

UC Berkeley psychologists bring science of happiness to China

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The ranks of China's millionaires continue to grow, but the increased wealth has done little to boost the country's gross domestic happiness, according to psychologists at the University of California, Berkeley. They say the pursuit of prosperity in the nation is fast outpacing mental health and well-being, and are seeking to correct that imbalance by spreading the science of happiness in China.

As part of that effort, UC Berkeley psychologists, along with colleagues at Tsinghua University, are hosting in August [China](#)'s first-ever conference on positive psychology. The event is particularly relevant in the wake of China's Foxconn plant worker suicides and headline-generating knife attacks on preschoolers, conference leaders said.

"We want to switch the focus in China from the gross domestic product to happiness, from the culture of competition to the common good," said UC Berkeley psychologist Kaiping Peng, founder and director of the Berkeley-Tsinghua Program for Advanced Study in Psychology.

In 2008, Peng and his colleagues rebuilt Tsinghua University's psychology program, nearly 60 years after the department was dismantled as part of China's restructuring of higher education along Soviet lines. Psychology is now the third most popular field of study at that university after international finance and accounting, Peng said.

The "First China International Conference on Positive Psychology," to be held on Aug. 7 and 8 on the Tsinghua University campus in the academic heart of Beijing, has attracted 200 academic papers from 38 countries and is expected to draw more than 400 scholars, teachers and business leaders.

Those presenting their research will include UC Berkeley psychologist Dacher Keltner, author of "Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life," and Christopher Peterson, a University of Michigan psychologist and a pioneer of positive psychology. Another high-profile speaker will be Robert Wright, chronicler of evolutionary psychology and author of "The Moral Animal," which ranked among The New York Times Book Review's 12 best books of 1994.

The positive psychology movement was born in the late 1990s when a handful of American psychologists shifted their research away from mental illness and dysfunction and toward the mysteries of human resilience and optimism. Among other things, the Tsinghua University conference will investigate how positive psychology can improve life in China's households, workplaces and educational institutions. It will also explore ties between mental health and spirituality.

"Many people in China feel uncertain about the future," Peng said. "We want to do more than just talk about depression and mental illness. We want to figure out how to improve their emotional outlook and bring the wisdoms of Buddhism and other religions to the scientific study of happiness."

While psychology in China has enjoyed a renaissance in recent decades, psychiatry and neuroscience are still taken more seriously than social psychology and research into the neurobiological roots of positive emotions, Peng said.

But that mindset may be shifting as a string of high-profile suicides and homicides have raised the question of how people in China are faring in the face of rapid economic growth and social change.

The Berkeley-Tsinghua conference has generated so much interest and curiosity, Peng noted, that two other positive psychology conferences have been scheduled in China around the same time. One is being hosted by Beijing Normal University from Aug. 13-15.

"People love this idea. They want to copy it," said Peng, who grew up during Mao Zedong's cultural revolution, a time when psychology was considered a Western-biased pseudoscience.

The story of how Peng brought psychology back to Tsinghua University is something of a fairytale. His father, a college professor, was sent to the Chinese countryside during the cultural revolution to work on fish ponds, leaving his family behind.

But Chairman Mao's anti-intellectual movement didn't deter the young Kaiping Peng from pursuing academia. He took his college entrance exams early at age 16, and entered Beijing University intending to major in physics. University officials instead directed him to study psychology,

a subject he knew little about.

Peng didn't immerse himself fully in psychology until he entered the University of Michigan in 1989 as a visiting scholar and went on to earn a Ph.D. in the subject. He interviewed for faculty positions at the University of Chicago and Cornell University, but it was UC Berkeley that he fell in love with, and whose faculty he joined in 1998.

In 2008, through UC Berkeley's fundraising arm, he was introduced to alumni Cher Wang and Wen Chi Chen, who rank among Taiwan's wealthiest entrepreneurs and philanthropists. The couple wanted to donate seed money for various projects in China. After some discussion with Peng, they agreed to support the Berkeley-Tsinghua Program for the Advanced Study in Psychology as part of a broader collaboration between the two campuses.

Peng traveled to Beijing that same year with George Breslauer, UC Berkeley's executive vice chancellor and provost, and Sheldon Zedeck, vice provost for academic affairs and faculty welfare, to propose the idea to Tsinghua University officials. The visit went well, and an agreement was struck. With seed money from Wang and Chen and a matching donation from Tsinghua University, the partnership was born and recruiting began.

Today, the 10-member psychology faculty at Tsinghua University is made up of four Chinese professors, three U.S.-trained Chinese psychologists and three American professors, including Seth Roberts, a UC Berkeley professor emeritus of psychology and author of "The Shangri-La Diet," a book that promotes weight loss through flavorless foods.

Roberts said he jumped at the opportunity to teach at Tsinghua University because he said he thought "Beijing would be fascinating,"

and that his light teaching schedule would give him more time to write books. He also said he expected the students to be brilliant and talented, and was not disappointed.

"To get into Tsinghua as an undergraduate, you have to score extremely well on a nationwide test," Roberts said.

The idea for a [positive psychology](#) conference came to Peng and his colleagues this spring when a spate of knife attacks in kindergartens that left 15 young children dead turned the spotlight on mental health in China. The assailants were alleged to suffer from psychological problems or grudges related to workplace or relationship problems. Then in May, 10 workers at Foxconn, a computer component manufacturing plant in southern China, committed suicide, deepening concerns about the gap between China's haves and have-nots.

One obstacle to happiness in China, Peng said, is the intense culture of competition: "When you have that many people all fighting to achieve the same narrowly defined goals, it becomes a zero-sum game," he said.

"That's why we need to change the paradigm of what success means and come together for the greater good of Chinese society," Peng added.

"That's why we need to talk about the science of happiness."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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