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**PLENARY SPEECH**

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**Moral Education for Real Happiness:  
Ethical Thinking on Education in China Today**

## **Abstract**

Like most ordinary Chinese people, students and teachers in China experience many serious challenges in relation to finding meaning in their lives. Therefore, it might be helpful to discuss the relationship between happiness and education against the background of the massive changes taking place in contemporary China. Understanding the real meaning of happiness can help Chinese people upgrade the current troubled pattern of educational and social development to a higher or more refined level. Happiness, or our quest for it, provides a very valid reason why we should live according to a moral code, although this utilitarian approach cannot always answer critiques from deontology very well. The essential problem, and one that all educators should consider, is most likely that of accurately defining happiness, not just attempting to understand whether happiness provides a reason for moral behaviour. This paper offers some thoughts on these issues as well as the following topics: What is the real meaning of the concept “happiness”? How can we learn life’s wisdom through better understanding this concept? What should, and what can, our education system provide for children and teachers in this regard?

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## **I. Background: great progress but unhappy education in China**

As we well know, contemporary China has made rapid and remarkable progress in education since new China was founded in 1949, in particular since China’s opening up and the adoption of the reform policy in 1978. We can find many facts to support this judgement. For example, on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008, China’s central government announced the implementation of urban and rural compulsory education, which means families no longer have to pay school fees at all. I believe this is a great milestone in the world history of human rights development because it means that more than 1/5 of the world population now has the chance to learn in schools for at least 9 years. To put it in context, the

illiteracy rate in China was 80% in 1949 and 38% in 1979, while it was only of 8% in 2008; furthermore, in tertiary education, enrolments increased from 0.117 million in 1949, to 0.8 million in 1978, 20.21 million in 2008 and 25.36 million in 2012. (MOC: *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China*, 1987-2013)

Similar to the major challenges associated with the significant development of the Chinese economy, education in China, while recently making significant progress, has also encountered a lot of problems and challenges. The biggest issue is the low quality of education, which is represented by the large number of people who have reported being unhappy during their learning experience. All stakeholders suffer from the existing education system which is examination-oriented and mark-driven. On the one hand, students are overloaded with large amounts of homework every day. On the other hand, teachers feel burnt out while it is a nationally-acknowledged fact that parents also feel under tremendous pressure in supporting their children.

I think that this situation obliges us to consider the following very serious questions:

1. **Is an education system that creates unhappiness a healthy one?**
2. **Is an education which does not create happiness, but instead creates pressure and stress, a “moral” education?**

This is the true reason why I appeal for “Moral Education for Real Happiness” and try to be engaged in “Ethical Thinking on Education in China Today”.

## II. Dangers and the real reason for unhappiness in China’s education

An education which creates unhappiness is certainly an immoral form of education. There are millions of dangers. The creation of unhappiness in the educational process is damaging to everyone in China today, and indeed to everyone outside China too. Firstly, at an individual level, unhappiness in education not only means a poor quality learning and teaching experience for both students and teachers in the present, but also the possibility of unhappy lives in the future. Secondly, at the national level, an education system which creates unhappiness will not be able to support the development of our nation (or “China’s Dream”), which is the most important task in China nowadays. To upgrade and achieve structural changes in both industry and within the society, we need a large supply of creative people. Unfortunately, the unhappy education system in China can only fail to produce a large quantity of graduates who are creative in their thinking and passionate about their work.

How can we address this problem? The answer is always hidden in the problem. Perhaps the real question we should ask here is this: **What is the real cause underlying the pattern of unhappy education? Or, what is the origin or root cause of the examination-oriented education system?**

I think one important reason is a conceptual (mis)understanding of the aim of education. The ultimate and universal aim of education is to seek happiness in life, but unfortunately many Chinese people interpret “happiness” wrongly; or we just have some vulgar utilitarian and materialistic understanding of the concept of happiness. The cut-throat peer competition that prevails between students, as well as teachers and parents, is caused by this wrong concept of “happiness”. Therefore, China needs a revolution of the mind. The biggest task in Chinese society today ought to be developing a better understanding of the real meaning of happiness - a more serious and precise definition.

### III. Three “thought experiments” for understanding happiness

What is true happiness? We can define the real meaning of the concept of happiness through the following three “thought experiments”.

#### Case 1: Does money really bring happiness?

Sometimes unhappiness is indeed caused by poor living conditions. Money can buy lots of things, but not happiness, and sometimes people are happy even if they are not very rich. It is very easy to find both happy and unhappy people in any one particular set of financial circumstances. From this we may conclude that money, or material conditions, are very important, but not a pre-requisite for happiness. If you hope to create a happy life, you need some spiritual attainments, such as life skills and moral wisdom.

#### Case 2 : The happiness of mothers

A mother’s happiness is a prime example used to explain the meaning of true happiness. What is a mother’s happiness? Undoubtedly, the healthy growth of her child can bring happiness to a mother. However, could she still feel happy even if she does not care about her child's growth (like the wicked stepmother in some ancient parable)? Or, could she be happy even when she is unable to support her son or daughter’s healthy growth? In both situations, the answer is “no”.

#### Case 3 : Teachers’ happiness

The happiness experienced by teachers provides another good example for explaining the meaning of real happiness. Imagine a teacher who does not care about her students or how her teaching impacts her students, could she acquire the happiness that she should have in her teaching career? Furthermore, if teachers do not have the professional skills required to realise their teaching dreams, they will not experience real happiness in teaching.

To sum up, we have learned from Case 1 that happiness is linked inherently to some spiritual attainments, and not directly to money. Cases 2 and 3 reveal (notwithstanding the different circumstances) that all kinds of happiness share two essential factors: having a dream and the fulfilment of that dream. So it is possible to define the meaning of happiness properly, even though it is really a very difficult task.

