

Avowed Happiness in Confucian Asia: Ascertaining its Distribution, Patterns, and Sources

Doh Chull Shin · Takashi Inoguchi

Accepted: 6 October 2008 / Published online: 4 November 2008
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Abstract This study reviewed three philosophical accounts of happiness, and then tested those accounts with the Asiabarameter surveys conducted in six Confucian societies during the summer of 2006. Statistical analyses of these surveys reveal that East Asians tend to experience happiness to a greater extent when they experience enjoyment together with achievement and/or satisfaction. The preponderance of such multi-dimensional conceptions in all those societies poses a direct challenge to a single dimensional account of happiness in the West. The analyses also reveal that positive assessments of interpersonal relationships matter more than the amount of knowledge or wealth in living a happy life in Confucian societies.

For millennia, philosophers have argued that humans exist in order to be happy and that the search for happiness is the most fundamental goal of human existence (Hudson 1996; Kingwell 2000; Lane 2000; Tefler 1980). For example, Aristotle (1998) identified happiness as the chief and final good in his first book, *Ethics*, and wrote more than nine books inquiring into the nature of human happiness (Nussbaum 2004; Vanier 2002). Utilitarian philosopher Bentham (1996) claimed that government's primary purpose is to ensure the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson pronounced all men possess an "unalienable" right to the "the pursuit of happiness." Among philosophers and many other thinkers, there is general agreement that happiness constitutes the greatest quality of human life.

Happiness, however, is a peculiarly difficult subject to frame and analyze (Haybron 2000; see also Argyle 1987; Chiang 1996; Chu et al. 2005; Diener 2000; Lu 2001; Park 2005; Seligman 2002; Wu 1992). Although everyone is sure that happiness is desirable,

D. C. Shin (✉)
University of Missouri at Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211, USA
e-mail: shind@missouri.edu

T. Inoguchi
Chuo University, Tokyo, Japan
e-mail: inoguchi@ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

people disagree widely about what happiness is and how it is achieved. Is happiness the same as peace of mind or the sense of contentment or satisfaction? Is it enjoyment and pleasure or fulfillment? Does happiness emanate from riches, fame, or power? Do the ingredients of happiness and its sources vary across the places and the ages in which people live? These are longstanding philosophical and empirical questions that people still argue about today. The present study represents a systematic attempt to deal with some of these questions in the context of Confucian Asia.

1 Previous Research

Over the past three decades, there has been a substantial increase in empirical inquiry into self-assessments of happiness, as evidenced by the compilation of the World Database of Happiness (<http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/>; Veenhoven 1984), the publication of *The Journal of Happiness Studies* in 2000, and international conferences on the concept of Gross National Happiness¹ (<http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publications/gnh/gnh.htm>). In the United States and other developed countries in the West, many scholars have examined the relationships between the various demographic, sociological, psychological, and behavioral characteristics of the mass citizenries and their reports on happiness (for a review of this literature, see Diener et al. 1999; Veenhoven 2000). Their studies have produced valuable information on the levels and correlates of avowed happiness among the mass publics mostly of the West. What these studies have not done is to develop a systematic line of research studying how the mass publics of the non-Western world specifically understand happiness and judge the status of their happiness.

In East Asia, most empirical studies to date have focused on comparing the levels and distribution of avowed happiness across various demographic groups or its sources with what is noted in the West (Kitayama et al. 1995; Lu 2001; Lu and Shih 1997; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Ng 2002). Specifically, these studies have identified the groups most and least likely to experience happiness and the sources most and least likely to contribute to it. Yet they have failed to determine how differently or similarly East Asians *understand* happiness and strive to achieve it. This paper seeks to fill this void in the literature by comparing the conceptions and experiences of happiness among the citizenries of Confucian societies in the region.

This paper is organized into nine sections. The section that follows immediately explicates the notion of happiness by reviewing the ways people often use the term to appraise the quality of their life experiences. The second section introduces the three fundamental accounts of happiness known in the philosophical literature and proposes a conceptual framework for our analysis of the conceptions and experiences of happiness among the mass publics of Confucian Asia. The third section discusses the key variables included in our analyses and describes how they are measured. The fourth section compares the levels of avowed happiness across six Confucian societies and the most and least happy of these societies. The fifth section compares the average levels of happiness across the population segments of each society and identifies those particular segments most and least likely to experience it. In the next two sections, we examine the divergent conceptions

¹ The term “gross national happiness” was coined in 1972 by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan, the east Himalayan Buddhist monarchy of approximately 800,000 people. It has recently become a subject of increasing and widespread concern in the international scholarly community and policy circles (New York Times 2005).

of happiness in terms of experiencing enjoyment, achievement, and satisfaction, and compare the essentiality of these components. We also identify the most and least popular conceptions in the entire region of Confucian Asia and individual societies in the region. The eighth section examines whether the possession of high income and other resources or a subjective relative assessment of those resources matters more in the experience of happiness among the people in Confucian Asia. The final section summarizes key findings and compares them with what is noted in other regions.

2 The Notion of Happiness

From the Epicureans to contemporary social scientists, considerable confusion reigns regarding precisely what happiness means. Even in present English usage, “happiness” carries numerous meanings and thus frequently creates a semantic snare (Margolis 1975). To clarify the meaning of the concept and establish grounds for its proper use in scholarly research, it is necessary to make a conceptual investigation of the philosophical and empirical literature on happiness and distinguish the three main uses of the term “happy” (Thomas 1968).

The first use of the term refers to a feeling, which is usually of short duration. When Homer and Herodotus equated happiness with physical pleasure and when Bradburn (1969) and Campbell (1981) thought of it as an affective state of mind, they were referring to short-term moods of gaiety and elation, which is fundamentally different from the core meaning of satisfaction. Such happy feelings are often termed euphoria: the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. Viewed from this perspective, happiness is a hedonistic concept.

A second use is one in which a person is “happy with” or “happy about” something, and these expressions mean “being satisfied with” or “contented with,” and do not at all imply that one has any particular feeling. Referring to happiness in this way refers to more than emotional pleasantries (Biswas-Diener et al. 2004, p. 18); the word is used exclusively to describe the welfare aspect of a life experience, not the hedonistic aspect of human life.

