

Article

Special Issue: *Cross-Cultural Studies in Well-Being*

The Good Life in Contemporary China

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Abstract | Drawing upon some 30-months of ethnographic field research in China's feted Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, I examine here two competing visions and practices of the "good life" in contemporary China. I have labeled these the Modernist and the Relationist practices of the good life respectively. Although Chinese conceptions of the good life at the level of the state and of the general populace are today explicitly dominated by the project of modernization in all its grasping materiality and technological glory, my paper reveals that the capacity of a modernist lifestyle to engender well-being, much less the good life, is far from assured. Meanwhile, my research in Shenzhen disclosed an alternative, Relationist, conception of well-being that was seldom expressed or associated with the good life despite also being ever present. This was a mode of well-being that was constantly being re-created in the course of everyday, mundane social interactions. Because of the general nature of their occurrence, they are not typically associated by the Chinese with well-being or the good life, appearing instead to be unselfconscious practices that are deeply rooted in the Chinese consciousness. The Relationist mode of well-being stands in contrast to the Modernist variant in both its nature and objectives, prompting us to ask: what makes the good life in China and beyond?

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This paper features an examination and comparison of primarily two competing practices of 'well-being' - or the 'good life' - in contemporary China.¹ It draws from approximately 30-months of ethnographic field research in the Southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, which was designated as China's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in 1980, in the wake of the country's policy of reform and opening-up (*gaigekaiifang*). My interlocutors, with whom I lived during this time, were invariably all migrants from the countryside. The overwhelming presence of rural migrants in Shenzhen signifies not just the predominance of rural-to-urban migration as a social phenomenon in today's China, but the extent to which the city in general - and Shenzhen in this case - is

widely considered to be where the good life can be found.

This paper conceives of praxis broadly, recognizing that the social reality we apprehend, and of which we are an inextricable part, is multi-layered and many-sided. It is a reality consisting of the micro-logical as well as the macro-logical, in turn corresponding with *gemeinschaft* (community) small-scale social formations and with large-scale *gesellschaft* (society) respectively. Additionally, the manifest nature of this reality is material (tangible) and also immaterial (intangible). Corresponding with these features of social reality, my paper discloses micro-level social practices in the form of personal life-experiences, as it does the

macro-level institutionalized practices of contemporary Chinese society. These practices are expressed in the form of material objects as well as in immaterial and intangible social norms and mores.

It is one of the premises of this paper that contemporary Chinese conceptions of well-being are dominated by and skewed towards the meta-discourse of modernization and its cognates of economic growth, development, and urbanization. I submit that it is because of the dominant tendency to privilege the modern as signifying the putative good life that the city of Shenzhen has taken the form of avant-garde architecture, sky-scaling structures of steel and glass, luxurious modern apartment blocks, shopping-malls, and five-star international hotels. Indeed, the city is celebrated for such urban aesthetic features. All indicators suggest that Shenzhen is at the forefront of the development of latter-day Chinese modernity, hence the equation of the city with avant-garde modernity. Since modernization is equated with progress, and the latter with well-being, these architectural symbols are widely perceived in China - as elsewhere - to be synonymous with the actualization of the good life, the more modern the better.

Second, our built-environments are not autonomous or innocuous but are the inscription of certain institutionalized visions and desires into the physical landscape. As such, they are aesthetic expressions that convey contemporary Chinese society's common-sense, its *weltanschauung* - worldview - about what the good life consists.

Third, how does such a macro-logical, meta-level discourse - a worldview - find expression at the micro-level, in the lives of my interlocutors? These two realms are not independent of each other but dialectically entwined, revealing in particular, how the macro-logical dominates and influences consciousness on the ground. The life-story excerpts I gathered make clear how the *weltanschauung* of the contemporary period in China is internalized. Everyday preoccupations are being dictated by global and national-level, capital-and-capitalist-oriented policies of economic growth and development. In keeping with the imperatives of these macro-level processes, my interlocutors migrate to the urban centers for the opportunity to work for more money, toiling diligently with the belief that such will eventuate in increased well-being and, ultimately, the good life.

The economic and particularly, materialistic character of such practices constitute the Modernist template of well-being and the good life. This template is thought to derive from the realization of ever increasing levels of material wealth. It is a self-conscious program involving a futuristic orientation and behavior that is consistent with Shenzhen's burgeoning urban landscape. Despite Modernity's glittering allure, the sort of well-being it generates entails significant personal costs, with the capacity of a modernist lifestyle to engender well-being far from assured. My account reveals that an alternative conception of well-being includes quotidian practices that revolve around everyday social interactions. These are commonplace and can be witnessed in many urban neighborhoods in China. Because of the general nature of their occurrence, they are not typically associated by the Chinese - or anyone else - with well-being, much less the good life. These everyday forms of social relations are made and re-made with the intent of 'family-ing' the lived experience. Because emphasis here seems to be given to the nourishment of inter-personal relations within the community, I have called this the Relationist mode of well-being. Such practice appears to be unselfconscious and rooted deeply in the Chinese consciousness. The Relationist mode of well-being stands in contrast to that of the Modernist variant in both its nature and objectives.

