

# An Integrated Theory of Happiness

## The Yang Zhu Chapter of the *Liezi*

DEVIN JOSHI<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines the integrated approach to theorizing happiness in the Yang Zhu chapter of the book associated with the Daoist master Liezi. While ancient critics famously denounced Yang Zhu as an amoral, pleasure-seeking hedonist, I argue the Yang Zhu chapter offers an individually rational but socially non-conformist approach to well-being of considerable relevance to contemporary scholarship on happiness. Not only does the chapter offer an intriguing and counter-intuitive argument about what constitutes and causes well-being, but its philosophical implications address a large number of inescapably foundational conceptual questions that can serve as metrics for evaluating theories of happiness in general. These questions include the *scope* of happiness (i.e. who?, what?, when?, where?, how much?) *causation* (i.e. how?, why?), and *purpose* (i.e. why should it matter?) while also addressing possible tensions between subjective and objective experiences, uniform and diverse causality, individual and collective outcomes, relative vs. absolute happiness, and immediate vs. lasting fulfillment.

This article explores the integrated theorization of happiness associated with the legendary Chinese proto-Daoist figure of Yang Zhu as captured in the “Yang Zhu” 楊朱 chapter of the book named after the Daoist mas-

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<sup>1</sup>I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Matthew Hammerton and to Steven Burik, William Tov, and Andree Hartanto at Singapore Management University for sharing their valuable philosophical and psychological insights on happiness and Yang Zhu. I am also very grateful to Elliot Cohen, Lea Cantor, Steve Geisz, Marnix Wells, David Chai, and other participants at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Daoist Studies at Leeds Beckett University in June 2023 for their valuable suggestions and comments on an earlier version of this paper.

ter Liezi 列子.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting the pursuit of political power, material gain, social status, and public reputation in favor of cultivating individual well-being, Yang Zhu was denounced as an amoral, pleasure-seeking hedonist by Confucian critics like Mencius.

In contrast, I argue that Yang Zhu's individually rational but socially non-conformist approach to well-being is of considerable relevance to contemporary scholarship on happiness. Not only does the *Liezi* chapter offer us an intriguing and counter-intuitive argument about what constitutes and causes well-being, but its philosophy addresses a large number of inescapably foundational conceptual questions that can serve as metrics for evaluating theories of happiness in general.

In recent decades, scholars have analyzed Yang Zhu's thought to better situate it vis-à-vis competing philosophical schools in China's Warring States period (475-221 BCE).<sup>3</sup> They have also examined changing perceptions of Yang Zhu from the Warring States period to the present.<sup>4</sup> As Carine Defoort notes, the six prominent roles attributed to Yang Zhu in Chinese dynastic history range from "Yang Zhu as a rival in argumentation (late Zhou), a heretic (Han), a prominent figure in the *Liezi* (Wei-Jin), a master with deficient thoughts (Song), and a political reformer (late Qing)" (2020, 237).

These are followed more recently by the portrayal of Yang Zhu as a "philosopher" since the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> There is still, however, much dispute about what exactly Yang Zhu stood for (Brindley 2022). For instance, some label Yang Zhu as a hedonist (Graham 1989) or an egoist

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<sup>2</sup> According to Fox, the label "proto-Daoist" refers to "ideas that exert some influence on the emergence of a distinguishable Daoist tradition" (2008, 358).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Kushner 1980; Graham 1989, 2001; Hansen 1992; Emerson 1996; Fox 2008, Zhao 2014; Villaver 2015; Zhang 2020; Defoort and Lee 2022; Brindley 2022.

<sup>4</sup> See Cao 2019; Chen 2019; He 2019; Li 2019; Liu and Li 2019; Wei 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Recent evaluations of Yang Zhu's philosophy include an edited volume by Defoort and Lee (2022) and a 2019 special issue in the journal *Contemporary Chinese Thought*.

(Kushner 1980; Van Norden 2011) whereas others find Yang Zhu to be neither an egoist (Seo 2015) nor a hedonist (Li 2019; Liu & Li 2019).<sup>6</sup>

As argued here, irrespective of its particular position in moral, philosophical, and political debates of its era, the Yang Zhu chapter of the *Liezi* is relevant to contemporary audiences because of its nuanced thinking about happiness and well-being. I explore that chapter's approach to theorizing happiness here in an effort to contribute to the growing international scholarship on interconnections between Daoism and happiness.<sup>7</sup>

To be clear, I am not offering a Daoist theory of happiness nor endorsing Yang Zhu's prescriptions. Rather, my aim is to explain how a classical figure and text often associated with Daoism gives a message with rich implications for how we think about happiness. Instead of oversimplifying Yang Zhu into a predefined category such as egoist, hedonist, individualist, or Daoist, I explain how key ideas expressed in the chapter can inspire an integrated approach towards thinking about happiness.<sup>8</sup>

The article is structured as follows. It begins with a brief discussion of the legend of Yang Zhu and his core philosophy of "cherishing oneself." It then discusses how the chapter's narrative structure implies an integrated approach to theorizing happiness by addressing key issues regarding the following: a) scope (who, what, when, where), b) causation (how), and c) purpose of happiness (why). The chapter also addresses a number of possible tensions in how we conceptualize happiness such as between subjective and objective experiences, uniform and diverse causality, individual and collective outcomes, relative vs. absolute happiness, and immediate vs. lasting fulfillment. As discussed in the paper's con-

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<sup>6</sup> Still others find Yangism itself containing two opposing camps—one of "indulging" and the other of "restraining" one's "inborn disposition and nature" (Cao 2019: 147).