Thirdly, the term “happy” is often used to characterize the quality of a whole human life rather than making a statement about a particular aspect of life as in the case of the second use (Beneditt 1974; Cameron 1975; Lu 2001; Summers 1996). In this sense, when a person says that he is happy, he means that he has a happy life, a life in which all of his objectives come together to form as a harmonious and satisfying whole (Simpson 1975). When one makes such a global or holistic judgment in the context of the concept of happiness, he takes into account various aspects of his conditions and circumstances, as well as how he feels about all of them. For this reason, philosopher Austin (1968) concludes that a person’s sense of happiness represents the highest assessment of his whole life.

Unlike the first two segmented views of happiness, which focus on either pleasure or fulfillment and welfare, this third conception of happiness includes the whole scope of human needs, desires, interests, tastes, and demands, and seeks to determine whether they constitute a harmonious whole. Fletcher (1975, p. 14) characterizes that whole as “a sensitive commixture of mind and feeling” (see also Goldstein 1973). Believing that a mind without emotions is impoverished and that emotion without mind is squalid, they integrate both as “happiness”. Unlike pleasure, therefore, happiness is neither episodic nor subject to momentary moods. Feelings of pleasure and pain can occur both in the context of a happy life and in the context of an unhappy life. This distinction between *feeling*

happy and *being* happy should be considered in systematic accounts of happiness (McCall 1975).

This important distinction and the value of happiness as a conceptual tool for assessing the whole life quality of people through their own appraisals have gained little appreciation in empirical research on the quality of life (Andrews and Withey 1976; Campbell et al. 1976). Despite substantial and consistent evidence contrary to their claims, many well-known scholars have identified happiness merely with short-term moods of gaiety and elation. For example, Bradburn (1969, pp. 63–68) viewed happiness as a product of positive feelings and absence of negative feelings, although his data explain only small portions of variations in happiness. Andrews and Withey (1976) equated happiness with a preponderance of positive feelings over negative ones despite the fact that their Affect Balance Scale tapping positive and negative feelings explains only 26% of the variance in self-reports on happiness among the American population. These research findings clearly suggest that happiness should not be equated with an experience of feeling or affect alone. Instead, it should be viewed as an overall assessment of a person's *whole life* according to his or her own criteria.

3 Accounts of Happiness

If happiness refers to an overall quality of life, the essential question is, of what does happiness consist? Philosophers and social scientists have examined a variety of life experiences such as honor, virtue, material comfort, pleasure, and success in search for the constituents of happiness (Furnham and Cheng 2001; Veenhoven 2000). Each of these components has its advocates and critics in the quest for the constituents of true happiness.

Von Wright (1963, pp. 92–94) adumbrates three well-known accounts of the happy life. The first of these he calls the “Epicurean Ideals.” It holds that happiness consists in having (as opposed to doing) certain things that give one passive pleasure. For example, one might get pleasure from the enjoyment of beautiful paintings and good company. For that individual, happiness consists in enjoying life by having enough of these pleasure-producing things. The well-known Lockean idea that property is the foundation and means of happiness belongs to this hedonistic conception of happiness (Schaar 1970).

The second ideal leading to a happy life is, according to von Wright, found in the writings of the utilitarian philosophers, who derived happiness from the satisfaction of desires. In such a view, happiness is essentially contentedness—equilibrium between needs and wants on the one hand and satisfaction on the other; the prompt satisfaction of needs produces happiness, while the persistence of unfulfilled needs causes unhappiness (Wilson 1967). A person's happy life would be one in which as many as possible of his or her needs and desires are met.

A third account of the happy life, as revealed in the philosophical literature, sees happiness neither in passive pleasure as in the possession of property nor in the satisfaction of needs. This view, expressed in Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, equates happiness with creative activity (McKeon 1941, pp. 1093–1112). Happiness derives from the fulfillment of one's capacities by doing what one enjoys. As Annas (2004) and Schaar (1970) point out, happiness is a sense of achievement brought by man's inner productiveness, and it is the accompaniment of all productive human activity.

Having considered all three of these philosophical accounts of happiness, we propose that the three positive life experiences of *enjoyment*, *satisfaction*, and *achievement*

constitute the three main components of happiness. We also propose that these positive life experiences by themselves or in combination shape a person's overall judgment of happiness. Next we will investigate which specific components are most and least essential to the experience of happiness in Confucian societies. In those societies, what particular combinations or mix of these life experiences accompany happiness most and least often? Do the answers to these questions vary across the societies? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to determine systematically whether there is a Confucian notion of happiness.²

4 Measurements

To test the conceptual model of happiness outlined above in Confucian Asia, we selected three sets of items from the latest wave of the AsiaBarometer (ASB) surveys. During the months of July and August 2006, these ASB national surveys were conducted in six societies with cultures that have largely been shaped by the teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Included in these Confucian societies are China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea (hereafter Korea), Singapore, and Taiwan.³

The first set consists of one item on happiness and two others on its three constituents: enjoyment, achievement, and satisfaction. On the assumption that each individual is the best judge of his/her own state of happiness, the ASB surveys framed the item tapping happiness in such a way that respondents could make the distinction between *feeling happy* and *being happy*, and judge the state of their happiness in terms of their own conception of it.

Like other surveys, the ASB surveys asked respondents the straightforward question, "All things considered, would you say you are: (1) very happy, (2) quite happy, (3) neither happy nor unhappy, (4) not too happy, or (5) very unhappy?" This particular wording of the question enabled respondents to distinguish between *being happy* and *feeling happy* and make an appraisal of the overall situation of their existence. On the basis of the previous research finding that answers to this question are valid and reliable estimates of happiness (Ng 1996), we took such self-reports as the basic dependent variable.

To tap the extent of life enjoyment, the ASB surveys asked: "How often do you feel you are really enjoying life these days—often, sometimes, rarely or never?" To tap the extent of achievement in life, the same surveys asked: "How much do you feel you are achieving what you want out of your life—a great deal, some, very little or none?" In these questions, enjoyment and achievement represent different qualities of a whole life.

To measure the extent to which basic human needs are satisfied, we selected a second set of four items each of which deals with, respectively, physical, financial, social, and spiritual needs. Specifically, these items asked respondents to rate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they were satisfied or dissatisfied with their own health, household income, family life, and spiritual life. By counting the number of these four needs that they rated as being satisfied, a four-point index of life satisfaction was constructed. The two extreme scores of 0 and 4 on this index refer, respectively, to the satisfaction of none and all of the

² Lu (2001, p. 411) reviews the Confucian literature on happiness and concludes that "Confucians regard happiness as spiritual, not material; as moral, not circumstantial; as self-identified, not other-judged."