### IV. Happiness: a kind of life in which you can realise your dreams

Based on the above discussion, **my definition of happiness is as follows: Happiness is a kind of life in which you can realise your dreams. More specifically, happiness means a kind of objective life situation in which, as a human being, you have the autonomy to freely realise and successfully achieve your life goals or dreams.** It should be noted that a “feeling happy” is actually the subjective response to this objective life situation, but it is not synonymous with happiness itself. (C. Tan, *Studies on Ethics for Teachers*, BNU Publishing House, 2000, p. 23). In short, you “feel happy” when you are experiencing “happiness”.

We may experience two types of happiness in our daily lives: **spiritual happiness** and **materialistic happiness**. However, my concept of happiness is a narrower one and limited to spiritual happiness. I do not seek to equate “**real happiness**” with material wealth, even though I know sometimes material conditions are a very necessary foundation for a happy life. This is the reason why I said that happiness means you can realise your life dream *as a human being*. In other words, my understanding of happiness is mainly linked to the satisfaction of Abraham H. Maslow’s higher-order needs of a human being: from Love and Belonging, Esteem, Self-actualization and perhaps Safety, but not the “Basic” or “Physiological” needs. This last level of needs is fundamental

and very important for a human being, but it is not the distinction between human and animal. The essence of real happiness is to achieve our life goal as a noble and complete human being. Most misunderstandings of happiness are rooted in seeking the satisfaction of “basic” or “physiological” needs. In other words, we will not find real happiness simply by pursuing the satisfaction of “basic” or “physiological” needs. It is belief in this *materialistic conception of happiness* or materialistic life philosophy, expressed in the Chinese saying “Human beings die in pursuit of wealth, and birds die in pursuit of food”, that has been destroying, not building, our happiness in life.

## V. The secrets of happiness and the implications for education of its definition

The above-mentioned definition of happiness has revealed some secrets of how to live a happy life. For me, the achievement of real happiness depends on the following two conditions (even if they are not sufficient):

1. **An ideal in life.** *To pursue happiness, you need a **dream**, a meaningful goal in life, a future imagined possibility in your career or daily life. No dream, or no hope, means no source of happiness.*

2. **Accomplishments.** *You will be happy when you can do whatever you are doing well, when you can realise your life goal successfully, or you have some ability to make your dreams come true. This means that you need to develop some moral and professional competencies in your **character**.*

Those two conditions constitute the secrets to a happy life. In other words, if you want to find happiness for yourself, the prerequisites **are finding out what your real life dream is and preparing all conditions (especially subjective character) needed for your dream to come true.**

Based on this understanding of real happiness, what should we do to reform education in China?

If we accept that an education that gives unhappiness is immoral, the most important implication from this definition of happiness is that education should be a “moral” endeavour which has the aim of building happy lives for all people involved, especially students and teachers. The two prerequisites of happiness, that is finding your real life dream and preparing all conditions necessary to realise your dream, apply equally well to education in schools and classrooms. This implies the following:

**Firstly, teachers should provide students with happy learning experiences or “moral” teaching.** Schooling should help students to find their own intrinsic goals in life. As well, rather than “giving” students life dreams, teachers should support students in exploring what motivates their learning, as learning should be based on an intrinsic motivation and desire to learn. Once students have found their own intrinsic motivation for learning, learning and even homework could magically become a source of happiness rather than a burden for them. Another important condition is to develop children’s learning skills and the capabilities to overcome challenges that may appear in the process of learning. Then the issue regarding homework is no longer how much to give them but how meaningful and rewarding the work is; it is about how homework can help students to master learning skills as a foundation for other victories in life.

**Secondly, teachers need to create a happy teaching practice or “moral” work for themselves also.** The definition of happiness which I just explained has two implications for teachers. On the one hand, teachers should cultivate their own career ambitions; on the other hand, they should also develop their teaching ethics and professional abilities. In other words, it is through the commitment, love and respect that we have in our jobs that we can find happiness in our career, rather than by striving to meet the moral expectations of others. Professional development should not only

be about acquiring “survival skills” to handle peer competition; professional development that encompasses learning to be a good teacher is the way to happiness in teaching. To be a happy teacher means to be a great teacher and enjoy being a great teacher.

## VI. Conclusion: “Moral” Education for True Happiness

As I mentioned before, the examination-oriented education has brought about much destruction in China. Many people, in particular students and teachers, feel unhappy with the teaching and learning process. However, it is not easy to change the current examination-oriented education system, because it is deeply rooted in the culture in China (and some East Asian countries). One important reason for unhappiness in education is a wrong life philosophy, especially a misunderstanding of the ultimate aim of education. Seeking a life of real happiness through this examination-oriented education is like trying to get blood from a stone because the examination-oriented approach, and the tragic practices associated with it, are underpinned by a misunderstanding of what happiness is. If it is to redeem itself – and this should be its urgent mission – education in China today must start to redefine and reconstruct the concept of happiness. I believe **happiness is a life in which you can successfully realise your dreams**. Therefore, **the pursuit of happiness in education means helping both students and teachers to find and realise their dreams in their daily life of learning and teaching**.

Achieving a *happy* education is a really important and huge mission within China’s current educational reforms. However a famous Chinese saying reminds us that “The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step”. Confucius also told us: “Is virtue a thing remote? I wish to be virtuous, and virtue is at hand.” (Confucius: *Book 7 Shu R, The Analects*). Confucius also insists on the principle of “Study for oneself”: “In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others.” (Confucius: *Book 14 Hsien Wan, The Analects*). For the difficult task of the accomplishment of the great mission of seeking educational and life happiness for students and teachers in China, Confucius’ advice is extremely valuable.

## References

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Confucius: *Book 7 Shu R, Book 14 Hsien Wan, The Analects*.  
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