

Chapter 3

Overall Quality of Life in Asia

The following three sections compare overall evaluations of well-being. It compares the extent to which people experience feelings of happiness, enjoyment, and achievement and identifies the specific components of global well-being. One way to assess their subjective quality of life is that people consider all the things that they deem significant to them and thus judge the overall quality of their lives (Shin and Inoguchi 2009).

3.1 Levels of Happiness

This section focuses on the extent to which the Asian people experience feelings of happiness in life across the 29 Asian countries/societies. The AsiaBarometer Survey asked respondents, on a five-point verbal scale in all the surveys from 2003 to 2008, if “All things considered, would you say that you are happy these days?” The response categories are “very happy,” “quite happy,” “neither happy nor unhappy,” “not too happy,” and “very unhappy” with a “don’t know” category. This question was not asked only in the 2004 China Survey. In the 2003 and 2004 questionnaires, the second choice was coded as “pretty happy.” Table 3.1 shows the distribution of survey responses across the five categories, ranging from “very happy” to “very unhappy” by country/society. Of the entire sample size of 47,958, “don’t know” responses and missing values were excluded. When we rescaled the original five-category verbal scale into a five-point numeric scale, ranging from a low of 1 (very unhappy) to a high of 5 (very happy), the mean of this variable is 3.7 with a standard deviation of 0.93.

The last row of Table 3.1 shows that one-fifth (20%) of all the respondents in Asia reported they are very happy, more than two-fifths (45%) say they are quite happy, one-fourth (25%) reported they are neither happy nor unhappy, slightly less than one-tenth (8%) say they are not too happy, and only a few (2%) reported they are very unhappy. In combining the two positive replies together, a substantive majority of the people in Asia (65%) is shown to be living happy lives. Those who

Table 3.1 Self-assessments of happiness (%)

	Very happy	Quite happy	Neither happy nor unhappy	Not too happy	Very unhappy	PDI
Brunei	51.2	43.5	3.9	1.4	0.0	93.3
Maldives	41.3	45.9	7.3	3.8	1.7	81.7
Malaysia	26.6	57.5	10.5	5.1	0.3	78.7
Bhutan	35.2	47.6	12.6	4.3	0.3	78.2
Sri Lanka	24.6	59.5	9.5	5.5	1.0	77.6
Singapore	27.7	51.9	14.4	4.9	1.1	73.6
Philippines	35.0	45.1	12.7	6.2	1.0	72.9
Thailand	18.7	58.2	16.9	5.5	0.8	70.6
India	37.4	36.2	20.3	5.0	1.2	67.4
Indonesia	14.1	61.1	16.4	7.8	0.5	66.9
Bangladesh	15.2	59.8	14.4	7.7	2.9	64.4
Laos	14.3	57.1	18.4	9.7	0.5	61.2
Vietnam	35.9	25.4	37.0	1.5	0.2	59.6
China	18.2	44.0	31.5	4.7	1.6	55.9
Japan	14.9	47.1	31.4	6.0	0.7	55.3
Myanmar	14.4	48.7	25.6	9.4	1.8	51.9
Mongolia	4.4	56.5	29.3	9.4	0.4	51.1
Hong Kong	6.6	44.0	46.1	2.2	1.0	47.4
Nepal	9.1	54.8	15.9	11.9	8.3	43.7
Taiwan	16.5	33.7	40.5	7.2	2.2	40.8
South Korea	9.5	44.2	32.1	12.8	1.4	39.5
Pakistan	14.2	39.2	29.8	13.3	3.6	36.5
Turkmenistan	14.7	35.7	35.5	8.0	6.2	36.2
Uzbekistan	13.0	43.7	21.2	18.6	3.6	34.5
Afghanistan	16.5	24.0	48.2	9.6	1.7	29.2
Kyrgyzstan	12.6	40.8	12.8	22.3	11.5	19.6
Cambodia	4.6	20.1	64.0	10.0	1.3	13.4
Kazakhstan	5.8	33.5	20.4	29.7	10.5	-0.9
Tajikistan	3.1	29.8	30.8	29.1	7.1	-3.3
Total	19.9	45.1	25.0	8.1	1.8	55.1

have unhappy lives, on the other hand, constitute a small minority of one-tenth (10%). In the region of Asia, over six times as many people live a happy life as live an unhappy life.

