heart that it was really and truly delightful.35

Labor, then, is both a punishment and a pleasure, a struggle and a way to overcome errors of the past: “People are truly resourceful. When they call their overtime work some sort of ‘struggle,’ they can get up an extra layer of extraordinary revolutionary fervor right away, just as if they were fighting, were in war and opening fire on their enemies, the capitalist classes, and their own thinking.”36 As Yu explains, labor is innately satisfying but under oppression undergoes a transformation, taking leave of its appeal to become a great misery. Yu relies on the elevated position of labor within Marxism to make this point: “In Marxism, labor and enjoyment/pleasure [xiangshou 享受] cannot be separated.”37 Another way to address the relationship between the material and the spiritual is to argue that Marxism did not eliminate the pleasure brought by wealth but insisted that it be earned, not “stolen and cheated away from others.”38 Yet even this position is difficult to sustain, as true communists are immune to the pleasures of material goods. The words of Communist Party organizer and guerilla leader Fang Zhimin 方志敏 (1899–1935) bear witness to the suffering expected of revolutionaries. Fang’s expressed desire to live in humble huts as opposed to big houses, to eat simple and tasteless food as opposed to fancy Western dishes, and to sleep on a hard bed rather than a soft mattress expresses the scorn for material comfort that Yu finds admirable.

Marx consistently connected well-being with the conditions of labor, arguing that alienated labor produced unhappiness and misery.39 Yu Huimin’s focus on labor refers to this Marxist tradition as well as to its interpretation in China, where labor became an important intellectual and experiential category, among other roles serving as a rationale for the widespread rustication movement of the Cultural Revolution.40 As we see in Wang Meng’s work, writers and filmmakers working in the post-Mao era have zeroed in on labor and its implications in socialist China, suggesting not only that concepts and myths of labor occupied an important historical and social position but also that the subjective experience of labor was complicated and multilayered.41 While the 1963 discussion about happiness and youth repeats some of the most common ideas about labor and happiness, it also highlights the problem of how youth—those with the most time ahead of them—should view both the past and the future.

Responding to a call from Mao Zedong, young people energetically took up the study of Lei Feng after his death in 1962, poring over his diary and discussing
his behavior and thought. It was during this time that the editors of *China Youth* solicited and published letters from readers that addressed the question of happiness. The questions and comments include many of the issues mentioned above: What kind of happiness should young people seek? How should we think about material and spiritual life? Are the best things in life eating well, dressing well, and living in a good house? Is the point of revolution to have a good material life? In the context of revolutionary discourse, the answers to these questions may seem obvious. But the discussion suggests dissatisfaction with the status quo and contradictions at the heart of the problem: Can you find pleasure in material life and still be a revolutionary? Why do we say that only in living for others do we find the greatest happiness? Can we also say that if we live well ourselves, that is the greatest happiness? Isn't it too difficult to have so many demands on the self, and to live only for others? How is this different from asceticism (苦行主義)?

Under the conditions of peace, the state of mind associated with permanent revolution—vigilance against state enemies, engagement in revolution, renewal of revolutionary values—is difficult to sustain. The balance between the lofty spiritual and the lesser material could be upset by the widely publicized focus of the state on both agricultural and industrial improvement, with the former to support the latter. If material improvement was a national goal, why could it not be recognized as a valid aspect of happiness? Although the answer was not to reject material improvement but to insist on it being available equally to all, the young people who wrote letters to the journal implied that they were constantly under pressure to sacrifice for others and reaffirm their selflessness. In other words, they could not enjoy whatever material improvements were available for fear of appearing unrevolutionary or even counterrevolutionary.

While the letter writers frame their ideas carefully, using the general “some say” through which to couch controversial ideas, they unravel the contradictory logic in the relationship between the spiritual and the material. A letter from Hu Dongyuan 胡東淵 of Jiangsu Province lays out the issue:

> When we talk about how happy life in new China is, we often talk about the old society, where you didn’t have enough food to eat or clothes to keep you warm. We explain by way of examples from the new society, which has plenty to eat and wear. Wanting to live better, seeking a high standard of material life are only common human sentiments. For all people who are alive, no matter what class they belong to, the goal of all activity is to eat well, wear good clothes, and live in a good house, in the present or the future. The desire to seek a better material life encourages humans to labor and to struggle. Seeking to enjoy a better material life is motivation for improvement. Although my classmates and I don’t agree with these views.
Structuring the letter by means of the spiritual/material dichotomy, Hu puts views dissenting with Lei Feng's focus on serving the people and self-sacrifice in the mouths of other unnamed people. Hu and his friends argue from Lei's perspective. Although Hu notes that dissenting classmates do not disagree completely, they express their belief that a completely spiritual happiness is an insufficient basis on which to anchor life. They continue to have questions, to the point where Hu and friends also begin to locate inconsistencies in the ideological narrative.