³ In all six societies, person-to-person interviews were conducted with the samples of males and females representative of their entire adult populations.

four needs. A score of 1 identifies the satisfaction of one need. Scores of 2 and 3 indicate satisfaction of two or three needs.

The third set of items consists of respondents' gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, and family income. These five variables are used to define the 13 different segments of the population in each society. We used them as either independent or control variables in multivariate analysis of influences on happiness. Gender and marital status are measured in terms of dichotomous categories. Education and income were measured in terms of three different levels: low, middle, and high. Like education and income, ages were divided into the three categories. The young are in the 20s and 30s, the middle-aged are in their 40s and 50s, and the old are in their 60 and older.

Besides these three sets of variables, we chose from the ASB surveys one more item to tap subjective assessments of one's own standard of living (Veenhoven 1991). This item⁴ asked respondents to rate their standard of living in a relative perspective on a 5-point scale running from "high" through "average" to "low." Only very small minorities were placed at the two extreme ends of the scale. We collapsed the categories to construct a 3-point scale, which is comparable to the ones measuring age, education, and income.

5 Levels of Happiness

The ASB surveys asked respondents to judge their lot in terms of five verbal categories. Table 1 reports the distribution of survey responses across these five response categories ranging from "very happy" to "very unhappy." The table also reports the percentages expressing happiness and unhappiness and their balance.

Of the five response categories, Table 1 shows that "quite happy" was the most popular choice with a plurality of two-fifths (43%) of the entire Confucian Asian sample, including all six societies. This category was followed by "neither happy nor unhappy" (34%), "very happy" (16%), "not too happy" (6%), and "very unhappy" (1%). When the two positive replies are considered together, a substantive majority of three-fifths (59%) of the people in Confucian Asia are shown to be living happy lives. Those who have unhappy lives, on the other hand, constitute a small minority of one-fourteenth (8%). In the region, over eight times as many people live a happy life as live an unhappy life.

In every Confucian society, "happy" people constitute a majority and "unhappy" people constitute a minority. In every society also, "very unhappy" people are the smallest minority. Table 1 also shows that the proportions of "happy" people vary considerably from a bare majority in Hong Kong and Taiwan to more than three-quarters in Singapore. Also the proportions of "unhappy" people vary considerably from less than 3% in Hong Kong to 14% in Korea.

To portray a balanced picture of the level of happiness in each society, we first combined the two positive and negative ratings and constructed a percentage differential index (PDI) by subtracting the combined ratings of the latter from those of the former. Values of this index range from a low of -100 to a high of +100. According to the PDI values reported in the last column of Table 1, Singapore emerges as the greatest nation of happiness with +73 on this index. It is followed by Japan (+54), China (+52), Hong Kong (+48), Korea (+43), and Taiwan (+41). On the basis of these scores, Confucian Asia can be divided into two sub-regions. The sub-region with higher levels of happiness consists of

⁴ The exact wording of this item is: "How would you describe your standard of living: high, relatively high, average, relatively low, or low?"

Table 1 Self-assessments of happiness

Contents	5 points scale					Mean	Percentages		
	-2	-1	0	1	2		Happy	Unhappy	Balance
China	1.7%	4.7%	35.7%	39.0%	18.9%	(.7)	57.9%	6.4%	+51.6
Hong Kong	1.0	2.2	46.1	44.0	6.6	(.5)	50.6	3.2	+47.5
Japan	.9	4.8	34.6	44.3	15.4	(.7)	59.6	5.6	+54.0
Korea	1.1	12.7	29.9	44.3	12.0	(.5)	56.1	13.8	+42.5
Singapore	.9	5.2	15.4	51.1	27.5	(1.0)	78.5	6.1	+72.5
Taiwan	2.2	7.2	40.5	33.7	16.5	(.6)	50.2	9.4	+40.8
Region	1.1	5.5	33.5	40.6	19.3	(.7)	59.9	6.6	+53.3

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

Singapore, Japan, and China, all of whose scores exceed +50 on the index. The sub-region with lower levels of happiness combines Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan, whose scores are lower than +50 on the same index.

Across the six societies in Confucian Asia are there notable differences in the experience of happiness. Nonetheless, these societies are alike in having majorities that live in happiness and small minorities living in unhappiness. They are also alike in lacking majorities that live a “very happy life,” but those who do live a “very happy life” outnumber those living an “unhappy life.” In fact, in every county but Korea, the percentage of people living a very happy life is greater than the percentage of those living an unhappy life and the percentage of those living a very unhappy life *combined*.

To what extent are the citizens of Confucian societies happy or unhappy with their lives? To compare the levels of avowed happiness more precisely across the six societies, we rescaled the original five-category verbal scale into a five-point numeric scale ranging from a low of -2 (very unhappy) to a high of 2 (very happy). Table 1 reports the means on this scale for each society and the Confucian region as a whole. On this scale, the six Confucian societies as a whole average +.7, a positive score that is higher than the scale midpoint, but significantly lower than the highest point of +2. This mean confirms that Confucian Asia is a region in which people live in more happiness than in unhappiness. Yet it is not a region in which a majority lives a very happy life.

In addition, Table 1 shows that every Confucian society scored a positive mean score. These mean scores vary considerably from +.5 in Hong Kong and Korea to +1.0 in Singapore. These scores confirm that people in the Singapore live in significantly greater happiness than those in Hong Kong and Korea. More broadly, in Confucian societies there is great inequality regarding the experience of happiness.

6 The Distribution of Happiness

As in other regions, people in Confucian Asia live in various circumstances and face very different situations. They also value different things for their own lives. As a result, even those who live in the same society are not likely to judge their life experiences in the same light. Which segments of the people in this Asian region are the most and least happy with their lives? In this section, we explore this question in terms of five demographic variables including gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, and family income.

Table 2 shows the percentages expressing happiness in each of the 13 population groups defined by the two or three characteristics of each variable. Between the two genders in Confucian region as a whole, more females than males experience happiness (63 vs. 57%). Especially in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, nearly 10% or more females report happiness than their male counterparts. Only in Hong Kong are males as happy as females. Of the six societies, the gender difference in happiness is most pronounced in Korea where 50% of males fail to report happiness. This difference is least pronounced in Hong Kong, the only place where half the females do not report happiness.