Table 3.1 also shows that the proportions of each category vary considerably from one society to another. For example, the proportions of “very happy” vary from only a few (3.1%) in Tajikistan, Mongolia (4.4%), and Cambodia (4.6) to almost a half (51%) in Brunei. To compare the levels of avowed happiness among 29 countries and societies over one variable, we rank the 29 countries and societies based on the percentage difference index (PDI), namely, the sum of the two positive categories (“very happy” and “quite happy”), minus the sum of the two negative categories (“not too happy” and “very unhappy”). The PDI variable takes on the value from negative 100 to positive 100. According to the PDI reported in the last column of Table 3.1, Brunei emerges as the greatest nation of happiness with a positive 93 points on this index. It is followed

by Maldives, Malaysia, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. A vast majority (95%) of the Bruneian respondents rated themselves as very happy or quite happy. Overwhelming majorities (87% and 85%, respectively) of the people of the Maldives and Malaysia say they are very happy or quite happy these days.

Conversely, the people of Tajikistan are least likely to live a happy life with the lowest value on the PDI score in Asia at a negative 3 points. The people in Kazakhstan and Cambodia are the second and third least likely to express happiness. About one-third (33%) of the respondents of Tajikistan say they are very happy or quite happy these days, whereas more than one-third (36%) say they are not too happy or very unhappy. About two-fifths (40%) of respondents in Kazakhstan and one-fourth (25%) of the respondents in Cambodia reported they are very happy or quite happy these days, compared to more than two-fifths (41%) and about one-tenth (11%) who indicated that they are not too happy or very unhappy. We also note that only two countries Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have a negative value on the PDI.

Although feelings of happiness vary widely in the Asian region, generally speaking, people in Asia experience more happiness than unhappiness.

3.2 Levels of Enjoyment

This section compares the extent to which the Asian people experience feelings of enjoyment in life. The AsiaBarometer Survey asked respondents on a four-point verbal scale in the surveys from 2006 to 2008: “How often do you feel you are really enjoying life these days?” The response categories include “often,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” and “never,” along with a “don’t know” category. This question was asked in 15 countries and societies (see Table 3.2). The sample size is 18,106 without the “don’t know” responses and missing values.

Of the four response categories, Table 3.2 shows that over one-half (53%) of the respondents chose “sometimes.” This category was followed by “often” (28%), “rarely” (17%), and “never” (2%). When we rescaled the original four-category verbal scale into a four-point numeric scale, ranging from a low of 1 (often) to a high of 4 (never), the mean of this variable is 3.1 with a standard deviation of 0.72.

When the two positive categories are considered together, an overwhelming majority of four-fifths (81%) is shown to be enjoying life. Those who do not express feelings of enjoyment, on the other hand, constitute a minority of one-fourth (19%). In the region, although we use only a subsample of 15 countries and societies, four times as many people live an enjoyable life as live an unenjoyable life.

Table 3.2 also shows that the proportions of each category vary considerably from society to society, just as Table 3.2 does on levels of happiness. For example, the proportions of “often” vary from about one-eighth (13%) in Taiwan to about one-half (51%) in Vietnam. To compare the levels of enjoyment in 15 countries and societies, we combine the two positive ratings (often and sometimes) and the two negative ratings (rarely and never) and constructed a percentage difference index (PDI) by subtracting the combined ratings of the latter from those of the former. According to the PDI values reported in the last column of Table 3.2, Vietnam

Table 3.2 Self-assessments of enjoyment (%)

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	PDI
Vietnam	50.7	44.5	4.1	0.7	90.4
Malaysia	45.4	44.9	8.9	0.7	80.7
Laos	27.0	62.8	9.4	0.8	79.6
Cambodia	13.1	76.2	9.6	1.1	78.6
Singapore	34.3	54.2	10.0	1.5	77.0
Thailand	40.4	47.8	11.4	0.4	76.4
Philippines	35.9	51.9	11.7	0.5	75.6
India	38.4	45.0	15.0	1.5	66.9
Indonesia	30.4	52.9	15.3	1.4	66.6
Japan	21.2	59.3	18.4	1.1	61.0
Myanmar	25.2	52.3	19.8	2.7	55.0
China	22.0	53.4	21.1	3.5	50.8
South Korea	17.0	52.0	28.0	3.0	38.0
Hong Kong	16.9	45.5	32.0	5.6	24.8
Taiwan	12.9	48.7	34.4	3.9	23.3
Total	27.6	53.2	17.2	2.0	61.6

emerges as the nation with the greatest level of enjoyment in life with a positive 90 points, then followed by Malaysia with a positive 81 points. If the two positive categories are combined together, over 90% of the people of Vietnam and Malaysia are shown to be living an enjoyable life.