<sup>7</sup> See Chiang 2009; Chen 2010; Davis 2011; Ivanhoe 2013; Joshanloo 2014; Tiwald 2016; Lobel 2017; Wang, et al. 2018; Daniels 2019; Zhang 2019; Zhao 2022. On the relationship between Daoism and psychology more generally, see Cohen (2009) and Kohn (2011).

<sup>8</sup> As Cao contends, Yang Zhu has been slotted into various imposed categories but "such doctrinal thinking seems to first choose a shirt and then squeeze the body into it" (2019, 159).

clusion, many of these foundational issues can serve as useful metrics for evaluating other theories of happiness.

## The Legend of Yang Zhu

The legendary figure of Yang Zhu, also known as Yangzi 楊子<sup>9</sup> (c. 440-360 BCE), is often seen as a proto-Daoist figure representing the Yangist school of thought, which likely inspired a number of later Daoist thinkers (Graham 1989, 54). Similar to the modern psychological concept of “flow” (Csikzentmihalyi 1990), Daoists focus on optimal experience as an unselfconscious “state where the self is lost in the activity of following the Way” which means to be “in harmony with the Dao,” the ultimate source of vitality that sustains life in the universe (Ivanhoe 2011, 139, 137; see also Zhang 2019).

Studying the Daoist sage Zhuangzi (c. 399-295 BCE) scholars find that “those who are in harmony with the Dao experience a sense of metaphysical comfort. . . . They feel a profound and special sense of security, peace, and ease as part of and party to powers much greater and grander than anything one could muster on one’s own” (Ivanhoe 2013, 265). However, achieving this state of great “contentment” (Daniels 2019, 585) involving a “special feeling of satisfaction, ease, and delight” is typically out of reach or at least difficult for most of us because our socialization “cuts us off and alienates us from the great Dao” (Ivanhoe 2013, 263, 276).

### Textual Sources

Nobody really knows what Yang Zhu thought or did and such a person may have never even existed. A common claim is that Yang Zhu was a student of the Daoist sage Laozi (Wei 2019), but this shadowy figure’s true origins remain unknown. Since Yang Zhu’s original writings have been lost, what we know of his thought comes from exchanges preserved by others in texts such as the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Almanac), an ancient encyclopedia stating that Yang Zhu “valued self” (Graham 2001; Chen 2012). As Villaver points out, the concept of self (*ji* 己) meant the opposite of others (*ren* 人) (2015, 218). Thus,

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<sup>9</sup> In classical texts, Yang Zhu’s name appeared in several forms such as: 楊朱, 楊氏, 楊子, 陽子, 陽生, 陽居. See Chen 2019: 92; Wei 2019: 141.

some interpret Yang Zhu's thought as endorsing ethical egoism (Kushner 1980).

Yang Zhu is also mentioned in chapter 13 of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Book of the Prince of Huainan), a syncretic text where he is associated with the doctrines of "keeping one's nature intact" (*quanxing* 全性), "protecting one's genuineness" (*baozhen* 保真), and "not allowing oneself to become tied to material things" (*bu yiwu leixing* 不以物隳形) (Fox 2008, 364; Fung 1983, 134; Graham 1989, 56). These three doctrines suggest that "being true to one's own natural destiny (*xing* 性) and avoiding attachments and hypocrisies that drain the body of its spiritual and physical resources will lead to the fulfilment of one's endowment" (Fox 2008, 364).

The *Huainanzi* also notes how Mencius opposed these doctrines and criticized the "excessive egoism" of Yang Zhu for supposedly championing the idea of acting only "for myself" (*weiwo* 爲我) (2008, 368). In a famous polemic, the Confucian scholar Mencius attacked Yang Zhu for being unwilling to "pluck one single body hair" (*yimao buba* 一毛不拔) to benefit "the world" (*tianxia* 天下) (Li 2010, 167).<sup>10</sup>

However, many contemporary scholars argue that Yang Zhu actually meant that one should not sacrifice one hair in exchange for receiving the benefit(s) of getting to rule the world (Graham 1989, 1990; Hansen 1992; Zhao 2014). In other words, one should not injure one's body (by removing even a single body hair) in the selfish pursuit of excessive wealth and power because "physical health is more important than anything—even the power of ruling a country" (Zhao 2022, 136). As Zhang (2020, 145) suggests, there is a kind of "'universalistic egoism' implied in Yang Zhu's philosophy. For Yang Zhu, it is not only no harm to *my* hair to attain the world but also no harm to *anyone's* for the sake of attaining the world." By acting this way "people do not infringe on one another, each content without being concerned with others' affairs, and the world naturally achieves order" (Li 2019, 124).