Table 2 also shows that in Confucian Asia as a whole, happy people are most numerous in the youngest of the three age groups identified. Young people in their 20s and 30s report happiness in a larger proportion than do their older peers (63 vs. 57%). Of the three age groups, moreover, young people are the only group in which majorities, ranging from 53% in Taiwan to 81% in Singapore, report happiness in all six societies. In the case of the middle and old age groups, those experiencing happiness constitute majorities in five societies. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, majorities in the 40s and 50s group are not happy with their lives, while in Hong Kong and Korea, majorities in the 60s and older age group

Table 2 The experience of happiness among population groups

Variables	Countries						
	China	Hong kong	Japan	Korea	Singapore	Taiwan	Region
Gender							
Male	56%	51%	55%	50%	77%	46%	57%
Female	60	50	64	63	80	55	63
(Difference)	(4)	(1)	(9)*	(13)*	(3)	(9)*	(6)*
Age							
20–39	57	57	61	65	81	53	63
40–59	57	46	56	52	76	45	57
60+	64	38	65	37	81	57	57
(Difference)	(7)	(19)*	(9)	(28)*	(5)	(12)*	(6)*
Marriage							
Single	48	55	41	52	73	55	55
Married	61	48	67	57	81	48	62
(Difference)	(13)*	(7)	(26)*	(5)	(8)*	(7)	(7)*
Education							
<High School	54	39	44	36	77	49	56
High School	60	55	57	57	79	47	59
College	64	70	65	65	82	57	66
(Difference)	(10)*	(31)*	(21)*	(29)*	(5)	(10)*	(10)*
Income							
Low	54	41	54	48	72	51	53
Middle	64	56	61	60	83	48	62
High	71	69	68	69	79	56	72
(Difference)	(17)*	(28)*	(14)*	(21)*	(11)*	(8)	(19)*

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

* Significant at the .05 level

are not happy with their lives, either. These findings suggest that young people live more happily than their older peers.

Nonetheless, Table 2 shows that old people, when separated from middle-aged people, are happier than or nearly as happy as their younger peers in societies: China, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan. Only in Hong Kong and Korea, where growing age is accompanied by steady declines in the proportion reporting happiness, are the former less happy than the latter. Evidently the direction of the relationship between happiness and age varies from the positive to the negative within the same cultural region of Confucian Asia.

Table 2 also shows that the magnitude of the relationship varies considerably within the region as well. In Korea, for instance, young people lead old people in expressing happiness by 28% points. In Singapore, where happiness is generally high, the differences between these two age groups amount to only 5% points in favor of the young. When all these findings are taken into account, it is difficult to determine which group between the young and old is the happiest. In all six Confucian societies, however, it is, undoubtedly, the middle age group that least expresses happiness. Of these societies, age matters most in Korea and Hong Kong, and least in Singapore.

Comparing the married and unmarried people in Confucian Asia as a whole, the married express greater happiness than the unmarried (62 vs. 55%). This pattern of difference, however, does not hold true in all Confucian societies. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, happy people are more numerous among the unmarried than the married (55 vs. 48%). Only in these two societies do a majority of the unmarried live happy lives while a majority of the married does not. In China and Japan, the pattern is reversed with a majority of the unmarried living without happiness and a majority of the married living in happiness. In Korea and Singapore, happy people constitute majorities of both groups. When all these differences are considered together, the difference regarding marriage is most pronounced in Japan with a 26-percentage point advantage among the married. The difference is least pronounced in Korea where age difference was found to be most pronounced. Like age, marriage affects happiness differently in both direction and magnitude across Confucian Asia.

Table 2 shows a steady and positive relationship between levels of educational attainment and happiness when all six societies in the region are considered together. The higher is the level of education, the greater is the proportion of happy people. As a result, happy people are least numerous among those with a middle school education or less and most numerous among those with a college education. This pattern holds true in all Confucian societies with the exception of Taiwan, where happy people are least numerous in the middle educational group (high school education). In Taiwan, less than a majority with a high school education report happiness. Even in this country, as in all other societies, the college-educated are the happiest of the three educational groups.

In most Confucian societies including Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, a majority of people lacking a high school education fails to live a happy life. In two of these societies, Hong Kong and Korea, larger majorities of more than three-fifths of the least educated do not live such a life. In striking contrast, substantial majorities of the college-educated in all seven societies live a happy life. In Hong Kong and Singapore, larger majorities of more than two-thirds of the most educated live in happiness. When all these differences are taken into account, education matters most in Hong Kong and Korea where the college-educated are nearly twice as likely to live a happy life compared to those with no or little formal education. Education matters least in Singapore where majorities of every education group express happiness in their lives.

As with education, increases in income are generally associated with higher levels of happiness. In Confucian Asia as a whole, the more money people have, the happier they

are with their lives. This pattern of a steadily positive relationship is observed in five societies: China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea. In these four societies, the most and least affluent segments of the population constitute, respectively, the most and least happy groups. In contrast, the middle-income group represents the happiest in Singapore but the least happy in Taiwan. Despite these differences, all Confucian societies are alike in that majorities of their high-income people experience happiness.

Across the six societies, however, there is great variation in the extent to which income matters for the experience of happiness. In Hong Kong and Korea, happiness is more than 20% higher among high-income people than among low-income people. In Taiwan, the parallel difference is 8% points, only one-quarter of the difference observed in Hong Kong. Income accompanies greater happiness in all Confucian societies, and yet it means much more happiness in some of these societies.

In Confucian Asia, which population groups are most and least likely to live a happy life? Do these groups differ from one Confucian society to another? To address these questions, we compare percentages expressing happiness among the 13 population groups reported in Table 2 and identify the two particular groups that register the highest and lowest percentages in each society. For each society, Table 3 describes the two groups that constitute the happiest of the 13 groups. It also describes the two groups that constitute the least happy of the groups.

Table 3 shows that across the entire region of Confucian Asia, the least happy category contains as many as six different population groups, including the unmarried, old people, low-education people, low-income people, middle-age people, and males. Of these six groups, unmarried people and low-education people are most often listed in the least happy category, appearing in three societies. Next to these categories of people are old people and those with limited income. Most often included in the category of the happiest population groups are the college-educated. In five countries: China, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, they are one of the two happiest groups. In four countries: China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea, high-income people are one of those groups. On the basis of these findings, it is fair to conclude that the most and least happy population groups vary considerably across the region of Confucian Asia. Despite these differences, the unmarried with little income or education and high-income people with a college education are, respectively, the least and most happy groups of the people in the region.