A word concerning methodology is in order. Although examining questions of the good life tends typically to involve philosophical speculation and prescription centered on how to live well, the endeavor here is on practices that focus on illustrating the wholeness of praxis rather than the abstraction of normative prescription. The inspiration for this move is given by the Confucian teaching of "embodying our experience" (*ti* 体), which is predicated on the holistic cosmological understanding that "our entire psychophysical persons are involved in the process of assimilating and transforming the world as it is experienced." (Ames 2011: 21).

My orientation towards praxis is also sustained by the understanding that life is ultimately embodied and lived. In other words, well-being is something to be experienced in the present, in the moment of everyday life, not merely as something projected as a future outcome. It is owing to such a predilection that I have sought to understand well-being and the good life in

China via anthropology, guided by its cardinal value of “working to create the conditions for the conceptual.” (Viveiros de Castro 2003). In this pursuit, I have attempted to understand it from street-level upwards, from the perspective and practices of the people striving to attain it (Mathews, Ribeiro and Vega 2012, Mathews and Izquierdo 2009).²

Well-being and Good Life as Macro-Level Reality

The following ethnographic vignette captures Shenzhen’s rapidly changing urban landscape by way of contrast with the New Territories in Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong’s impressive economic growth and development from the 1960s through to the 80s earned it the reputation of an ‘Asian Tiger’ contributing to the East Asian Miracle (World Bank 1993), the city had served as an economic model to be emulated by China at the beginning of the latter’s market reforms.

My first trip to Shenzhen occurred by way of my crossing over from Hong Kong. I caught the bus from Hong Kiu (hongqiao) in the New Territories to the Shenzhen Bay checkpoint, crossing a bridge built over the Pearl River Delta to link the western sections of both Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The urban milieu of the New Territories (Hong Kong) from which this bus journey begins is generally old and somewhat tired looking, marked primarily by residential and commercial buildings constructed during Hong Kong’s industrial-era developments between the 1960s and 80s. Along the way, one sees much lush greenery of both the wild and domesticated variety. There are agricultural plots of different sizes growing a variety of vegetables as well as a good spread of four-five story residential blocks. These signs of relative rurality, which are interpreted by mainstream developmentalist logic as a case of “backwardness”, run against typical media representations of Hong Kong as the “global city” (Roy and Ong 2011; Chiu and Lui 2009). If Hong Kong had been the de facto economic prototype for the PRC when Shenzhen was designated as China’s first Special Economic Zone (SEZ), then what was before me would not have been that aspect of Hong Kong that was intended as an object of emulation.

As the bus neared its destination and began crossing the bridge over the Pearl River delta, one could be-

gin to see Shenzhen’s skyline across the water in the distance. By any contemporary standard, it is a rather impressive sight. Breaking out of the horizon were glittering and towering structures of steel and glass, spread across the entire coastline. It was also clear that they were proliferating everywhere, signaling to the observer the promise of a modern – nay, hypermodern – landscape in Shenzhen in the imminent future, if that future was not already here. If it had been intended that Hong Kong serve as a model for Shenzhen, then the urbanized landscape in the distance suggested that the desired emulation had succeeded. In an architectural and aesthetic sense, the prototype had been surpassed. The built environment appeared to suggest that material well-being was being accomplished, at least at the macro-level of Chinese society.

The proliferation of hypermodern architecture was not limited to the Shenzhen coastline. Perhaps it is better said that such coastal property developments were an indication of the extent to which property development – instigated by the processes of urbanization – had spread, expanding to the coastline as the city has grown. Corresponding with such developments, one sees the ongoing and incessant processes of ‘creative destruction’ everywhere throughout Shenzhen. Old buildings were razed only to be resurrected in a more imposing and aesthetically more modern formulation. Indeed, my perambulations around the city revealed this same unrelenting process to be the impetus for the city’s rapid urbanization. Whereas Shenzhen was initially made up of four administrative districts, this number had now expanded to six as the city has incorporated more of its outlying regions in its expansion through time.

An index of the vigor of Shenzhen’s urbanization is indicated by the fact that Chinese rural-urban migration has been estimated to involve up to some 440 million in the 30 years since 1979 (Chan 2011), resulting in a majority of the Chinese population in 2011 – at 51% – living in the cities. In contrast, just over thirty years ago, in 1979, the percentage of China’s urban population was just 19%.