Yangist philosophy also appears in later parts of the *Zhuangzi* (a.k.a. Chuang-tzu), a Daoist collection formally edited around 300 CE by Guo

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<sup>10</sup> As Li notes, the high status conferred upon Mencius in the Song Dynasty added to Yang Zhu's negative reputation, a classic irony given that Yang Zhu never cared about reputation anyway (2019, 120).

Xiang (Graham 2001, 29). As Graham (1989, 55) notes, four of its chapters (28-31) on “Yielding the Throne,” “Robber Chih,” “Discourse on Swords,” and “The Old Fisherman” probably belong to the Yangist school since they consist of “highly literary” dialogues with “much citation of instances from history and legend” producing stories “longer and technically more sophisticated than anything elsewhere in *Chuang-tzu*” (Graham 2001, 222). A prominent message in these chapters is that “the life of the body is more important than the things which serve to nurture it. Possessions are replaceable, the body is not” and one should be “careful not to be deluded into seeking power and possessions at risk to life by the two great temptations, greed for wealth and moral demand to contribute to the good government of the people” (2001, 222).

Another significant textual source of Yangist philosophy and the one I focus on here is the Yang Zhu chapter in the *Liezi* a text attributed to the legendary Daoist figure Lie Yukou 列御寇 (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) though the received version of this text dates to about 300 CE (Graham 1989, 60; Chen 2012, 1).<sup>11</sup> As scholars have noted, the work “is a compendium of hyperbolic anecdotes, seemingly paradoxical aphorisms, and curious parables” (Ames 2011, 1). Contained in the Daoist Canon, it is often seen as the third most important Daoist work after Laozi and Zhuangzi (Graham 1990; Chen 2012). While the Yang Zhu chapter has sometimes been seen as anomalous within the text (Graham 1990), scholars like Liu and Li (2019, 76) find “the ‘Yang Zhu’ chapter of the received *Liezi* is not only reliable, but also an especially valuable text—one that can serve as a foundational resource for study of Yang Zhu’s thought.” Hence, given the importance of the *Liezi* in Daoism and its inclusion of a separate chapter explicitly named after Yang Zhu, I focus on this chapter here. The chapter was also selected for analysis because it implies a complex and integrated approach to thinking about happiness.<sup>12</sup>

### Cherishing Oneself

A number of scholars have argued that Yang Zhu’s most important contributions to thinking about happiness can be summed up as “cherishing oneself” (*guiji* 貴己) and “tending/nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生) (Zhao

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<sup>11</sup> The chapter title is translated as “Yang Chu” by Graham (1990).

<sup>12</sup> The translation follows Graham 1990.

2014, 173). As Fox notes, by prioritizing the “efficient preservation of life force,” Yang Zhu’s individual rationality was unconventional in its era by challenging social conformity and the hierarchically oriented, war mongering status quo (2008, 358). Graham describes Yangism as follows:

[It was] a philosophy entitling members of the ruling class to resist the overwhelming moral pressures to take office. . . . But Yangism differs from its successors in having nothing mystical about it. It starts from the same calculations of benefit and harm as does Mohism, but its question is not ‘How shall we benefit the world?’ but ‘What is truly beneficial to man?’ more specifically ‘What is truly beneficial to myself?’ Is it wealth and power, as the vulgar suppose? Or the life and health of the body and the satisfaction of the senses? (1989, 56)

By championing the idea of cherishing oneself, Yang Zhu shifted the empirical and normative unit of analysis regarding well-being and moral cultivation away from the family (as advocated by Confucians) and the state (as advocated by Mohists and Legalists) back to the individual.<sup>13</sup> As Zhao (2014, 174) notes, “Yang believed that if only everybody focused merely on taking care of themselves rather than others, the whole world could be in peace.” In her view, Yang Zhu saw a need for us to abandon our “socialized external self” (*wo* 我) in favour of “returning to one’s true internal self” (*ji* 己) (2014, 176). This implies keeping “one’s physical body and sensual organs in a satisfied condition, one’s mind and heart in a happy mood, and one’s emotions and feelings in a pleasant situation” while cultivating “a natural attitude toward life and death; and a freedom from attachments to any conventional values or external material pursuits” (2014, 175).

## An Integrated Theory of Happiness

The Yang Zhu chapter holds much value for contemporary scholarship by signaling to us essential criteria for developing an *integrated* theory of happiness. This is because through its narrative format (of various sto-

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<sup>13</sup> While Schwartz’s interpretation is that Yang Zhu represents historical fatalism (1985, 188), Graham views Yang Zhu as an advocate for people “to live out the term of life which Heaven has destined for man” (1989, 56).

ries and exaggerated characters) the chapter addresses many pivotal questions one might have regarding the meaning of “happiness” including its *scope* (i.e., who?, what?, when?, where?, how much?) *causation* (i.e., how?, why?), and *purpose* (i.e., why should it matter?). Dealing with these issues, the Yang Zhu chapter serves as a model for others by providing a series of metrics to use in developing an integrated theory of happiness. I will now examine these possibilities by discussing elements that an integrated theory of happiness ought to entail alongside examples of how the Yang Zhu chapter addresses those points.