So far we have examined how unevenly self-assessments of happiness are distributed across the categories of five demographic variables. Of these variables, education and

Table 3 The least and most happy of population groups

Countries	Least happy	Most happy
China	Unmarried Low income	High education High income
Hong Kong	Old age Low education	High education High income
Japan	Unmarried Low education	Married High income
Korea	Old age Low education	High education High income
Singapore	Unmarried Low income	High education Middle Income
Taiwan	Middle age Male	High education Old age

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

Table 4 Percentages expressing happiness by levels of socio-economic resources

Countries	Socio-economic resources index					(Difference)	(eta)
	1	2	3	4	5		
China	52%	57%	61%	68%	71%	(19%)	(.13)*
Hong Kong	33	47	57	70	76	(43)	(.26)*
Japan	40	52	57	69	66	(29)	(.16)*
Korea	37	48	60	69	67	(32)	(.23)*
Singapore	69	82	81	77	79	(13)	(.13)*
Taiwan	54	48	43	55	68	(24)	(.13)*
Region	50	57	60	69	71	(20)	(.14)*

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

* Significant at the .05 level

income are the two variables registering the uneven distribution of such assessments to the degree of 10% points or higher in most Confucian societies. For this reason, we combine their values into a 5-point index of socio-economic resources and identify the societies where these resources matter most and least. A score of 1 on this index refers to low-income people with less than a high school education and a score of 5 refers to high-income people with a college education.

From the analyses presented above, we expect that higher levels of socio-economic resources are associated with corresponding levels of happiness. Contrary to this expectation, Table 4 shows that more resources do not always bring about greater happiness. In Taiwan, for instance, the least happy are those placed in the midpoint of the index, not at its bottom. In Japan, Korea, and Singapore, moreover, the happiest are not those placed at the top of the index. Only in two countries, China and Hong Kong, are the least and most happy placed at the two extreme ends of the resources index. This finding suggests that more education and wealth do not always bring about widespread happiness in most Confucian societies.

The statistics reported in Table 4 also reveal a great deal of variation in the extent to which these resources affect the experience of happiness. In Hong Kong, for instance, high-income people with a college education are over two times more likely to live a happy life than those with little income and limited education (76 vs. 33%). Between these two groups there is a large gap of 43% points. In Singapore, on the other hand, the gap is only 10% points (79 vs. 69%), a figure of less than one-quarter of Hong Kong’s. According to this statistic measuring percentage differences, which is reported in the seventh row of the figure, Hong Kong and Korea are the two Confucian societies where socio-economic resources are associated with the highest degree of inequality in happiness. Singapore and China are the three societies where the same resources have produced the least inequality in happiness.

7 Conceptions of Happiness

Reviewing the philosophical literature on happiness, we have identified its three key components: the enjoyment of life, the achievement of goals, and the satisfaction of basic needs. Of these three components, which ones form the most and least popular conceptions

Table 5 Conceptions of happiness

Number of dimensions	Countries						
	China	Hong Kong	Japan	Korea	Singapore	Taiwan	Region
One							
Enjoyment	7%	7%	2%	11%	1%	5%	5%
Achievement	3	3	1	1	0	2	1
Satisfaction	3	8	2	1	2	9	3
(Total)	13	18	5	14	3	16	10
Two							
Enjoyment & achievement	19	11	5	15	1	10	11
Enjoyment & satisfaction	10	11	17	18	13	18	14
Achievement & satisfaction	3	7	2	2	2	4	3
(Total)	22	29	24	34	16	32	27
Three							
Enjoyment, achievement, & satisfaction	61	51	71	51	81	47	61
None of the above	4	4	1	2	0	5	2

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

of happiness among the masses of Confucian Asia? Do these masses equate happiness with the experience of only one or two components? Or do they equate it with the presence of all three components? In this section, we explore these questions by linking the experience of happiness to that of enjoyment, achievement, and satisfaction in isolation and in combination. Specifically, among those who judge their lives as happy, we calculate the percentages experiencing only one component, two components, and all three components of enjoyment, achievement, and satisfaction. Comparing these percentages falling into the seven different categories of these experiences,⁵ we attempt to ascertain the most and least popular conceptions of happiness in each Confucian society and Confucian Asia as a whole.

According to the data reported in Table 5, only one in 50 people (2%) in Confucian Asia claims happiness without experiencing any of the three components. In Singapore, moreover, nobody claims a happy life without experiencing at least one of these three positive life experiences. In the four other societies, very small minorities, ranging from 1% in Japan to 5% in Taiwan, live happily without any of those experiences. To overwhelming majorities of the mass citizenries in Confucian societies, therefore, enjoyment, accomplishment, and satisfaction do seem to constitute the three essential components of happiness.

Nonetheless, a careful review of the data reported in Table 5 indicates that not any one of these three components alone allows those majorities to live a happy life. In Confucian Asia as a whole, one out of ten (10%) people reports happiness while experiencing only one of the three components. In two countries, Japan and Singapore, the figures are even

⁵ These seven types are: (1) enjoyment, (2) achievement, (3) satisfaction, (4) enjoyment and achievement, (5) enjoyment and satisfaction, (6) achievement and satisfaction, and (7) enjoyment, achievement and satisfaction.

smaller at 5 and 3%, respectively. In the rest of the Confucian societies, they range from 13% in China to 18% in Hong Kong. Thus, to large majorities, ranging from 78 to 97% of the Confucian Asian publics, happiness constitutes a phenomenon with more than one characteristic.

In two countries, Japan and Singapore, large majorities of over two-thirds (71%) and four-fifths (81%) of those who report happiness experience all three components of enjoyment, achievement, and satisfaction. In the four other societies with the exception of Taiwan (47%), majorities ranging from 50 to 60% report happiness and experience all three components. When all six societies are considered together, those living a happy life with all three components are over two times as many as those living such a life with two components (61 vs. 27%). They are over six times as many as those living it with only one component (60 vs. 10%). In Confucian Asia, most people describe happiness in multidimensional terms.