Amidst the frenzied and feted processes of economic development, rapid urbanization, and historically unprecedented waves of rural-urban migration that are thrusting China to the forefront of global economic and political prominence, there is generally the sense in and beyond China that the Chinese are doing well

and on their way to attaining the good life. This is affirmed by the fact that over 800 million of the country's citizens have been lifted out of poverty since the institution of economic reforms three-plus decades ago. (World Bank 2018).

To be sure, this was a mode of well-being and good life that revolved around the market-based, money-exchange economy, which was at the heart of China's post-Mao reforms. Accordingly, it was materialist, pecuniary, commoditized, developmentalist, and urban. Informed by the economic rationalist logic that "more is better" and, hence, compelled by the imperatives of material accumulation, economic considerations featured as the primary preoccupation of life. Culturally, it was a variant of well-being manifested in *gessellschaft*, the modern and urban way of life (Tonnes 1957).

Micro-Level Articulations of Well-Being: Objective Needs vs. Subjective Desire

Of what does the typical Chinese person consider well-being to consist? Was the economic vision of well-being also one that my interlocutors shared? If so, what exactly did their practices of well-being involve? Insofar as the abovementioned rural-to-urban flows are prompted by the desire for improved life chances and circumstances, they could be regarded as efforts undertaken to accomplish a modicum of well-being and possibly also a good life. But, clearly, whether these migratory undertakings can be said to eventuate in well-being in a meaningful sense remains open.

My Chinese companions would invariably explain that life in the village was *ku* (bitter/hard) then describe what it entailed. I shall here retain my companions' use of the Chinese term, '*ku*', precisely for its metaphorical ambiguity in invoking a sense of both bitterness and suffering, a sense that consists of both objective physiological and psycho-subjective elements.

Madam Chao, the proprietor of the sundries shop located along the row of shophouses outside my apartment complex recalls a childhood of hardship in Changde, rural Hunan, in the 70s. "I remember what it was like when I went to school. Everyday we'd have to get up before sunrise, at around 5 a.m., fry some rice left over from the previous night's dinner, have breakfast, then walk to school, which was about 4 km

away. I'd return the same way in the evening, walking a total of 8 kilometres a day."

As there was little arable farmland where she lived, the family survived by manually chopping down bamboo in the hills, physically transporting it home, processing it, then selling the end product at the local market. Additionally, part of the monetary proceeds from the sales had to be paid as taxes (*tiliu*) to the local district government. She describes a life of indigence: "Our clothes had to be patched over and over. From this you should know how difficult our life was."

This view of rural life was echoed by Mr. Ma, the Hui the proprietor of the neighborhood noodle shop. "Of course, life in the countryside is *ku*. Agricultural work is the most *ku* of all: it is the hardest kind of work one can do, yet it pays the least. So, when others are able to buy things you can't - especially when your kids cannot have what their schoolmates have, isn't that *ku*? Every person hopes his (or her) child can eat and dress better; everyone hopes to have these things for themselves, and to have more leisure. One cannot envision a lifetime of *ku*, a lifetime being stuck in the *nongcun* (农村, rural village/countryside)."

About the association made between *ku*/suffering and the *nongcun*, Mr. Ma explained, "All of China is developing, including the countryside. If you're not, then you feel like a failure: that is suffering (那就是苦). Moreover, farming and shepherding are very physically demanding activities. If you continue to be engaged in them, it's hard to eat and live well. If you remain in the countryside, you'll soon notice that whereas others (who return from the city) are able to wear leather shoes (*pixie*), you can only wear canvas (*buxie*). Whereas others eat meat, you can't."

Both of my companions have highlighted the importance of adequate food, clothing, and shelter as requisite factors for well-being. Both have invoked a physiological or biological conception of well-being, attesting by way of personal experience that well-being in modern China cannot eventuate under conditions of impoverishment. Being impoverished impedes one's basic physiological needs from being met. Such deprivation is especially reflected in Madam Chao's account of her childhood in the countryside, giving rise to the widespread belief that well-being is something of impossibility in rural China. *Ku* in this case involves physical suffering taking the form

of hunger, even undernourishment. It implicates an absence of well-being in a literal sense.

Associating well-being with the (economic) withdrawal to wear leather rather than canvas shoes, Mr. Ma has moved from a strictly objective (i.e. scalable) and physiological conception of well-being towards one that is subjective and psychological. Here, a physiological notion of well-being loses coherence and ceases to be meaningful. Although Mr. Ma's insinuation that the ability to wear leather is an indication of well-being, a paradox becomes apparent.

Whereas an objective measure of well-being may be given by physiological need, such as the appeasement of hunger, a psychological notion of well-being, as determined by the predilections of taste, escapes identification simply because of the completely arbitrary nature of tastes. Accordingly, such a state of well-being and the factors believed to contribute to it would tend to be too arbitrary to be of general relevance, potentially varying between individual, time, and place, and even when dealing with the same person through time and space. Invariably, it would be a state of well-being that is highly whimsical and particularistic.