Table 1. Metrics for Evaluating an Integrated Theory of Happiness

#	Issues to Settle	Possible Tensions within each Issue
1	What is Happiness? (meaning, intension)	Subjective vs. Objective Authentic vs. Artificial Image vs. Substance Happy vs. Not Unhappy Presence vs. Absence Positive vs. Negative (framing) Reality ( <i>Sein</i> ) vs. Appearance ( <i>Schein</i> ) Hedonic (pleasure) vs. Eudaimonic (flourishing) Affect vs. Cognition
2	Happiness of whom? (unit of analysis)	Self vs. Others Individual vs. Collective Humans vs. Sentient Beings Living vs. Dead Persons
3	Happy when? (temporality, duration)	Past vs. Present vs. Future Process vs. Product Momentary vs. Intermittent vs. Sustained vs. Whole Life Short-term vs. Long-term Quality vs. Quantity of Life Upward vs. Downward Trajectory
4	Happy where? (spatiality)	Internal (mind) vs. External (body) Differentiated vs. Integrated Domains Multiple vs. Single Holism vs. Part-ism



5	Happy by how much? (degree, depth)	Shallow vs. Deep Active vs. Passive Dichotomous vs. Continuous Summative vs. Average Emic vs. Etic
6	Happy why and how? (causation)	Mental (consciousness) vs. Material (resources) Mind vs. Body Uniformity vs. Diversity Mono-causal vs. Multi-causal Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity (equifinality) Necessary, Sufficient, or Conducive Conditions Set-points/Inheritance vs. Actions/Agency
7	Why be happy? (purpose)	Intrinsic (ends) vs. Instrumental (means) Normative vs. Empirical/Positive Critical vs. Distant/Disengaged Being Good vs. Feeling Good

### What is Happiness?

The first component an integrated theory of happiness should include is a clear explanation of the *meaning* it assigns the term “happiness” and its *intension*. For example, its conceptualization of happiness should distinguish between its major (essential/core) and minor (peripheral/optional) components. In the Yang Zhu chapter, the essential components of happiness are made clear - to be physically (body) and mentally (mind) healthy and satisfied, free from worries or stress, and in touch with and able to live in accordance with one’s own unique nature. This philosophy is embodied in the phrases “cherishing/valuing self” and “tending/nourishing life” which refer to “the satisfaction of personal needs without injuring health and life” (Graham 1990, 143). Thus, in response to a rich and a poor person both of whom had bad experiences Yang Zhu responds that “the right course...is to be found in enjoying life, in freeing ourselves from care. Hence those who are good at enjoying life are not poor, and those who are good at freeing themselves from care/worry do not get rich” (1990, 141).

In this respect, Yang Zhu’s conceptualization of happiness implies hedonic balance. On the one hand, he advocates “simply living without restraint; do not suppress, do not restrict” enjoyment of the pleasures of

the senses including music and song (hearing), beautiful women (seeing), flowers and spices (smelling), discussing truth and falsehood (expressing and contemplating), fine clothes (touching) and good food (tasting) (1990, 142). On the other hand, one should exercise a degree of moderation in such enjoyment in order to live a tranquil life and to be able to continue enjoying such pleasures while living out the full life course nature has prepared for us (Chen 2012, 52).<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, the opposite of this ideal consists of being trapped in stressful situations, being coerced to do something that goes against one's health and internal nature, and pursuing external "pseudo-satisfiers" (Max-Neef 1992, 205-09) like wealth and reputation which appear on the surface to make us happy but might actually fail to do so. Thus, Yang Zhu's conception of happiness includes both objective criteria (health) and subjective elements (feeling free of stress) as well as affective (feeling pleasure) and cognitive (feeling content) dimensions. It combines short-term enjoyment of various pleasures and long-term enjoyment of how nature has made us.

In response, one might ask how one can know whether a person is truly happy or not? This raises two important considerations. The first concerns a potential gap between *Sein* (reality) and *Schein* (appearance). This relates to the difference between genuine happiness as opposed to that which looks like happiness but is actually just a social expectation or something illusory. For instance, society may laud and praise those who are good looking, are star athletes, or have big salaries when those attributes may be simultaneously unrelated to or even detrimental to a person's happiness if they take time and energy away from things which would generate greater happiness.<sup>15</sup>

A second important concern is issue framing. Are we talking about 'being happy?' or 'not being unhappy?' This subtle distinction is important because researchers have found framing things positively (focusing on the presence of something good) versus negatively (emphasizing

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<sup>14</sup> For Yang Zhu, "to injure health by excess or risk life to multiply possessions is to forget that things are only means to the life generated in us by Heaven; one's possessions are replaceable, one's life is not" (Graham 1989, 57).

<sup>15</sup> Yang Zhu cautioned against "identifying with the unreal (fame, luxury, tradition) at the expense of the real (nature, the body)" (Emerson 1996, 546).

the absence of something bad) significantly impacts how people perceive and evaluate outcomes (Kahneman 2012). Yang Zhu's integrated approach circumvents this potentially confounding aspect by incorporating both positive and negative framing to discuss causes of happiness (following one's inherent nature, etc.) as well as causes of unhappiness. Regarding the latter he states: "People find no rest because of four aims — long life, reputation, office, possessions. Whoever has these four aims dreads spirits, dreads other men, dreads authority, dreads punishment. I call him 'a man in flight from things'" (Graham 1990, 154).