As Hu gets deeper into the argument, the stakes in recognizing a hierarchical relationship between the material and the spiritual emerge:

Some people have money and can buy what they want to eat or what they need. This naturally makes them happy, and they have a pleasurable life. Some don't have money and need to carefully calculate all ordinary expenses. If they want to buy something they can't be carefree about it, and they can never really enjoy themselves. It's clear that if someone's material life is lacking, their spiritual life is hard to sustain. If we discuss spiritual life without the pleasures of material life, doesn't happiness become empty and abstract? And they even feel that seeking a better material life only will not "weaken your will" but, on the contrary, will "harden your will," because the more urgent your desire to seek a better material life, the more you will fight to realize communism. These two perspectives both seem to be logical. In the end, what is the correct way to think about them?^44

It is difficult for some students to accept the logic of self-sacrifice, Hu explains. They feel it is reasonable for people to work and live for themselves. The goal of revolution is for everyone to live better, so, they ask, doesn't that include me and my family? If there is no oppression, there is no contradiction between self-interest and the interest of the group. Hu's letter strikes at the heart of the connection between being revolutionary and being miserable: "If someone works hard day and night for others and pays no heed to the self, isn't that just too miserable? Why can't the individual have a bit of enjoyment? Don't we often say that we revolutionaries are not ascetics?"^45

The final problem Hu addresses is the presence of cheaters who work only for themselves; expending effort on their behalf is a waste of time, Hu states. This concern suggests that youth were strongly aware of freeloaders that took advantage of the sacrifice of others. While the problem was not supposed to exist, it also was addressed in fiction by Zhao Shuli 趙樹理 (1906–70), whose stories were often ambivalent about the revolutionary enthusiasm of peasants.

Hu's letter implies that, by the early 1960s, any notion of a unified revolutionary subjectivity was riddled with cracks. The young letter writers question the
Panreligious embrace of self-sacrifice, struggle, and misery, which can then be transformed into revolutionary happiness through willpower. In the second set of letters, Gao Yunqi 高蕴琦 of Shanghai attempts to solve the problem by addressing the difference between happiness (xingfu 幸福) and enjoyment (xiangshou 享受):

Historically, only the oppressors considered “happiness=enjoyment” to be an ancient unchangeable “truth.” They engage in any number of base and shameful things just to increase their enjoyment. They ride on the heads of the working people without lifting a finger or moving a toe, every day eating meat and fish and drinking wine. They wear silk and damask and live in large fancy homes. So their understanding of happiness can only be “enjoy, enjoy, enjoy.” Other than enjoyment, there’s only more enjoyment. There’s nothing strange about this. And only the oppressing class could consider “seeking enjoyment of a better material life” to be “a forward movement.”

Happiness results from sublime self-sacrifice, whereas enjoyment is only the coarse pleasure of the flesh and the moment. While most of the letters in this issue support a Lei Feng–style revolutionary happiness, Li Mingde 李明德 of Hebei also recounts a discussion with his friends. His vision of happiness, he states, is to become a great and famous scientist. While his friends criticize his choice as selfish, he believes it to be in line with what the nation needs, introducing the question of whether self-sacrifice will produce the best results from the perspective of the nation.

This final problem adds to the overall sense of that the letter writers sense systemic contradiction in the theories they are asked to live by. As I have described, historians and philosophers sympathetic to Marxism tried to solve inconsistencies in the theory by elevating the functions of consciousness and subjectivity, by understanding desire through the lens of Freud’s work on psychoanalysis, and by introducing the concept of false consciousness. Another approach contextualizes Marxism within the history of utopian systems, all of which propose ways to fix the inequality and violence of human society. The belief that they hold the key to bringing harmony to society “is common ground to the many varieties of reformist and revolutionary optimism, from Bacon to Condorcet, from the Communist Manifesto to modern technocrats, communists, anarchists and seekers after alternative societies.” Believing that conflicting desires mean that human life without conflict is neither possible nor desirable, John Gray argues that, while Marx had few rivals in his understanding of the radical changes that capitalism would bring about, his utopian vision of the alternative to capitalism led to a communism that was dangerous and impractical: “Marx believed that with the arrival of communism the conflicts of values that had existed throughout history would cease, and society could be organized around a single conception of the
good life." It is precisely the utopian desires of social reformers that lead to the suppression of anyone who does not agree with the dominant ideology.