One could also understand this as a move from a needs-based to a desire-based conception of well-being. Evidently, whereas biological needs have an upper limit, desires know no ends. Indeed, it is because desires are unbounded to any physical or physiological constraints that they are often said to be insatiable. In this case, *ku* (suffering) that supposedly results from deprivation occurs largely in the realm of psychology and affect. *Ku*, here, is precisely an awareness of being deprived, in the first instance perceived and interpreted by the mind rather than experienced as a direct and immediate physiological need.

Mr. Ma stated, "The worst kind of *ku* does not simply reside in not having certain things," it is in being "looked down upon because you're unable to afford them... that's the worst form of *ku* (*nashizuiku*). It's unbearable!"

Ku derives not so much from the utilitarian function of an object as from what one's inability to possess it symbolizes. Mr. Ma's desire to wear leather shoes arises not so much from its utilitarian qualities - its *use value* - but from the social status it confers, its *symbol-*

ic value. There was psychological assuagement derived from being able to wear leather. With leather being more expensive than canvas, one's ability to afford the former signifies superior economic and social standing, pre-empting the possibility of being scorned for appearing 'poor'. This appeared to be consumption for the sake of signaling status.

This was a tendency observed by Thorstein Veblen during the development of early capitalism. About the incipient capitalist social order succeeding the previous one characterized by pre-defined status and customary obligations, he noted, "Property now becomes the most easily recognized evidence of a reputable degree of success... It therefore becomes the conventional basis of esteem. Its possession in some amount becomes necessary... to any reputable standing in the community... Soon as the possession of property becomes the basis of popular esteem... it becomes a requisite to the complacency which we call self-respect." (Veblen 1899: 15- 16).

The condition Veblen describes is a restive and outward-oriented state, constantly sought and satisfied through the consumption of conspicuous objects - symbols - in order to obtain the approval of others. It was a practice he (op. cit.) famously termed "conspicuous consumption".

The tendencies of conspicuous consumption and emulation serve to indict the harsh, competitive cultural environment that the typical Chinese person now lives within. Life in today's China has become a rat race and success - well-being (?) - is defined by how well one fares vis-a-vis others. And non-participation does not insulate one from adversary but foists upon him (or her) the immediate realization that s/he has failed.

As Veblen seemed to have understood over a century ago, such one-upmanship is but an early feature in the wealth and capital-accumulation process, noting, "If...the incentive for accumulation were the want of subsistence or of physical comfort, then the aggregate economic wants of a community might conceivably be satisfied at some point... but since the struggle is substantially *a race for reputability* on the basis of an invidious comparison, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible." (op. cit.: 16).

Indeed, with prodigious wealth creation in today's

China typically exceeding subsistence requirements, the average Chinese notion of well-being has now been unhinged from a clear, minimal, physiological benchmark. Well-being in China seems to have become elusive. In its stead, *ku* – suffering, or discontent – appears to have emerged to become the new normal, as those “deprived” are under pressure to keep up with their peers. One is then brought into a perpetual state of discontent and the accumulation of more wealth, for the consumption of still more goods seems like the only way to relieve one of such a predicament. Indeed, this seems to be the only option Mr. Ma thinks available to him. Hence, even though physiological subsistence appears to be easily attained in China today, the pressures for social emulation appear to put well-being *qua* contentment always just beyond reach.

As a result of market reforms and its concomitant processes of development, modernization, urbanization, and rural-to-urban migratory flows, wealth has been amassed and re-distributed, often in quick order. For better or worse, this has led to the dramatic opening up of societal and economic divisions and nourished the tendencies of competition, advancement, conspicuous consumption, invidious comparison, and status consciousness, values that the reform policies of post-Mao China have unavoidably stimulated, even if unwittingly.

Consequently, we see the Chinese micro-reality being subsumed by the very same logos that informs and shapes the macro-reality, the logic of modernist development that revolves around a program of techno-economic and material accumulation. This is observable at the levels of both macro and micro-reality, in the nature of policies and in the urban environment as much as in the beliefs and everyday pursuits of the typical Chinese person. Much as Shenzhen’s city-planners are compelled to build more and ever taller glass-and-steel towers, luxury apartments, office buildings, hotels, and shopping malls, presumably to increase the well-being of its citizens, my interlocutors are compelled to work harder, to earn more, so that they may consume more, ostensibly in the interest of attaining a sense of well-being.

These notions of well-being reflect developments within the larger environmental context of post-Mao market reforms, especially highlighting the foundations of a modern, money-exchange economy of industrial production and pecuniary commodity con-

sumption.