### Whose Happiness?

Secondly, an integrated theory of happiness ought to address the question of whose happiness we are talking about. An important distinction here is whether the *unit of analysis* is an individual (me or her) or a collective (us or them). There is a possible tension here because my (or her) happiness may come at the expense of your (or their) happiness. Likewise, your (or their) happiness may come at the expense of my (or her) happiness.<sup>16</sup>

Following the principles of cherishing oneself and "cherishing the body" (*guishen* 貴身), Yang Zhu responds to this issue by placing emphasis on the individual's happiness. The reason for this choice is because the happiness of the individual may ultimately be the cornerstone for the happiness of everyone. As Zhao explains,

If each person's own distinctive nature can be recognized and respected, external and international conflicts will be dramatically reduced and the violence and terrorism that result from hate and revenge will be eradicated. If everybody/every country can focus on their internal business and internal cultivation based on their own nature, and not focus on disturbing, intervention, and the control of other countries, then the world could really be in peace. (2014, 185-86)

As this attempt to aggregate Yang Zhu's principle of cherishing oneself reveals, the *Liezi* chapter rejects hypocritical, repressive, and un-

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<sup>16</sup> Such tensions are not only found in happiness theories but also in many variants of liberalism which do not always support everyone's freedom and even condone harming some to benefit others (Joshi 2020).

productive moralities imposed on societies and individuals. According to Yang Zhu, “there is an old saying that each of us should pity the living and abandon the dead. This saying puts it exactly. The way to pity others is not simply to feel for them. When they are toiling, we can give them ease, hungry we can feed them, cold we can warm them, in trouble we can help them to get through” (Graham 1990, 141-42). As this passage illustrates, Yang Zhu was in favor of supporting all life (both ours and his), leading A.C. Graham to conclude that Yang Zhu “wants pleasure for other men as well as for himself” (1990, 136).<sup>17</sup>

As Zhao Yanxia likewise notes, in Yang Zhu’s vision “pursuing one’s personal enjoyment should not be based on the rejection of taking care of others. . . *Yangsheng* (nourishing life) should include both the nourishing of one’s own life and that of others” (2014, 180). Thus, Graham defends Yang Zhu as someone “concerned for life in general, not just his own” and as “an individualist concerned to benefit his own person and leave others to do the same” (1989, 54, 55).

This stems from Yang Zhu’s belief that altruism is unrealistic. Whereas gods or heroic mythical figures like the legendary Chinese emperors Shun and Yu may have been capable of altruism, such behavior would be impossible for mere mortals. Hence, Yang Zhu seeks to advance both individual and collective well-being, but if the two come into conflict he prioritizes the well-being of one’s self. Thus, Yang Zhu’s preference hierarchy as shown in Table 2 below is option 1 > option 2 > option 3 > option 4. The preferred (best) solution is win-win over win-lose. The second-best would be win-lose and so on.

Table 2. Self (Individual) and Others (Collective) in Happiness Theories

	Self wins	Self loses
Other wins	1) Win (self) + Win (other)	3) Lose (self) + Win (other)
Other loses	2) Win (self) + Lose (other)	4) Lose (self) + Lose (other)

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<sup>17</sup> In Emerson’s view, “Yang Zhu did not liberate the ‘individual’ from his obligations. What he did was to elevate private affairs (both family and personal) above public business” (1996, 550).

### Happiness When?

A third issue to address in an integrated theory of happiness concerns *when* a person is happy (or when should they be happy) and for *how long*? Here again there is a potential tension between being happy in the present (now) or the past (then) versus being happy in the future (later). One should perhaps also consider whether our happiness is on an upwards or downwards trajectory over time and whether happiness should be viewed as a process or a product. There is also a possible tension in the *duration* of happiness - whether it is limited to a given moment (instantaneous, fleeting), whether it comes and goes (intermittently) or whether it is lasting (continuous, sustained). For instance, one may experience happiness in the short-term but not in the long-term. It is also possible that experiencing happiness in the future might require us to undergo sacrifices (i.e., unhappiness) in the meantime.

Yang Zhu's integrated approach fortunately provides answers to a number of these questions concerning temporality. Firstly, the Yang Zhu chapter appears to favor hedonic balance so that an individual can enjoy happiness both now and in the future. If there is a conflict between the present and the future, however, it advocates pursuing happiness now instead of waiting for later.

While you are alive, resign yourself and let life run its course, satisfy all your desires and wait for death. When it is time to die, resign yourself and let death run its course; go right to your destination, which is extinction. Be resigned to everything, let everything run its course; why need you delay it or speed it on its way? (Graham 1990, 148)

In Yang Zhu's perspective, life is so short that one should live for enjoyment (now) instead of working to build a social reputation (Graham 1990, 135-37). The *Liezi* chapter starts from the premise that most people unfortunately spend their entire lives in a miserable state and the immanence, inevitability, and universality of death appears numerous times such as the following.

