Curing Unhappiness in Revolutionary China: Optimism under Socialism and Capitalism

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When Émile Coué (1857–1926) developed optimistic autosuggestion, or routine repetition, as a method of psychotherapy, touting the slogan “Tous les jours à tous points de vue je vais de mieux en mieux” (Every day in every way, I am getting better), he became a powerful proponent of a twentieth-century trend that took place in many geographical areas: the promotion of well-being, happiness, and optimism via suggestion, repetition, ritual and belief/faith rather than through a change in circumstances. Coué’s ideas, which developed within the context of intense interest in the mind that the developing field of psychology engendered, motivated others, who used his ideas to transform personal relations, commerce, health, and more. Fundamentally, Coué’s highly influential claim is that happiness is a state of mind, and unhappiness at best is a failure of the will; at worst, it is a psychological disease.

In socialist and revolutionary China, leadership in various fields also sought to engender and document happiness. First developed in the Soviet Union, the positive hero was avidly embraced in China, particularly in 1950s novels. This model often featured the conversion of a bystander into an enthusiastic participant in society’s forward movement, and heroism on behalf of revolutionary goals in the face of terrible obstacles. The theory of the type, dianxinguanglun 典型论 “typicality” or “typical character,” in literature, film, art and drama, encouraged distance from contemporary reality and an optimistic perspective. The theory of revolutionary optimism (geming leguan zhuyi 革命乐观主义) eventually medicalized the absence of happiness as an illness. Exhibited and encouraged in all spheres, happiness became a mandatory political goal.

The heroic model and the Maoist emphasis on a subjectivity imbued with revolutionary optimism were the Chinese socialist version of the twentieth-century tendency—in societies influenced by Enlightenment thought—to valorize happiness, and subsequently, to regard unhappiness as a serious condition or an illness that can be cured. The work of Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), whose essays, plays and novels were widely translated beginning in the 1920s, whose novel Mother (1932) became the founding document of socialist realism, and whose theory of typicality lay at the core of Maoist literary
theories was the bridge into the literary model that embodied the revolutionary interpretation of the twentieth-century trend toward subjective enhancement of well-being. Admired and translated by Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899–1935), Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰 (1903–1976), and others, Gorky’s ideas lay at the heart of the 1935–36 debate on typicality between Zhou Yang 周扬 (1908–89) and Hu Feng 胡风 (1902–85). This debate is generally interpreted as a struggle over the meaning of realism, but it also set the stage for an expansion of typicality into a more broadly understood emphasis on happiness.

This emphasis on and promotion of happiness was not unique to socialist countries, but rather was a semi-global trend, originating in Europe, that embodied a subjective, contemporary recognition of the utopian aspects of personal, national, and world progress, or an extension of scientific rationality. In the most radical examples, utopia became not a vision of the future, but a state of mind, or happiness under present circumstances.1 While the influence of this trend extended into many locales, in this paper I will concentrate on China and the United States, both of which, I argue, showed heightened levels of interest in producing happiness or optimism, and propelling it forward as integral aspects of their modernized culture. In this regard, we can look at the United States as an archetypical representative of rapid capitalist development, and as China as the same for socialist development; in other words, these societies are characterized by a concentration of tendencies under these regimes. Therefore, understanding the drive toward curing unhappiness in revolutionary China begins with a look at happiness in the West and more briefly in the Soviet Union, which first developed the models that became an important part of revolutionary Chinese culture. The goal of this comparative assessment is to embed Chinese socialist psycho-social practices within a global context that shows how they are part of the Enlightenment project of progress and improvement, a temporal model with far-reaching consequences.

Optimism under Capitalism: The Western Era of the Mind

During the mid to late nineteenth century, interest in mental processes flourished in many geographical areas. In Europe and the United States, “mental philosophy” was moving away from religion, and was in the process of becoming the modern field of psychology, which spread into Russia, Asia, Latin