

# The pursuit of happiness in modern Japan

The so-called rise of Asia has attracted renewed attention to Asian societies mainly as places of economic growth and business opportunities. But different socio-political orders throughout Asia also serve as a reminder of alternative priorities regarding the meaning of prosperity. Bhutan's proclamation of Gross National Happiness and the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism are only the most eye-catching examples that have cast a spotlight on the significance of subjective well-being and quality of life in contrast to promises of growth, wealth, and progress.

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YET, AS THE GROWING NUMBER of studies into happiness reveals, a certain level of economic development appears to be a precondition for "the state of satisfaction of one's fundamental desires" – the wide-spread working definition of happiness. Therefore, it is no contradiction that the pursuit of happiness is a quest for both materialistic values and non-materialistic or "post-materialistic" values, following Ronald Inglehart's distinction. In addition to quantitatively measurable degrees of happiness over time and across societies, qualitative analyses of the historical meaning of happiness help to contextualise the findings of recent studies of happiness in the contemporary world. They also draw attention to the functions of the concept of happiness in public discourse as a proxy for more disputed social and political goals. Focusing on Imperial Japan, this article discusses how 'happiness' (幸福 *kōfuku*) served thinkers and activists as a consensual substitute for more controversial demands such as freedom, civil rights, socio-economic fairness, or a non-hegemonic social, economic, and political order.

## Happiness as a political concept

Happiness became part of the canon of modern political discourse following John Locke's observation that all human action is guided by the "removing of pain" as "the first and necessary step towards happiness" and his statement that the perfection of human nature "lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1689).<sup>1</sup> Article One of the Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776) first postulated "the enjoyment of life and liberty" as well as "pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety" as inherent rights. In the same year, these rights famously became part of the US Declaration of Independence as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) later provided a socio-philosophical basis to these ideas in his writings on utility. His utilitarian thought became known as the "greatest happiness principle", which postulates achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people as the aim of good government. These ideas also influenced political discourse in Japan, where politicised ideas of happiness emerged as part of the Movement for Freedom and People's Rights in early Meiji Japan (1868–1912). In fact, one of the first political societies in modern Japan, founded by activist and politician Itagaki Taisuke (1837–1919) and others, named itself after ideals proclaimed in the Virginia Declaration – namely the Society for Happiness and Safety (幸福安全社 *Kōfuku Anzensha*). The Movement's ideational indebtedness to utilitarian thought was also reflected in its pressure on the Meiji leaders to promulgate a civil constitution. More than half a century before "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was written into the post-war Japanese constitution by the US occupation authorities, Article Nine of the Meiji Constitution from 1889 defined the purpose of government as "increasing the happiness of the people".

The Meiji policies, however, prioritized the country's 'modernisation' with an emphasis on increasing the strength and wealth of the country, not the well-being of its people; the focus certainly was not on achieving the "greatest happiness of the greatest number of people". Instead, as civil rights activist Ōi Kentarō (1843–1922) criticised, "the happiness of the minority is the [result of the] unhappiness of the majority" (*Jiji Yōron*, 1886). This criticism of social injustice in Imperial Japan became more outspoken in the following decades under the influence of anarchist and socialist thought. In the tradition of the People's Rights Movement, which had pushed for the strengthening of *minken* (people's rights) versus *kokken* (state's rights), the neglect of the common people's happiness was contrasted with the growth of the country's prosperity (国富 *kokufu*). In reaction, a new concept began to supplement the widely accepted "right to pursue happiness" – namely the right to *attain* happiness. Proposals oriented toward obtaining this happiness ranged from radical anarchism to blunt imperialism. Anarchists throughout East Asia appear to have made great

use of the concept of happiness in formulating their socio-political utopia: Wu Zhihui (1869–1953) of the Paris group of Chinese anarchists promoted the willingness "to abnegate all personal rights in order to pursue collective happiness", while Huang Lingshuang (1898–1982) argued for the "equality and happiness" of each individual. Famous Japanese anarchist Kōtoku Shūsui (1871–1911) emphasised the mutual links between freedom and happiness, as did the Korean revolutionary Sin Ch'ae-ho (1880–1936), who in 1923 not only called for the expulsion of "Robber Japan" from Korea, but also for the destruction of social inequality in order to "promote the happiness of all the masses".<sup>2</sup> But the linking of their political agendas to the widely agreeable concept of happiness could hardly conceal their anti-government stance; Kōtoku was executed for treason and Sin died in prison before Korea regained independence.

Pursuing happiness after the war: *Kōfuku o motomete* [In Search of Happiness] by philosopher and best-selling author Kushida Magoichi (1915-2005), published in 1948 (reproduced with permission).