A hundred years is the term of the longest life, but not one man in a thousand lives so long. Should there be one who lives out his span, infancy and senility take nearly half of it. The nights lost in sleep, the days wasted even when we are awake, take nearly half the rest. Pain and sickness, sorrow

and toil, ruin and loss, anxiety and fear, take nearly half of the rest. Of the dozen or so years which remain, if we reckon how long we are at ease and content, without the least care, it does not amount to the space of an hour (Graham 1990, 139).

We all die; saints and sages die, the wicked and foolish die (1990, 140).

Make haste to enjoy your life while you have it; why care what happens when you are dead? (1990, 141).

As these passages illustrate, although Yang Zhu valued both quality of life and quantity of life, to him the former is more important. One of his disciples expounded on this by stating that having no life is better than a miserable life; “to keep one’s life intact is the best, to keep one’s life partially completed is the second, death is the next, and to live under force is the worst one” (Zhao 2014, 179). Yang Zhu’s emphasis on quality of life is illustrated in his story of Tuanmu Shu of Wei who upon receiving a generous inheritance, “followed his impulse and did as he pleased...Whatever his passions inclined him to enjoy, whatever his ear wished to hear, his eye to see and his mouth to taste, he would send for without fail” (Graham 1990, 146). But Tuanmu Shu also shared what he had with many others. When he got older, he “gave away all the precious things in his treasuries and storehouses, all his carriages and robes and concubines” and possessed nothing when he died (1990, 147).

#### Happiness Where?

A fourth issue worth addressing in an integrated theory of happiness concerns *where* in our lives do we experience happiness? Is it localized in certain specific domains (happy with my job, happy with my finances, happy with my love life) or globalized across all domains (happy with everything)? Relatedly, is happiness something experienced by our mind or body or both? Here again there is potential for conflict as someone might experience pleasure in their body but torture in their mind or conversely contentment in one’s mind but pain in one’s body.

On this issue, Yang Zhu sees happiness as a matter of both mind and body. He wants pain to accrue to neither the body (losing a single hair) nor to the mind (does not want an ounce of stress). One might also ask whether happiness is an instantaneous response (affective) or an overall evaluation (cognitive) and Yang Zhu sees it as a matter of both. While pleasure-seeking, Yang Zhu does not appear to endorse hedonic

(pleasure) happiness over eudaimonic (flourishing) well-being.<sup>18</sup> Rather, his ideal is for individuals to enjoy both forms of well-being. As Zhao (2014, 184) observes, Yang Zhu subscribes to “a life cherishing philosophy based on the satisfaction of both one’s physical and psychological, as well as spiritual needs.”

### How Happy?

A fifth issue relevant to an integrated theory of happiness is how much or to what extent one ought to be happy. Relatedly, how does one know whether someone has achieved that degree of happiness? These issues concern epistemology (how we know something exists) and measurement (determining how much of something is present). Regarding the latter, there are possible tensions between taking subjective (self-appraisal) as opposed to objective (externally observable indices) approaches to measuring happiness. This overlaps to some extent with differences between emic (insider perspective) and etic (outside perspective) approaches to understanding phenomena.

One might also like to have a sense of whether one’s measures are valid, reliable, and replicable. When we talk of a person’s happiness, are we talking about an absolute level of happiness or a happiness level relative to some other person’s happiness or external benchmark? Correspondingly, what is the distribution of happiness across a society or societies?<sup>19</sup> Then there is the important issue of ‘how much is enough?’ and ‘How much does it take to be happy?’

While the Yang Zhu chapter does not provide answers to all of these questions, on the crucial issue of how much one needs to be happy, Yang Zhu evidently champions the idea of diminishing marginal returns—that you only need enough of certain things to be happy and that

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<sup>18</sup> The concepts of *eudaimonia* and *hedonia* originated in ancient Greece. According to Huta, the former includes “states and/or pursuits associated with using and developing the best in oneself, in accordance with one’s true self and one’s deeper principles. Hedonia includes states and/or pursuits associated with pleasure and enjoyment, and the absence of pain and discomfort” (2013, 201).

<sup>19</sup> As well-being researchers have observed, this kind of measurement—especially when trying to compare happiness levels across cultures can be very difficult (Tov and Au 2013).

getting more than enough will not make you any happier. On this he remarks,

A grand house, fine clothes, good food, and beautiful women - if you have these four, what more do you need from outside yourself? One who has them yet seeks more from outside himself has an insatiable nature. An insatiable nature is a grub eating away one's vital forces" (Graham 1990, 156).

### Why Are Some People Happy?

An integrated theory of happiness should also address what makes people happy. What generates happiness? And more broadly what *causes* things to happen in this world? Are outcomes determined primarily by mental (consciousness) or material (resources) sources/factors?