In other words, leather shoes, meat, and urban glass-and-steel structures have in common the fact that they constitute the figurative symbols of supposed material progress and personal status advancement, signifying the nature of contemporary Chinese desire today. For my interlocutors these are not just material objects, they are signifiers of the future and, therefore, of well-being in China today. Such a view is affirmed by Yan Hairong (2008: 2), who notes that the institution of market reforms in China has led to the temporality of the global capitalist market coming to dominate both city and countryside, commanding “through transnational organisations and national governments that peoples and areas advance (*jin*), catch up (*gan*), and get on track (*jiegui*).”

But the enduring question remains: do such efforts, which are thought to increase well-being, in fact eventuate as such?

The Ineffableness of Well-Being: Relationalities

Despite the urban-inspired economism that has come so ubiquitously to dominate the popular notion of well-being in China today, there were many moments when I was afforded glimpses of another reality, one unencumbered by the imperatives of pecuniary accumulation, achievement, or attainment. These moments were revealed to me frequently and invariably occurred in the context of Chinese group life.

The scene that I wish to draw the reader’s attention to is the public compound of my Shenzhen apartment complex at around 5 o’clock on a typical evening. The fact of its being my residential apartment complex seems incidental, for I have observed similar social congregations occurring at other venues across the city at approximately the same time of the day. It is that time of the day when children are out from school and working adults are returning from work, released from their institutionalized (enforced?) pre-occupations for the day. Occurring just before dinner, it typically takes place with the family and can be seen as “free time” marking the end of the workday. It seemed like time given to respite from the constant and frantic scurrying around to “catch up” and “advance”; there was no need to go anywhere or to do anything, no goal to strive after. It was simply a time to be in the moment.

The sizeable congregations of children and their adult caregivers in the common areas downstairs and the seemingly spontaneous and organic manner by which they would gather and then disperse, as if by some orderly call of nature, was an intriguing social phenomenon to behold.

At this time, the common grounds of my apartment complex are filled with a tremendous buzz. Some of this vibe simply comes from the energies that children naturally emit when at play, but much of it is the result of the dynamic synergies that are forged when people come together. The scene is teeming with life. Pedestrians – grandparents, parents, children, even the occasional dog – stroll in one or the opposite direction; toddlers are being pushed in their strollers.

Depending on their age, the children may be accompanied by their adult minders – parents as well as grandparents – who take the opportunity to socialize with one another. Little organization actually goes into making such gatherings happen. In most cases, the groups seem to emerge simply as a result of the tendency of people to cluster with those appearing to share similar backgrounds, underscoring our deep social natures and urges: we are social creatures, and such is the nature of our sociability.

While the child's well-being appears to be the ostensible reason for his minders taking him outdoors, the benefits are clearly not his alone. These benefits are also extended to his adult minders, who are usually women. Indeed, it is apparent that such child-centered outings present their minders with abundant opportunities to interact and socialize with others in similar circumstances. It is usually the case that children serve as catalysts for adult interaction, for their gregariousness frequently lightens the mood and dispenses with any awkwardness that exists between strangers.

When a child of three or four, who is accompanied by an adult trailing close behind, runs into another of approximately the same age, one of the adult minders usually initiates the conversation. Typically, one of them would draw the attention of the other child while speaking to her own: "Look at *xiao mei mei*" (Look at little sister). Often, she would then turn to the other child to ask, "*Xiao mei mei*, where are you going?" The appeal to family here, as exemplified by referring to the other child as "sister" (or "brother"),

should not be missed; this is a point to which I will return.

The unfolding social encounter is as much an opportunity for pedagogy as it is for interaction. The purpose of such a way of talking, presumably, is to teach the child – perhaps both children – the mores of sociability. Such a greeting is an icebreaker and opens up the way for the adults to carry the conversation further. Typically, the second parent would respond on behalf of her child. She would say, quite rhetorically, "We've come out to play", before inquiring about the other child: "*Xiao gege* (small big brother), what is your name?", "How old are you?", "Are you at kindergarten yet?", and so on.

A conversation would then ensue between the two adults. Of course, it is possible that no exchanges occur between two parties passing each other. I have observed and personally experienced this too, but it is hardly the norm given the time, place, and the spirit of the circumstances. Aloofness seems to be the trait of men and women still in office-attire, clearly, only just returning from work. They appear serious, harried, and pressed for time, but perhaps it may be said that they have yet to leave the temporality and spatiality of the workday. Certainly, their outfits (often inclusive of leather shoes too), the brisk pace of their walk, and their comportment, mark them as outliers in the scene I am describing.

At any rate, the positive norms of sociability in my neighborhood are preponderant and infectious. The primary agents of these affirmative social norms – mostly mothers, grandparents, and children – appear to have a disciplinary socializing effect on those who might otherwise harbor more anti-social tendencies.

