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 Buddhist Tibetanism are only the most eye-catching examples that have cast the light 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 not surprising that the pursuit of happiness is a quest for both materialistic values and non-normative or “post-materialistic” values, following Ronald Inglehart’s distinction between historically 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 context of the contemporary world. The present 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 most fervent desire of happiness” as “the first and necessary step towards happiness” and his statement that the perfection of human nature “lies in a careful and constant attention to acquiring a stock of happiness” (Locke 1714/1988, 14). Locke’s utilitarian thought became the philosophical basis for the social contract theory of government as “increasing the happiness of the people”. The Meiji leaders, however, prioritized the country’s economic development and the destruction of social inequality in order to “promote the happiness of the country” (first Meiji constitution, 1868, Article 1). In particular, John Stuart Mill’s interpretation of the “pursuit of happiness”, already present in the 19th century, “is the expression of a desire to produce happiness for oneself” (Mill 1869, 37). This general positive answer to the question “Are you happy?” provided an analysis of the history of happiness as a political concept.

In Abe’s and, to a lesser degree, also in Hani’s writings on family, marriage, and, family. As Kaneko Sachiko’s research on the history of women’s magazines, shows, women’s journals served as progressive platforms for critical debates about diverse social issues.

In modern Japan, the question “Are you happy?” could be treated in two ways. First, happiness was viewed as a personal and idiosyncratic concept with no direct relation to societal or political processes. Second, happiness was seen as an inseparable part of social and political structures, which could either promote or restrict the pursuit and attainment of happiness – in modern Japan and elsewhere. Therefore, the struggle for the emancipation of women promoted the willingness “to abnegate all personal rights in order to pursue collective happiness” (Kōtoku Shūsui 1913/1919, 123). As Kaneko Sachiko’s research on the history of women’s magazines, illustrates, women’s journals served as progressive platforms for critical debates about diverse social issues.

Notes
1 Asia is not included in the only monograph to date that provides an analysis of the history of happiness as a political concept: Makino Susumu (2005). A History from the Greeks to the Present, London: Penguin. For a historical contextualization of the concept of happiness in modern Japan, see Makino Susumu (2005). The emergence of happiness as a political concept in Japan is influenced by utilitarian thought. In particular, John Stuart Mill’s interpretation of the “pursuit of happiness”, already present in the 19th century, “is the expression of a desire to produce happiness for oneself” (Mill 1869, 37). This general positive answer to the question “Are you happy?” provided an analysis of the history of happiness as a political concept.

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