Yang Zhu's answer is that fulfilling both mental and material needs matters for our happiness. Yang Zhu believes in getting pleasure out of material things, but is also against being tied to material things and rejects blindly following social conventions (Fox 2008, 367).<sup>20</sup> A related issue is to what degree happiness is influenced by inherited/genetic "set points" (nature) or by our interactions with the world and people around us (nurture). In this respect, Yang Zhu sees it as a matter of both. He contends that "struggling against one's natural inclinations takes a great deal of work, and this stress dissipates our energies and vital resources" (2008, 367). At the same time, Yang Zhu believes we can say no to what society wants from us and turn away from the lure of status, possessions, and fame. He stresses the role of agency and the importance of individuals in choosing to step off the hedonic treadmill.

Yang Zhu also teaches us that the route to happiness is multi-causal, much like various "list theories" of happiness (Haybron 2013, 85) and in contradistinction to mono-causal theories which assert there is only one primary cause of happiness. Yang Zhu also seemingly supports the idea of equifinality—that there may be multiple routes to happiness given that each individual is different. Given Yang Zhu's conception that "each individual's destiny is unique" (Fox 2008, 363), his theory is more

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<sup>20</sup> Fox says, "Meditation, conscious breathing exercises, and vigorous physical activity" will help the individual "to develop a clearer sense of what exactly is the 'good life,' and to have the courage and integrity to follow that course through to the end, despite the alienation and social censure that may ensue" (2008, 369).



aligned with causal heterogeneity/diversity as opposed to causal homogeneity/ uniformity.

The complexity of Yang Zhu's causal thinking is reflected in his view that happiness involves both subjective and objective as well as individual and collective dimensions. The intersection of these dimensions produces four quadrants (see Table 3) related to the individual's interior (intentional) and exterior (behavioral), and the collective's interior (cultural) and exterior (social) states of being (Wilber 2000, 70). Thus, when it comes to individual subjective happiness, consciousness may be a primary determinant of happiness. For instance, are we content with and appreciative of what we have? For our collective subjective happiness, however, ideology or shared beliefs may play a larger role. As for individual objective happiness, resources (i.e., financial, material, emotional, technological, etc.) that are at one's own disposal may be primary determinants. Lastly, in terms of our collective objective happiness, the surrounding environment (social, political, natural, and economic) in which we find ourselves may play a significant role.

Table 3. Four Dimensions/Levels of Causal Forces in Happiness Theories

	Individual Happiness	Collective Happiness
Subjective Happiness	I. Individual Consciousness	II. Shared Beliefs
Objective Happiness	III. Personal Resources	IV. Social and Natural Environment

#### Why Try to Be Happy?

A final issue worth including in an integrated theory of happiness is the *significance* and *relevance* of happiness vis-à-vis other possible aims or goals in life. Happiness may be a worthwhile pursuit, but for some people, certain things such as kindness, goodness, health, meaningfulness, longevity, wealth, morality, power, responsibility, children, or success may be valued more than happiness.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the value of happiness may differ across individuals and societies. Some may see it as a supreme value whereas others may not value it at all. For some, happiness

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, some people believe it is more important to "be good" than to "feel good."

is of *intrinsic* value (as an end in itself) whereas for others it holds *instrumental* value (as a means to achieving something else).

In this respect, the Yang Zhu chapter not only makes empirical claims about what he believes causes happiness (staying out of public affairs, following one's inherent nature, etc.) but it also normatively champions happiness as a (more) desirable aim vis-à-vis other potential life goals such as pursuing a social reputation, power, or wealth (Graham 1990). A representative passage in a Yangist chapter of Zhuangzi captures this prioritization.

The petty man will die for riches, the gentleman will die for reputation...in so far as they throw away what is already theirs and are willing to die for something that is not theirs, they are identical...Do not be a petty man—return to and obey the Heaven within you; do not be a gentleman—follow the reason of Heaven...Turn your face to the four directions, ebb and flow with the seasons (trans. Watson 1968, 334).

As this illustrates, in Yang Zhu's vision, one should use things in this world "to nourish one's nature" when in fact regrettably "most are using their natures to nourish other things" (Graham 1989, 57). For Yang Zhu, the happiness gained by cherishing oneself and following one's inherent nature is of intrinsic value and hence superior to things like acquiring wealth, rank and reputation which have at most instrumental value. As Zhao (2014, 181; see also Slingerland 2000) contends, "Yang Zhu has actually suggested a new moral standard here: To follow one's internal nature is not evil but a true virtue; the spontaneous internal nature should be where the true morality comes from."

As the Yang Zhu chapter states, "Man resembles the other species between heaven and earth, and like them owes his nature to the Five Elements...However, my body is not my possession; yet once born, I have no choice but to keep it intact" (Graham 1990, 153). As the Yangist viewpoint emphasizes, human lives and human bodies are not our own. They are essentially on loan from Heaven and therefore we must be responsible in fulfilling our duty to nourish our bodies, meet its needs, and keep it alive for the duration Heaven has planned for us. We are not to treat our bodies or lives as possessions as if they were "ours" or to sub-

ject ourselves to harm or excesses that will damage what Heaven has given us.