The speech-acts I refer to may seem like small talk – they are small talk. Yet one should not underestimate the contribution that such seemingly trivial social practices make to well-being, for they affirm the sense of self vis-à-vis others and vice versa, and in the process, lubricate the wheels of sociality, familiarity, and community. They serve to consolidate the intimate, affective ties that afford one a sense of belonging within the larger social organism of the community. Here was requisite small talk conducted as part of the everyday life of *gemeinschaft*.

Accordingly, it is the speech-act *per se* and not its

precise contents that is relevant. Here, the very act of speech accomplishes what eloquence or profound words often fail to attain: the empathic recognition of the existence and presence of the other in one's midst. Moreover, as already noted, the 'other' is not just any other; s/he is constructed as 'family', and the speech-acts give succor to the simulation. Hence, every other child is 'brother' and 'sister' while every other adult is an 'uncle' or 'aunt'. Such simulation should be appreciated for what it accomplishes, which is not insignificant: the invocation of family not only breaks one from the routine of the cold impersonality of rational (i.e. contractual) society - *gesellschaft*, it opens up the possibilities for a social reconstruction in favor of greater intimacy, inclusion, and familiarity. It appears to be but an inadvertent attempt to establish, if not consolidate, *gemeinschaft*.

That these interactions involve participants from across all age groups is important since they spawn intra as well as inter-generational knowledge transmission and sharing which, in turn, establish mutual understanding, trust, co-operation and respect within and across generations.

Overall, then, the everyday life activities in my neighborhood demonstrate signs of an ever emergent familial-based sociality that appears inclusive of all wishing to partake of them. And even as the dynamics of sociality I have described seem to begin with and revolve around the child, the members of all age-cohorts are given an important participatory role in them. The result is the daily production and reproduction of collective community life, in which the common spaces of my apartment complex are abuzz with the potential of a shared conviviality.

Such practices of sociality have had a special and enduring place in the everyday cultural life of China, not least as far as the Confucian tradition is concerned. Citing the *Analects (lunyi)* 12:1 (克己复礼为仁), the neo-Confucian scholar, Ames (2011: 87), writes: "One becomes human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute one's initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of one's life force within family, community, and cosmos." The relational dimension in the Chinese cultural life-world is further emphasized by his invocation of "relational virtuosity", along with its association to *ren* (仁), the Confucian aspiration of becoming "consumately human". (op. cit.: 91). We thus become human in the course of our relational

becoming. In short, Ames points out that in the Confucian tradition, "we need each other", and "becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we *do*, and that we either do together, or not at all." (op. cit.: 87).

In the Chinese cultural universe, well-being is believed to be ineluctably relational in nature. I also observed this elsewhere, across the city and the country.

Modernist and Relationist Practices of Well-Being

What emerges are two alternative and contrasting conceptions of well-being and the good life in contemporary China: the Modernist and the Relationist. These conceptions and practices bear different cultural genealogies that I elaborate as follows.

Modernist

The Modernist variant of well-being highlighted above is of relatively recent derivation, arriving in China through Western influences towards the end of dynastic rule at the end of the 19th century (Ci 1994; Gasster 1983; Fei 1983). This modernist orientation has especially been fortified in the post-Mao era under the policy of reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*).³ This conception of well-being has its foundation in the Enlightenment-inspired cosmology of modernism, which, in turn, is grounded in the scientific materialist worldview that asserts matter to be the basis of reality. Consistent with this worldview, it is also a conception of well-being that regards unfettered technological and economic progress as constituting the basis of human well-being and development.

In light of this, the modern-day, money-exchange economy and its imperatives have come to occupy their singularly dominant place at all levels of contemporary Chinese life. As the (in)famous Shenzhen slogan - *Time is money, efficiency is life!* - reveals, the preponderant concerns in contemporary China are pecuniary and productivist. And that has been demonstrated to hold true at both the macro- (i.e. the state) as well as micro-levels (i.e. the individual).

Moreover, having for the most part grappled with the foremost question of physiological subsistence, the Chinese state and its people seem in this age to have moved beyond the realm of 'needs' into that of incommensurable 'wants'. Accordingly, we witness

the nature of human concerns move from the strictly biological towards the cultural-symbolic, in line with what Fei Xiaotong (1983: 4) describes as the generic human evolution “from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.” Indeed, it is the result of this movement that the notion of well-being now seems to be implicated in the realm of the symbolic, which has eventuated in the loss of a clear demarcation between the things that engender well-being and those that do not.⁴

Again, this trend towards well-being-as-symbol prevails as much at the macro-level of state policy as it does at the micro-level of ordinary Chinese citizens going about their everyday lives. Hence, the pursuit of ultra-modern architectural symbols by the state’s urban planners can be seen to be somewhat mirrored by the analogous desire of ordinary individuals to possess status-conferring consumption goods. Both are caught in a “race for reputability” (Veblen op. cit.: 32), in which attainment, achievement, and adversarialism are systemic character traits. In broad outlines, it is fundamentally a Hobbesian, dog-eat-dog world: *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