Multidimensional conceptions of happiness vary considerably with most of the demographic characteristics of those who experience it. Table 6 shows what percentage of the happy people in each group report experiencing all three components of happiness. Of the

Table 6 Multidimensional conceptions of happiness among population groups

Variables	Countries						
	China	Hong Kong	Japan	Korea	Singapore	Taiwan	Region
Gender							
Male	51%	49%	69%	52%	82%	50%	60%
Female	53	51	73	49	81	44	60
(Difference)	(2)	(2)	(4)	(4)	(1)	(6)	(0)
Age							
20–39	51	49	63	49	82	41	57
40–59	52	50	76	53	80	55	62
60+	58	56	78	47	86	48	66*
(Difference)	(7)	(7)	(15)*	(6)	(6)	(14)*	(9)
Marriage							
Single	45	41	60	50	83	39	55
Married	53	57	73	50	80	51	62
(Difference)	(8)	(16)*	(13)*	(0)	(3)	(12)*	(7)*
Education							
<High school	43	47	72	43	77	49	58
High school	53	52	71	48	87	41	59
College	65	53	70	54	81	51	64
(Difference)	(22)*	(6)	(2)	(11)	(10)	(10)	(6)
Income							
Low	44	44	67	44	73	37	51
Middle	59	50	75	52	79	47	59
High	69	60	79	61	90	60	73
(Difference)	(25)*	(16)*	(12)*	(17)*	(17)*	(23)*	(22)*

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

* Significant at the .05 level

five characteristics listed in Table 6, only gender is of little consequence. When all six Confucian societies are considered together, there is no difference at all between the two genders in their conceptions of happiness as a three-dimensional phenomenon (60 vs. 60%). Only in three societies is one gender slightly more three-dimensional than the other. In Japan, for instance, females are more multidimensional than their male counterparts (73 vs. 69%), but in Korea and Taiwan, females are less multidimensional than males (49 vs. 52% and 44 vs. 50%).

Age matters much more than gender in experiencing happiness in multidimensional terms. In five Confucian societies, age associates positively with a three-dimensional conception. In China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore, age accompanies increasing multidimensionality in happiness. In these societies, multidimensional happiness is most commonplace among people in the 60s and older. In Korea and Taiwan, however, they are most numerous among people in the 40s and 50s age group. In Korea and Taiwan, however, multidimensional happiness is highest among the middle-aged, those in their 40s and 50s. Despite this modest variation, it is evident that people in this region are likely to become multidimensional in their happiness as they grow old. In the region as a whole, 66% of old people, as compared to 57% of young people, become happy when they experience all three categories of subjective well-being.

Like age, marital status matters considerably in five societies. In China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan, married people are more multidimensional than unmarried people probably because the former are older than the latter. In three societies, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan, 12–16% more of the married group express multidimensional happiness. In the Confucian region as a whole, the former lead the latter by 7% points in living a happy life of enjoyment, achievement, and satisfaction.

Education also matters considerably in most societies. Only in two societies, Hong Kong and Japan, is there little difference between people with little or no education and the college-educated. In the other four societies, differences exceed 10% points, and the college-educated are multidimensional in the greatest proportion. In two societies, China and Korea, increases in the education level are accompanied by growing proportions of multidimensional conceiver. On the other hand, in Singapore and Taiwan, the most educated are not most multidimensional nor are the least educated the least multidimensional. Generally in Confucian societies, education motivates people to become multidimensional in happiness, but it is not clear why it plays a more contributing role in some societies than in others.

Of all the five demographic variables considered, income appears to matter most in motivating the people of Confucian Asia to view happiness as a three-dimensional phenomenon. In the region as a whole, the proportions of multidimensional conceiver steadily rise from 51% of low-income people through 59% of middle-income people to 73% of high-income people. There is a large difference of 22% points between the two extreme income groups, which is three times larger than the difference denoted with education. Moreover, this monotonic pattern of positive relationship holds true in all seven societies. Clearly, higher income allows people in Confucian Asia to pursue a happy life in multidimensional terms.

Given the findings above, it is useful to examine how education and income together affect the multidimensional conceptions of happiness. Table 7 reports the percentages of multidimensional conceiver among those placed at each of five socioeconomic resources levels. Throughout the entire region of Confucian Asia, multidimensional conceptions are always more common at the two top resource levels than at the two bottom levels. This suggests that socioeconomic resources promote such conceptions. Across six Confucian

Table 7 Multidimensional conceptions of happiness by levels of socio-economic resources

Countries	Resources level					(eta)
	Lowest	Low	Middle	High	Highest	
China	40%	49%	58%	67%	72%	(.23)*
Hong Kong	45	45	52	52	68	(.11)
Japan	79	67	73	72	81	(.10)
Korea	42	41	53	55	61	(.14)*
Singapore	68	79	87	86	90	(.19)*
Taiwan	31	50	45	51	57	(.14)
Region	48	58	61	64	73	(.14)*

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

* Significant at the .05 level

societies, however, there are notable differences in the way in which multidimensional conceptions are distributed. In China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan, they form majorities only at the two or three top levels. In Japan and Singapore, they form substantial majorities at all five or four levels of resources.

As Table 7 shows, the magnitudes of percentage differences between the top and bottom categories of resource levels also vary considerably. In all but Japan, where the difference is only 3% points, those placed at the top are significantly more multidimensional than those placed at the bottom. In Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore, about one-fifth more from the former are multidimensional conceptions. In China and Taiwan, the difference between the two groups is even higher and runs up to more than one-quarter. These findings indicate that wealth and education motivate Confucian Asian people to view happiness as a multidimensional phenomenon. Apparently, the way these resources affect people’s conceptions of happiness does vary somewhat in the different societies.

Does the way people approach happiness as a single dimensional or multidimensional phenomenon affect the level of happiness they experience? Would someone experiencing all three dimensions of happiness be more likely to be happier than someone experiencing fewer dimensions? In Table 8, we explore this question by linking the experience of a “very happy” life to differing dimensional conceptions. In every society in Confucian Asia and the region as a whole, those living “very happy” lives are most numerous in the

Table 8 Percent being “very happy” by different experiences of well-being

Countries	Single dimensional	Two-dimensional	Three-dimensional	(Difference)	(eta)
China	25%	26%	40%	(15)	(.18)*
Hong Kong	5	11	17	(12)	(.14)*
Japan	15	24	28	(13)	(.07)
Korea	8	17	29	(21)	(.20)*
Singapore	5	35	36	(31)	(.11)*
Taiwan	22	28	41	(19)	(.19)*
Region	18	30	37	(18)	(.14)*

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

* Significant at the .05 level

multidimensional category and least numerous in the unidimensional category. In every society, the difference between the two categories exceeds ten percentage points in favor of the former. In Singapore, multidimensional conceivers are seven times more likely to be very happy with their lives than unidimensional conceivers (36 vs. 5%). These findings indicate that multidimensional conceivers live very happy lives in a significantly higher proportion despite variations in the political and economic systems where they live. Moreover, in Confucian Asia, education and money enable people to live very happy lives marked by multidimensional perspectives.