Just as revolutionary ideology was intensifying, counterculture novels such as *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (1922–69) and *Ticket to the Stars* by Vasily Aksyonov (1932–2009) were being translated and published with special beige covers that proclaimed restricted access. The books were available only to high-level cadres that needed to know what ideological enemies were thinking. They escaped their confines, however, falling into the hands of young people sent to the countryside to work during the rustication movement, who hand-copied them, passed them around, and organized salons to discuss literature and art. The Misty poets, who formed one of the first post–Cultural Revolution literary movements to challenge revolutionary ideals and sensibilities, were influenced by these forbidden books. The letters in *China Youth* suggest that, as China was on the brink of the Cultural Revolution, young people not only had detected logical contradictions in the system but also were willing to participate in what they surely knew was a dangerous form of publicly questioning the status quo. The sensibilities of the Misty poets were not completely new but were a further development within a continuum of dissatisfaction with the contradictions of revolutionary ideology.

**WENDY LARSON**

University of Oregon

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**Notes**


2 Ibid., 59.

3 Ibid., 58.

4 Ibid., 59.

5 Ibid., 61.

6 Philip Cushman has been a powerful interpreter of the liberation through consumption that he identifies in (especially American) psychoanalysis. See Cushman, *Constructing the Self*. See also Zaretsky, *Political Freud*; and Busk, “It’s a Good Life?”


8 Reid, “Happy Housewarming!”

9 Larson, “Every Day in Every Way.” In this chapter I trace the development of optimism and happiness within socialism and capitalism over the twentieth century. Although
scholarly interest in contemporary Chinese discourses of happiness has flourished, there is little work on happiness during the height of Chinese socialism. For book-length studies, see Wielander and Hird, *Chinese Discourses*; and Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*. Many articles on happiness in China from a contemporary social perspective are available. For a discussion of happiness that includes evaluation of traditional discourse, see Wang, “Lun Makesi xingfuguan qi ta dangdai jiazhi.” There are at least six master’s theses on Marxist ideas of happiness by students at Chinese universities, and several relevant PhD dissertations. Many of these studies evaluate contemporary notions of happiness within the context of Marxist and historical discourse. See, e.g., Wang, *Makesi xingfu sixiang yanjiu*.

10 A full study of the history of happiness in China would include investigation into theories of happiness in premodern China, especially within Confucianism. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, Chinese Marxism and Maoism are the main theoretical influences. For a study that looks at vernacular happiness over the twentieth century with an eye to the contemporary moment, see Lee, “Rise and Fall.”

11 Although the practice of rustication, or sending youth to the countryside to learn through labor, dates from much earlier, it was intensified during the years preceding the Cultural Revolution and after the Red Guard movement. See Yang, *Red Guard Generation*.

12 Hu, “Qingnian yinggai you shenme yang de xingfuguan?”

13 For a study of Chinese martyrs that includes chapters on martyrs under socialism and focuses on self-sacrifice in Chinese socialism, see Wang, “Flesh and Stone.” Wang argues that the traditional focus on female martyrdom was applied to both men and women under Chinese socialism. Reverence paid to socialist martyrs became a way of publicly expressing loyalty to the state and party and of “proving” revolutionary purity.

14 Although the spiritual-versus-material dichotomy may seem to be a clunky binary in the more subtle versions of Marxist theory, it was a common conceptual construction in China during the Maoist years. See Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng*. It also has been fundamental to the various interpretations of Marxism at different times. A special issue of the journal *Rethinking Marxism* is devoted to the issue of Marxism and spirituality, and the binary is often invoked in the contributions: Chakrabarti, Dhar, and Kayatekin, “Marxism and Spirituality.”


17 Marx, “Karl Marx’s ‘Confession’”; this posting explains that filling out confession questionnaires were a common social pastime in Victorian England. Marx’s questionnaire was completed at his uncle Lion Philips’s house in Holland in 1865.

18 Abbinnett, *Politics of Happiness*.

19 Ibid., 14–15.

20 Ibid., 4.

21 Ibid., 3.

22 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

23 Markus, “Adorno and Mass Culture.”

24 Ibid., 87.


26 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*. See also Eyerman, *False Consciousness*. In feminist theory, see MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*. 