Hence, while developmentalism spawns the simultaneous processes of urbanization at the macro-level and consumerism at the micro-level, it bears testimony to the fact they are symptomatic of an orientation to well-being that is contingent on yet more, and perhaps faster, pecuniary-oriented production. Because the notion of the inevitability of progress is so central to its internal logic, well-being in this conception appears to be elusive, it is restive and always yet-to-be: so close but always out of reach. Indeed, this is so because in this conception, well-being has, via its attainment through the money-exchange economy, been made scarce and mutually exclusive. This institutionalization of scarcity through the money-exchange-economy means that one’s putative well-being comes at the expense of, and in competition with, another. By virtue of the competitive nature of the economic system, one is compelled to strive against others, endlessly. Life’s meaning resides in work; there is the sense that one lives to work. The Modernist praxis of well-being is therefore a paradox, for discontent seems to be a *sine qua non*.

Relationalist

By contrast, the Relationist conception and praxis of well-being is relationally constituted. It seems to be of

a more local cultural derivation, and if its vindication by the teachings of the Confucian classics above is any guide, can be said to be of a rather timeless nature. Hence, it bears the honorific marks of an enduring tradition. Yet, although it is like the Modernist conception, also a pervasive social practice, its practitioners appear to be unaware of its important standing as a cultural praxis of well-being. That is to say, my companions do not explicitly or consciously invoke ‘relationalities’ as having any causal effect on well-being, even as they are constantly engaged in reproducing them in their everyday lives!

This might not be as paradoxical as it first seems: habits of the heart are often things one has least conscious knowledge about. Deep culture is implicated in phenomena scorched into the recesses of the collective consciousness. Perhaps so much so that these ‘things’ of culture become subliminal and visceral, embodied as a set of shared social practices. Since their rationalization might well be redundant in this case, these social practices could simply have been unself-consciously perpetuated: taken up, absorbed into and woven into the fabric of the culture’s implicate order.⁵

Meanwhile the Modernist path to well-being is conspicuous because of its ubiquitous global presence. (Latouche 1996). Not dissimilar from its expressions elsewhere, the Chinese variant of modernism is a self-conscious, state-led, developmentalist project that has been rationalized through the institutionalized domains of knowledge, economics, and policy-making.

But be that as it may, the constant and simultaneous stirrings of the Relationist praxis of well-being was ever present, even if not advertised. As Chinese modernism continues to play out in spectacular but nonetheless culturally homogenizing fashion, there is in the background a rich vein of life throbbing in this relationalist mode. Such a relationally-constituted existence is unassuming yet if one pays close enough attention, can be observed to be emergent in the mundanities of daily Chinese life.

In contrast to a notion of well-being sustained by the rational self-interests of political economy, this relational-constituted mode was one nourished by the reciprocal self-other affections of moral economy. Furthermore, against the Modernist notion of well-being as yet-to-be, contingent on ongoing development and

mastery of the objective material world, the Relationist mode implicates well-being in the here-and-now, not in the dead matter of techno-objects, but in the living inter-subjectivities of the social world: in relations between people. Well-being is here attained in one's cultivation of convivial relations with others; it is obtained in relational excellence.

The Relationist mode of being is indispensable for everyday life in China. If we are to look at our ethnographic vignettes synchronously, it becomes increasingly apparent that these two modes of being – one, conspicuous, foregrounded, and rationalized; the other, understated, existing in the background, and affective – do not exist apart from but are inextricably imbricated with each other. And the nature of their entanglement is one in which this Relationist mode serves a constant under-laboring function.

The Relationist mode performs this function by lubricating the wheels of affective relations between peoples. In the process, it sustains, fortifies, and makes community possible. Well-being is thereby attained in the making of community, in the creation of sustained affective ties among a group, which through subsequent encounters, returns in a virtuous circle to nourish the source. In this mode, well-being is community; and community is well-being.

Since the Relationist mode can be seen to occur primarily outside the realm of the formal, money-exchange economy,⁶ one can infer that such re-production of *gemeinschaft* (community) relationality necessarily lays the social foundation upon which the monetized economy can operate. The actualization of the Relationist mode in the non-commodified spaces of home (*jia*) makes possible the realization of the Modernist mode away from it. Madam Chao and Mr. Ma are able to pursue their Modernist projects of well-being only because the relational labor of caring for their children are performed by their extended family in the village. The example of my apartment compound conveys an analogous message: the compound in which the Relationist mode comes to life is a space of respite from the logos of the Modernist mode, one in which “re-creation” occurs to enable its participants to return to pecuniary work the next day.