## Conclusion

While Yang Zhu was criticized by ancient critics for supporting the happiness of individuals over the interests of the state or family, “Yang Zhu’s rejection of public life and dedication to self-cultivation, originally a bold minority position, became widely persuasive” (Emerson 1996, 546). A possible shortcoming of Yang Zhu’s approach is that its individualistic orientation might run into a fallacy of composition, but it is clear that the Yang Zhu chapter of *Liezi* also favors collective well-being and only rejects those social practices which come at the expense of fulfilling the individual’s vital needs. Moreover, Yang Zhu’s integrated approach rejects extremism. For instance, he sees the mind-body distinction as counterproductive as both the mind and the body matter for human well-being.<sup>22</sup> On this and many other matters, the Yang Zhu chapter brings different elements of life together in a coherent fashion. Hence, it provides us with the building blocks to develop an *integrated* theory of happiness that incorporates hedonic balance to avoid artificially reducing or extending our life span.

Drawing from Yang Zhu’s thought we were also able to develop a checklist of items for evaluating theories of happiness in general. Yang Zhu’s theorization of happiness has many pioneering insights such as how framing effects perceptions of happiness as prospect theory has recently rediscovered. For instance, the framing of ‘benefit the world’ as opposed to ‘gain the world’ elicits vastly different responses. Yang Zhu was also attentive to time horizons, discount rates, and depth perception regarding how soon death will come and take over us. While seemingly individualistic on the surface, a deeper analysis as shown here reveals Yang Zhu’s simultaneously collective orientation. For instance, all of the putatively hedonist characters in Yangist writings were opposed to violence—revealing his humanist, non-violent, and life-nurturing approach.

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<sup>22</sup> As expressed by Yang Zhu, a body needs its pleasure which comes from material things just as a mind needs its contentment which comes from its state of consciousness.

The fact that these and so many other complexities are woven into his theorizing makes Yang Zhu's approach both subtle and nuanced.

Were future studies to work towards developing more explicit, comprehensive, and integrated theories of happiness, the Yang Zhu chapter of *Liezi* is arguably a good model to follow as few since have come up with such a sophisticated theory. For instance, its thinking which takes both *whose* happiness and *when* into consideration, gives us several possible combinations where a happiness theory might fall. Optimal happiness would presumably be option #6 (as shown in Table 4), which can be described as a "win-win-win-win" because it entails happiness for us (both you and me) always (both now and later).<sup>23</sup> This denotes happiness over a greater time span and for more people compared to other options in Table 4 which are more restrictive by being limited only to a single individual or point in time. On this matter, it seems Yang Zhu's first choice would be option #6 and that he would retreat to option #1 only when a more comprehensive (i.e. shared and sustained) happiness were not feasible. By contrast, it seems many contemporary approaches to happiness as advocated by "positive psychology" are limited only to focusing on option #1 while giving much less consideration to other possibilities.

Table 4. Spatiality (Scope) & Temporality (Time) in Happiness Theories

	Unit: Individual	Unit: Collective
Time: Present	1 (Me, now)	2 (Us, now)
Time: Future	3 (Me, later)	4 (Us, later)
Time: Present + Future	5 (Me, now + later)	6 (Us, now + later)

To conclude, Yang Zhu's integrated theory of happiness is one that normatively promotes individual well-being as an ultimate goal in life.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The sixth option here would be even more impactful if "us" refers not to a small subset ('my family', 'my business', 'my university', or 'my nation') of a broader population but to everyone (i.e., 'the world' or 'humanity' or 'all sentient beings').

<sup>24</sup> In an integrated theory of happiness, the meaning of happiness as de-contested by the theory should also be distinguishable from other potentially desirable outcomes. For instance, "happiness" is sometimes used interchangeably by re-

This made his controversial approach stand out compared to his contemporaries because happiness differs in kind from other attributes such as kindness, goodness, meaningfulness, longevity (i.e. quantity of life),<sup>25</sup> wealth, morality, power, responsibility, or success.<sup>26</sup> The challenge for Yang Zhu is not how to balance happiness against such other possibly desirable goals, but how to achieve happiness and sustain it. His answer seems to emphasize following: a) our own internal nature, b) adopting hedonic balance to enjoy well-being both in the moment and in the future, and c) whenever possible support the well-being of others. From the Yangist view, if we rationally think it through, we will reject much of what society wants us to do—i. e., pursuing longevity, rank, reputation, office, power, and wealth.<sup>27</sup> Instead if we just listen to our inner nature and live naturally as Heaven made us, we will flow unhesitatingly and smoothly through life like water flowing in a river.

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searchers with "quality of life", "subjective well-being" and "life satisfaction", but scholars have warned against conflating happiness with concepts such as "goodness", "development", or "progress" (Stewart 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the Yang Zhu chapter of *Liezi* downplays longevity as a goal in life in contrast to the many *yangsheng*-focused Daoist religious texts providing guidance on achieving longevity (Joshi 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Illustrating this difference, Haybron (2013, 101) notes how icons like Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa may be "exemplars of meaningful lives," yet were not necessarily happy. Yang Zhu likewise discusses how ancient Chinese sage kings like Shun and Yu are universally admired but their actual life experiences must have been miserable (Graham 1990, 150).

<sup>27</sup> In this respect, Yangism differs slightly from the Daoism of Zhuangzi as the latter places emphasis on abandoning conscious thought (in favor of mystical insight) to achieve optimal experience.

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