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14 / PRISM • THEORY AND MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE
28 MacIntyre, *Marxism*.
29 Yu, “Makesizhuyi de xingfugua.” Lei Feng, a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army, wrote about his desire for self-sacrifice in his diary, which was found, edited, and published after his death from an accident. The diary became a well-known and well-studied text that was widely imitated by youth trying to enhance their revolutionary credentials. Lei became an icon of hard work and self-sacrifice that is both revered and mocked. March 5 is the official Learn from Lei Feng Day.
31 Ouyang Hai 歐陽海 (1940–63), also in the People’s Liberation Army, was knocked over and killed when he successfully hauled a horse and cart off a train track before the train could hit it. Unfortunately, *The Song of Ouyang Hai* mentioned that Ouyang had studied Liu Shaoqi’s 劉少奇 (1898–1969) pamphlet *Lun gongchangdangyuan de xiuyang* 論共產黨員的修養 (On the Self-Cultivation of Communists), a speech given in 1939, and as a result, the book was criticized during the anti–Liu Shaoqi campaign. See Li, *Glossary*; see also Wang, “Construction of the Image/Myth.”
32 See Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 22. Although Dong was not from a peasant family, he decided to become a peasant after graduating from senior middle school rather than go on to a university education at Beijing University, where he had been accepted in 1961. On March 20, 1964, Renmin ribao 人民日報 (People’s Daily) published an article recognizing Dong’s choice as that which should be chosen by all sent-down youth. He received a model worker award in 2005. For a picture of Dong with Mao in 1964, see “1964 nian”; the website for the Sent-Down Youth Museum (www.hljzqg.com/xxzx/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=158) also mentions a younger sent-down youth, Zhang Ren 張韌, whose diary is also quoted in Yu, “Makesizhuyi de xingfugua.”
34 Ibid., 7; emphasis added.
38 Ibid., 11.
39 This idea is expressed most directly in the notes comprising the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, especially in the section “Estranged Labor.” These notes were not published until 1932. See Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. For a history of happiness in Marx’s work, see Ma, “Shilun Makesizhuyi de xingfuguan de fazhang guiji.” For a book-length study, see Yu, “Ma Kesi xingfuguan de zhexue yiyun.”
40 Meisner, “Marx, Mao, and Deng.”
41 In past research, I have analyzed the mix of spirituality, morality, and sensuality associated with labor. See Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng*, where I analyze the deconstruction of socialist labor in the 1995 film *Youchai* 郵差 (The Postman) by He Jianjun 何建軍 (177–221). In my work on Zhang Yimou 張藝謀, I found both affirmation and rejection of the concept of embodied, spiritual labor in his 2002 film *Xingfu shiguang* 幸福時光 (Happy Times). See Larson, *Zhang Yimou*.
42 See Kueh, “Mao and Agriculture.” The question of permanent revolution, for which Mao reaffirmed support in January 1958 (while claiming his version was not the same as Trotsky’s), generally referred to the privileging of the socialist movement over national development. But over time, different thinkers altered the meaning. See Skilling,
“Permanent or Uninterrupted Revolution.” For Mao, permanent revolution also was a state of mind in which revolutionary enthusiasm was established and maintained and complacency was forestalled. Thus, the 1950s slogan “more, faster, better, more efficiently” (多快好省 duokuai haosheng)—also reaffirmed by Mao in 1958—referred both to an improvement in material conditions and to the state of mind that would enhance efficiency, harmony, and cooperation.

43 Hu, “Qingnian yinggai you shenme yang de xingfuguan?,” 15. This long letter comprises the complete text of the first article in the series. Shanghai University professor Cai Xiang 蔡翔 (1953–), author of Revolution and Its Narratives: China’s Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949–1966, has compared Hu’s letter to another famous letter, by someone called Pan Xiao 潘曉, that was published in China Youth in 1980. Pan Xiao—possibly a pen name or a group of people—asks why life is getting narrower and narrower, a question that provoked a huge response. See Cai, “1960 niandai de wenxue.”

44 Hu, “Qingnian yinggai you shenme yang de xingfuguan?,” 16.

45 The two terms used for asceticism are kuxingzhuyi 苦行主義 and jinyuzhuyi 禁欲主義. The first focuses on experiencing misery and hardship, and the second on curtailing desire.

46 Gao, “Qingnian yinggai you shenme yang de xingfuguan?,” 20.


50 Bei, Shibai zhi shu.

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