Table 3.2 shows the people of Taiwan, on the other hand, are least likely to live an enjoyable life with the lowest value on the PDI score at a negative 23 points. The people in Hong Kong are shown to be the second least likely to express enjoyment. About three-fifths in both societies chose either “often” or “sometimes” of the four categories, whereas about two-fifths reported “rarely” or “never.”

All in all, the PDI values are positive in all the 15 countries and societies surveyed, and on average of the sample of those countries and societies, four times as many people live an enjoyable life as live an unenjoyable life. Feelings of enjoyment are prevalent in these Asian countries and societies.

3.3 Levels of Achievement

This section compares the extent to which Asian people experience feelings of achievement in life. The AsiaBarometer Survey from 2006 to 2008 asked respondents: “How much do you feel you are accomplishing what you want out of your life?” The four response categories offered ranged from “a great deal,” “some,” “very little,” and “none,” with a “don’t know” category. This question was asked in 15 countries and societies with a sample size of 18,053, excluding “don’t know” responses and missing values. See Table 2.1 for in which country in which year this question was asked with its sample size. Table 3.3 reports the distribution of survey responses across these four response categories for each country and society. Of the whole sample, one-eighth (12%) of all the respondents reported a great deal of achievement, over one-half (56%) reported some achievement, one-fourth (27%) reported very little achievement,

Table 3.3 Self-assessments of achievement (%)

	A great deal	Some	Very little	None	PDI
Laos	18.8	71.4	8.2	1.6	80.4
India	31.7	53.0	12.3	3.1	69.3
Indonesia	25.4	59.0	14.0	1.6	68.8
Malaysia	23.7	58.1	16.2	2.0	63.6
Singapore	16.9	59.1	20.7	3.2	52.1
Philippines	23.6	51.4	20.6	4.4	50.0
Thailand	9.4	65.5	16.9	8.2	49.8
Vietnam	15.6	54.5	28.7	1.2	40.2
Japan	6.4	60.1	30.3	3.2	33.0
China	7.0	57.0	29.0	7.0	28.0
Hong Kong	7.3	48.4	38.7	5.5	11.5
Cambodia	5.0	50.5	40.7	3.8	11.0
Myanmar	2.9	51.0	42.3	3.8	7.8
Taiwan	4.5	48.9	39.2	7.3	6.9
South Korea	3.6	46.6	45.3	4.4	0.5
Total	12.4	56.0	27.3	4.3	36.8

and only a few (4.3%) reported no achievement. When we rescaled the original four-category verbal scale into a four-point numeric scale, ranging from a low of 1 (none) to a high of 4 (a great deal), the mean of this variable is 2.8 with a standard deviation of 0.72. In all the 15 countries and societies, “some” achievement constitutes the majority of responses.

To compare the levels of the feelings of achievement in each society, we construct the percentage difference index (PDI) again by subtracting the combined two negative ratings (“very little” and “none”) from the combined two positive ratings (“a great deal” and “some”). Table 3.3 ranks 15 societies according to the PDI scores reported in the last column of the table. Table 3.3 shows the people of Laos are the most likely to feel achievement with a positive 80 points on this index, whereas the South Korean people are least likely to feel accomplishment with a positive 1 point on this index. An overwhelming majority (90%) of the respondents of Laos reported a great deal or some achievement, compared to about one-half (50%) of the South Korean respondents who reported a great deal or some achievement and about one-half (50%) of them who reported very little or no achievement.

Although the PDI values are positive in all 15 countries and societies, the values of the bottom three societies, South Korea, Taiwan, and Myanmar, are low, with positive and negative feelings being almost equally divided in their assessments of life achievements. In these societies, feelings of achievement are not dominant, but in some societies, such as Laos, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, feelings of achievement in life are dominant.

Reference

Shin, D. C., & Inoguchi, T. (2009). Avowed happiness in Confucian Asia: Ascertaining its distribution, patterns, and sources. *Social Indicators Research*, 92, 405–427.