8 The Essentiality of Components

In all six Confucian societies, we have found that enjoyment of life, the achievement of goals, and the satisfaction of basic needs do constitute the three essential components of a happy life. Of these three components, which is most essential to living a happy life? Do six societies agree or disagree regarding the most essential component of happiness? We examine these questions by comparing the percentages failing to report happiness among those who do not experience each of the three components. Underlying this analysis is the stronger the relationship between the absence of the component and the absence of happiness, the more essential that particular component is.

Table 9 reports a great deal of variation in the extent to which citizens in the six societies estimate the three components to be essential to a happy life. In Hong Kong, for instance, there is only a 4-percentage point difference among the ratings of the three components. This means that all three components are almost equally essential to a happy life in that society. In striking contrast, in Singapore, there is at least a 30-percentage point difference between the two extreme ratings. In Singapore, 30% more people consider the satisfaction of basic needs essential to happiness rather than the achievement of goals. Across the Confucian societies there is no consensus about which component citizens value as the most essential to happy lives.

Careful scrutiny of the percentages reported in Table 9 does reveal three patterns of valuations. In most Confucian societies—Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, enjoyment and achievement are rated, respectively, as the most and least essential components. In China too, enjoyment is rated as the most essential. To Chinese the least essential is satisfaction, not achievement. In Singapore, the most essential component is satisfaction, quite the opposite of findings in China. The least essential in Singapore is achievement. In the overall findings there is more agreement than disagreement over the most and least essential components of happiness in Confucian Asia. Of the three components, enjoyment is most essential while achievement is least essential to a happy life in the region.

Table 9 The essentiality of happiness components

Countries	Enjoyment	Achievement	Satisfaction
China	72%	64%	61%
Hong Kong	71	67	71
Japan	82	63	76
Korea	88	64	64
Singapore	71	49	79
Taiwan	75	61	68
Region	77	61	65

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

Table 10 compares the “essentiality” ratings of the three components across 15 different population segments of each society to determine whether the same or different components rate as the most and least essential to their happy life. In four societies including Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, all segments rate enjoyment and achievement as the most and least essential components of happiness. As in these four societies, all segments of the Chinese population except the high-income people rate enjoyment as the most essential component. To them, satisfaction, not achievement, is the least essential. In Singapore, all segments are alike in rating satisfaction as the most essential and achievement as the least essential. Within each society, however, there is great consensus among population groups about the essentiality of the three happiness components. Apparently, it is the characteristics of the societies that determine the priority of each component, not those of individual citizens.

9 Sources of Happiness

What makes people live a happy life? Economists have identified money and other financial capital as a force promoting a happy life (Cumins 2000; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Easterlin 2001, 2003; Lane 1993). Sociologists have identified the human capital of knowledge and skills and the social capital of family life and other interpersonal relationships as important sources of happiness (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Lu and Shih 1997). Psychologists, on the other hand, have established that a person’s relative assessment of his/her own life compared to that of others’ shapes perceptions of happiness (Diener et al. 1999; Campbell 1981; Veenhoven 1991).

From previous research findings, we chose four variables that represent those four known categories of influence upon happiness. They are family income, representing physical capital; educational attainment, representing human capital; marital status, representing social capital; and the relative assessment people make of their own standard of living, representing a sense of relative well-being. We included gender and age in the Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) as control variables to estimate the net effects of the four independent variables on happiness as the dependent variable (Andrews et al. 1973). For each Confucian society and Confucian Asia as a whole, Table 11 reports the *beta* and *R* statistics from the MCA analyses.

Of the four independent variables, which ones contribute most and least to the experience of a happy life in Confucian societies? Do these variables differ across the societies? The *beta* coefficients reported in Table 11 reveal which independent variables are the most and least powerful influences on happiness. In every society, the most powerful variable was respondents’ assessments of their own standard of living compared to others. The rest of predictors, including the two control variables of gender and age, have much less explanatory power. This subjective assessment variable is the only predictor whose coefficients are statistically significant in all seven Confucian societies. In five societies—China, Hong Kong, Korea Singapore, and Taiwan, moreover, the magnitudes of those coefficients exceed those of any of the other three independent variables. Only in Japan, does marriage have larger *beta* coefficients than the relative assessment of one’s own standard of living. These findings indicate that interpersonal comparisons of one’s standard of living are the most pervasive influence on perceptions of happiness in Confucian Asia. The findings also suggest that subjective assessments of the conditions of life shape the experience of a happy life more powerfully or directly than do objective life conditions.

Table 10 Demographic differences in the assessments of happiness components

	China			Hong Kong			Japan		
	Enjoyment	Achievement	Satisfaction	Enjoyment	Achievement	Satisfaction	Enjoyment	Achievement	Satisfaction
Gender									
1	69%	64%	71%	73%	64%	62%	86%	66%	80%
2	74	70	70	70	63	59	77	58	70
Age									
1	63	60	64	71	62	62	81	59	70
2	78	70	75	71	65	61	86	68	83
3	81	89	82	80	65	57	73	62	72
Marriage									
1	61	58	60	79	70	69	86	79	81
2	77	74	76	69	61	59	80	52	72
Education									
1	81	77	79	71	65	61	90	84	80
2	67	63	65	78	59	58	86	65	80
3	49	41	54	69	65	63	75	60	69
Income									
1	83	78	76	75	65	63	87	70	78
2	61	60	65	60	56	54	81	65	78
3	59	46	68	56	58	53	84	50	78