The Relationist mode of being is the backbone of *gemeinschaft* militating against the socially eviscerating tendencies of angst, alienation, and anomie associated

with the Modernist project. It appears that the Relationist mode of being is that which renders the felicities of life still possible in China today.

Conclusion

I have now highlighted two preponderant everyday practices of well-being observed in contemporary China, the Modernist and the Relationist respectively. Whereas the Modernist mode of well-being is transactional and economic, centered on the political economy of money and techno-materialist production; the Relationist mode is relationally centered and cleaves towards a moral economy based on the cultivation of thick relations with others.

As noted, the prominence of the Modernist praxis of well-being is only matched by the understatement of the Relationist mode. Whether it be at the level of individual or collective humanity, well-being and the good life are not to be found either in the future or in the technological mastery and exploitation of the material world. This insight runs against the seductive promises of Modernism. Nor will such a goal be attained through our consumption of yet more commodities, regardless of how luxurious. While these material pursuits are widely held out and sold as the path to attaining the good life,⁷ such an outcome has been demonstrated to be chimerical given the means offered. In fact such endeavors have been shown to be counterproductive to engendering any plausible notion of well-being, breeding instead invidious feelings of discontent, inadequacy, insecurity, the urge for one-upmanship, and *ressentiment*. As Goldstein has observed, “The subjectivity modernity works to create is constantly attempting to perfect it, constantly denying recognition of the impossibility of modernity.” (2006: 6).

Illusions notwithstanding, the Modernist mode of putative well-being has continued until now to enthrall the world with its alluring promises of the good life. As such, it exists today in the form of a corporate-controlled global undertaking – globalization – or what, in effect, amounts to the relentless spread of the Modernist agenda across the globe. It is likely because of this well-orchestrated corporate project that the Modernist mode is today ubiquitous, as alive in New York as in Shenzhen, as in the rural villages of Hunan and Qinghai from which my interlocutors come.

Perhaps the popularity of this Modernist mode derives from the fact that its built-in teleology exempts it from any empirical scrutiny, with its failure appearing only to reinforce the spell of its eventual success. After all, not unlike the Biblical story of salvation, the teleology assures that progress will unfold continually, if dialectically, until, eventually, goodness and truth prevails. As in all teleological systems: the ends always justify the means. Any claim that well-being and the good life have not been attained can and will always be met by the riposte: Not yet, for the best is yet to be.

Indeed, it is under the contemporary human predicament of threatening ecological devastation that an appreciation of the Relationist mode of being seems so fitting and necessary. As noted, the latter mode appears widely observable in everyday Chinese life yet seems to be much understated as a cultural resource of well-being and the good life. In the Relationist mode, well-being inheres in the ongoing invocation of relationalities on an everyday basis. In the course of one's life, such relational practices invariably begin with one's family, then radially extend outwards toward one's neighbors, one's community, one's friends, etcetera.

Finally, although the emphasis on relationality as the recipe for well-being and the good life may be considered culturally 'Chinese' insofar as it finds unstinting endorsement in classical Confucian texts, it is a boon to humanity that neither the Chinese nor any other ethnic group can exercise monopoly of it. Happily, in virtue of being a phenomenon of culture i.e. the collective mind, the praxis of relationality can transcend the arbitrary divides of ethnicity, race, nationality, and culture, to become the desideratum of humanity, a virtue freely available to all.

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cuniary, “domestic” sphere of “home” (*jia*), rather than in the commodified space of the formal economy.

[7] It is probably why some of us acquiesce to the dire reality of *living to work*.

Endnotes

[1] I shall be using these terms interchangeably in this paper, even though “well-being” is clearly a necessary condition for “a good life”.

[2] I have explained my preference for empirically-grounded studies against more analytically-inclined approaches more substantially in Kho (2017). The reader might wish to refer to the latter article if such methodological issues are of interest.

[3] Whether intended or otherwise, the effect of reform policy has been to transform Chinese society in accordance with liberal rationalist tenets. Through substantive reforms in the money-exchange economy, *gaige kaifang* has inadvertently but surely instigated the privatization and individuation of Chinese society, thereby institutionalizing the idea of the ‘rational’ individual as the basic unit of society. Arguably, such individuation of Chinese society has today reached an extent that is historically unprecedented. (See: Hansen and Svaverud 2010; Yan 2009)

[4] On this score, it might be worthwhile noting that “freedom”, that hoary catchcall of liberalism, is perhaps not without its problems – especially, if signifying a complete absence of social, cultural, or ethical constraints.

[5] It is likely that the prevailing cultural wisdom dictates that their practical contribution to the viability of the culture warrants their perpetuation.

[6] Although exemplified in my case by an ethnographic snapshot of relational going-ons within my apartment compound on a typical afternoon, another clear context in which such relationalities are re-produced in the family. In either case, the constitution and re-constitution of relations occurs within the non-pe-