## Freedom and happiness in women's magazines

In mainstream political discourse, however, happiness served less as a utopian goal than as a vehicle to promote alternative views of society as well as its traditional order and social institutions. This tendency can be observed particularly well in a new and growing medium of social discourse in Japan from the early twentieth century onwards: women's magazines (*fujin zasshi*). Their history goes back to the 1870s, and by the end of the Meiji period more than 100 different women's magazines had been founded. The most prominent ones reached circulations of up to 300,000. The combined circulation of all *fujin zasshi* climbed to 1.2 million in 1925, including a readership of 75-90% of all female students and women in employment.<sup>3</sup> Far from being monothematic in content, many women's journals served as progressive platforms for critical debate about diverse social issues (*shakai mondai*), often with a particular focus on their linkages to women, marriage, and family. As Kaneko Sachiko's research on the history of women's discourse in Japan has revealed, such discussions were strongly influenced by utilitarian thought.<sup>4</sup> In particular, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) and his advocacy of individual freedom as the precondition for the attainment of happiness became cornerstones of debates about the role of women in modern Japanese society – and about Japanese society *in toto*. One of the most fervent advocates of the emancipation of women

from a utilitarian perspective was socialist activist and politician Abe Isoo (1865–1949). In a series of articles published from the late Meiji period to the early 1940s in women's magazines such as *Fujin Kōron* (Ladies' Review) or *Shufu no Tomo* (Housewives' Friend), as well as in other mainstream journals, Abe proposed to review and reform the traditional social institutions of marriage and family according to their contribution to individual happiness. Abe principally approved of marriage but emphasized independence – particularly in an economic sense – as a source of happiness (*Joshi Bundan*, 1913). The purpose of life, he stressed, was happiness, not marriage. Any happy marriage, therefore, started with a free choice of partners, Abe maintained. Furthermore, with regard to family, Abe emphasized the priority of "individual freedom and happiness" over the family system that sacrificed personal happiness to the happiness of the family (*Fujin Shinbun*, 1918).

Similar positions were taken by pioneering female journalist Hani Motoko (1873–1957). Her journal *Fujin no Tomo* (Ladies' Friend), founded in 1908, continues to be published to this day. Hani is also well known for being the founder of a private liberal arts college for women, the Jiyū Gakuen (in 1921) in Tokyo. Drawing on the experience of her own failed marriage, Hani aimed to liberate women from the idea that marriage was a prerequisite for a happy life. Marriage, Hani argued, was "not a tool to achieve happiness" (*Fujin no Tomo*, 1928). Rather, the precondition for achieving "real free happiness" was freedom in personal affairs and liberation from a strictly regulated lifestyle (*Fujin no Tomo*, 1918).

## Happiness as expectation and experience

In Abe's and, to a lesser degree, also in Hani's writings on women, family, and marriage, happiness and freedom is an inseparable conceptual pair that transfers the issue of socio-political reforms from a constitutional and ideological level to daily life. It was on this everyday level that ideas or measures (supposedly) leading to happiness could be verified or falsified. Simultaneously, the legal, political, economic, and intellectual circumstances provided a framework which could either promote or restrict the pursuit and attainment of happiness – in modern Japan and elsewhere. Therefore, the struggle for more far-reaching and structural reforms on the national level could as easily be subsumed under "the pursuit of happiness" as the search for individual happiness in everyday life. This binary of "smaller" and "greater" happiness finds its conceptual analogy in what Reinhart Koselleck has called *Erwartungsbegriffe* (concepts of expectation) and *Erfahrungsbegriffe* (concepts of experience).<sup>5</sup> The former are usually more abstract and refer to goals that are projected into the future, while the latter are closely linked to past or present day experiences. Their contents – or the state of their attainment – can be (in)validated on a daily basis. Throughout history, and even today, happiness appears to have worked as a particularly suitable barometer to measure these expectations and experiences because most people are able to provide an answer to the question "Are you happy?". The general positive interpretation of the "pursuit of happiness", already present in the early Meiji period, as a socio-political goal and an individual right characterizes both dimensions of *kōfukuron* (幸福論 discourse on happiness) in modern Japan.

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## Notes

- Asia is not included in the only monograph to date that provides an analysis of the history of happiness as a political concept: McMahon, D. 2006. *The Pursuit of Happiness. A History from the Greeks to the Present*, London: Penguin. For a historical contextualization of the concept of happiness in modern Japan see: Coulmas, F. 2009. *The Quest for Happiness in Japan* (DIJ Working Paper 2009/1), <http://tinyurl.com/Coulmas> (last accessed January 2014).
- Quotations cited from Graham, R. (ed.) 2005. *Anarchism. A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Vol. 1*, Montreal: Black Rose.
- The figures are cited from Frederick, S. 2006. *Turning Pages: Reading and Writing Women's Magazines in Interwar Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Holthus, B.G. 2010. *A Half Step Ahead. Marriage Discourses in Japanese Women's Magazines*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawai'i.
- Kaneko Sachiko. 1999. *Kindai Nihon Joseiron no Keifu* [The genealogy of Modern Japan's women's discourse], Tokyo: Fuji Shuppan.
- Koselleck, R. 1979. *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp; translated by Keith Tribe as *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).