Table 10 continued

	Korea						Singapore						Taiwan					
	Enjoyment		Achievement		Satisfaction		Enjoyment		Achievement		Satisfaction		Enjoyment		Achievement		Satisfaction	
Gender																		
1	91%	63%	55%	71%	72%	73%	72%	52%	43%	52%	73%	81%	66%	56%	66%	73%	81%	66%
2	84%	58%	67%	87%	71%	84%	71%	47%	54%	47%	84%	67%	55%	69%	55%	63%	67%	63%
Age																		
1	81%	55%	67%	53%	69%	82%	69%	43%	54%	82%	82%	73%	56%	66%	82%	73%	73%	66%
2	87%	67%	70%	69%	72%	75%	72%	54%	53%	75%	75%	79%	69%	76%	75%	76%	79%	69%
3	95%	70%	70%	80%	86%	88%	86%	53%	53%	88%	88%	64%	57%	61%	88%	61%	64%	57%
Marriage																		
1	91%	62%	62%	71%	80%	89%	80%	59%	59%	89%	89%	75%	53%	62%	89%	75%	75%	62%
2	87%	60%	60%	62%	67%	72%	67%	45%	45%	72%	72%	75%	65%	71%	72%	75%	75%	71%
Education																		
1	92%	66%	66%	83%	67%	79%	67%	52%	52%	79%	79%	76%	65%	69%	79%	76%	76%	69%
2	88%	61%	61%	57%	83%	88%	83%	58%	58%	88%	88%	73%	63%	67%	88%	73%	73%	67%
3	83%	53%	53%	58%	80%	67%	80%	39%	39%	67%	67%	76%	53%	69%	67%	76%	76%	69%
Income																		
1	91%	67%	67%	69%	74%	89%	74%	52%	52%	89%	89%	70%	61%	60%	89%	70%	70%	60%
2	86%	56%	56%	62%	62%	63%	62%	39%	39%	63%	63%	77%	61%	71%	63%	77%	77%	71%
3	81%	52%	52%	48%	82%	80%	82%	60%	60%	80%	80%	73%	60%	70%	80%	73%	73%	70%

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

Table 11 Multiple classification analyses of happiness

Predictors	Countries						
	China	Hong Kong	Japan	Korea	Singapore	Taiwan	Region
Gender	.05	.00	.05	.10*	.03	.09*	.05
Age	.05	.06	.12*	.13*	.07	.08	.08*
Marriage	.10*	.04	.28*	.12*	.10*	.03	.10
Education	.07	.13*	.10*	.08	.02	.06	.04
Income	.02	.07	.05	.04	.06	.06	.06
Assessments	.26*	.31*	.25*	.33*	.25*	.08*	.25*
R^2	.31	.40	.41	.43	.29	.18	.31

Source: 2006 AsiaBarometer surveys

* Significant at the .05 level

Of the three other independent variables, only marriage significantly influences happiness in most Confucian societies. In four of the six societies—China, Japan, Korea, and Singapore, their relationships are estimated to be statistically significant. In Hong Kong and Taiwan is marriage not significantly associated with the experience of happiness when the effects of all other predictors are controlled. In contrast, education is significantly associated with happiness in Hong Kong and Japan. Surprisingly, family income, the most important component of physical or financial capital, does not significantly affects happiness in any society. In Confucian Asia, money itself does not buy happiness. Thus, we conclude that throughout Confucian Asia, social capital is more instrumental in shaping happiness than either financial or human capital.

10 Summary and Conclusions

In Confucian Asia, as in all other regions of the world, it is common that people desire to live lives of happiness. To what extent are they happy with their own lot? What constitutes the happy life? Do objective conditions of life or subjective assessments of those conditions determine their state of happiness? Utilizing the latest round of the ASB surveys conducted in seven Confucian societies, we sought to address these and other questions that concern how various segments of the societies' populations understand and judge happiness.

To explore these questions that have not been adequately addressed in previous research about Asia, we first placed the notion of happiness into the context of a person's whole life and then allowed respondents to appraise their happiness according to their own criteria. Then we reviewed the philosophical literature to identify from it what are asserted to be the three essential components of happiness. With these resources, we analyzed the surveys to ascertain the particular components or mix of the components that most and least often lead to reports of a happy life among the ordinary citizens of Confucian Asia. We also analyzed the surveys to compare the levels and sources of avowed happiness across the seven societies and within each one.

Previous survey-based studies have reported low levels of avowed happiness among average citizens in Asia (Diener and Oishi 2002; Ng 2002). The 2006 ASB surveys revealed that "happy" people, not "very happy" people, constitute a majority in every

Confucian society, yet the proportions of respondents expressing happiness vary considerably across the seven societies. These proportions are significantly higher in Singapore, Japan, and China than in Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan. The proportions also vary considerably across demographic groups within these societies. Of the five variables reported for these groups, education and income matter most, especially in Hong Kong and Korea. When all five characteristics are taken into account, the unmarried with a low level of income are the least happy while the college-educated with a high level of income are the happiest population groups in Confucian Asia.

In the region, happiness means much more than emotional pleasantries; it is a positive assessment of a whole life, the holistic judgment of life experiences that recognizes not only the enjoyment of living but also the achievement of goals and/or the satisfaction of desires and needs. In most Confucian societies, enjoyment is more essential to a happy life than achievement and satisfaction. Yet feelings of enjoyment alone do not lead to such a life among the vast majority of the citizens in all seven Confucian societies. When these citizens experience enjoyment together with achievement and satisfaction, then they are happy or very happy with their lives. With growing age and increasing wealth, people in these societies become more multidimensional in their conceptions of happiness. Consequently, the multidimensional conceptions of happiness are most pronounced in Japan and Singapore, the two wealthiest of the seven societies in the region. The preponderance of such conceptions throughout the entire region of Confucian Asia poses a direct challenge to the hedonistic, single dimensional conception of happiness that is most commonplace in the affluent West (Bradburn 1969; Bradburn and Capilovitz 1965; Campbell 1981).

To determine what contributes most to happiness in Confucian Asia, we analyzed the three most prominent—physical, human, and social—conditions of life and the subjective assessments of those conditions. Of these three conditions, social capital measured in terms of marriage is the most instrumental in shaping a happy life. Financial capital measured in terms of family income is, on the other hand, the least instrumental. In Confucian societies that emphasize the importance of community more than the individual (Bell 2006; De Barry 1998; Lu and Gilmore 2004; Uchida et al. 2004; Dienter and Suh 2000), interpersonal relationships matter far more than the level of knowledge or wealth. Nonetheless, social capital does not matter most for a happy life in all these societies. Instead, subjective assessments of one's own conditions of life relative to others are the most powerful influence on self-assessments of happiness (Andrews and Withey 1976; Campbell et al. 1976; Diener 2000). In this respect, Confucian Asia is more alike, rather than different from, all other regions of the world.

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