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Mental health and meaning: a positive autoethnographic case study of Paul Wong

AQ:1 Paul T.P. Wong and Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky

Abstract

AQ: 3

AQ: 4

Purpose – *The purpose of this study is to meet Professor Paul Wong, PhD, CPsych, Professor Emeritus of Trent University and Trinity Western University. Wong represents an interesting case of how a racial/cultural minority could achieve success in a hostile environment consisting of the systemic biases of injustice, discrimination and marginalization. His life also epitomizes how one can experience the paradoxical truth of healing and flourishing in an upside-down world through the positive suffering mindset (PSM).*

Design/methodology/approach – *This case study is presented in two sections: a positive autoethnography written by Wong, followed by his answers to ten questions. The core methodology of positive autoethnography allows people to understand how Wong's life experience of being a war baby in China, a constant outsider and a lone voice in Western culture, has shaped a very different vision of meaning, positive mental health and global flourishing.*

Findings – *Wong reveals how to live a life of meaning and happiness for all the suffering people in a difficult world. He has researched the positive psychology of suffering for 60 years, from effective coping with stress and searching for meaning to successful aging and positive death. According to Wong's suffering hypothesis and the emerging paradigm of existential positive psychology (Wong, 2021), cultivating a PSM is essential for healing and flourishing in all seasons of life.*

Research limitations/implications – *An expanding literature has been developed to illustrate why the missing link in well-being research is how to transcend and transform suffering into triumph. Wong reveals how this emerging area of research is still not fully embraced by mainstream psychology dominated by the individualistic Euro-American culture, and thus why, in an adversarial milieu, existential positive psychology is limited by its inability to attract more researchers to test out Wong's suffering hypothesis.*

Practical implications – *This study is full of wisdom and helpful tools to enable people to achieve mature happiness and existential well-being even when they have a very painful past, a very difficult present and a bleak future.*

Social implications – *This autoethnographic case study offers new grounds for hope for all those who are injured by life, marginalized by systemic biases or tormented by chronic illnesses and disorders. It also provides a road map for a better world with more decent human beings who dare to stand up for justice, integrity and compassion.*

Originality/value – *Meaning as reflected in suffering is according to Wong the most powerful force to bring out either the worst or the best in people. The new science of suffering shows us how the authors can achieve positive transformation through cultivating a PSM, no matter how harsh one's fate may be.*

Keywords *Meaning, Suffering, Resilience, Positive suffering mindset, Mental health, Autoethnography, Positive autoethnography*

Paper type *Case study*

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AQ:2

Introduction

This positive autoethnography is a case study of Professor Paul Wong, Professor Emeritus at Trent University and President of the International Network on Personal Meaning. Positive

autoethnography (Gonot-Schoupinsky *et al.*, 2023) draws on positive reflexivity and positive psychology (Gonot-Schoupinsky *et al.*, 2024) to reflect on and narrate topics of interest. Previous positive autoethnographic case studies have focused on positive aging (Shaffer and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2024), leadership (Mayer and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2024), forgiveness (Worthington and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2024) and positive introversion (Weeks and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2024).

Wong's enormous contribution to positive psychology is remarkable. As a racial/cultural minority, he has had to fight systemic biases of injustice, discrimination and marginalization (Wong, 2020a), motivating his search for meaning. Wong's new paradigm of existential positive psychology (PP 2.0) has the power to transform research and interventions in positive psychology and positive mental health when optimal conceptual theory (OCT) (Myers *et al.*, 2018) and the positive suffering mindset (PSM) are embraced by mainstream psychology. According to Wong's suffering hypothesis (Wong and Laird, 2024) and the emerging paradigm of existential positive psychology (Wong *et al.*, 2022), cultivating a PSM is essential for healing and flourishing in all seasons of life. But let us now turn to Wong himself to hear more.

AQ: 5

Paul Wong's story

Introducing myself

As Professor Emeritus at Trent University and President of the International Network on Personal Meaning, I am recognized as a pioneer in the existential positive psychology of achieving well-being through positive transformations in a world full of suffering (Wong, 2023a). I use the method of positive autoethnography (Gonot-Schoupinsky *et al.*, 2023) to share highlights of my fascinating life and academic contributions in a world dominated by WEIRD samples (Wong and Cowden, 2022). This paper shows how I heroically struggle to realize my dream of a better life and better world in spite of all my hardships, rejections and obstacles. The saga of my life and achievements can be found in my autobiography (Wong, 2019a) and my Festschrift (L. C. J. Wong, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). My latest book is *A Second-Wave Positive Psychology in Counselling Psychology: A Paradigm Shift* (Wong, 2023b). My latest publication is "A new science of suffering, the wisdom of the soul, and the new behavioral economics of happiness: towards a general theory of well-being" (Wong *et al.*, 2023). I have authored more than 300 papers and eight books.

The recurring leitmotif of all my publications is that life may be full of injustice, suffering and evil (Wong, 2020c), but there are always ways of overcoming and positively transforming suffering through the hero's journey and faith in divine grace (see my current course on "Unlock the Transforming Power of Suffering"; Wong, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). My view is contrary to the alternative way of reacting to suffering with bitterness, resentment and anger, a downward spiral that may lead to anxiety, depression, addiction, aggression and suicide.

Childhood

Among billions of families in China, fate placed me in the Wong family. Even though I cannot take credit for my birth, I can at least express gratitude for my family and my lineage, which have provided a solid foundation to build my life upon. I was born in 1937 in Tianjin, the year of the Nanking Massacre (Chang, 2012). I am culturally rooted in China, a land beset by wars and revolts in the past 100 years. This cultural difference probably accounts for most of my disagreement with the positive psychology launched by Martin Seligman. As a child, I watched helplessly as Japanese soldiers and Chinese traitors forced my family and me out of our residence at gunpoint. As a teen, I witnessed how Chinese communists seized all the properties accumulated by my father as a self-made business man. In my adulthood, I see

again and again that might mean right, and how the rich and powerful enjoy all the privileges even in communist China.

About my parents

I dare say that very few people have lived as fully, passionately and productively as my father. Very few people could survive the highs and lows of his life without his resilience. I am most grateful to my father for teaching me, by example, many important lessons of resilience. Even though he had gone bankrupt more than once, his life was very successful in terms of possessions, positions and the achievements of all his children. He had suffered a lot but was still able to enjoy all the fine things money could buy and indulge in all his sexual fantasies. Ironically, after living vicariously through his dream and observing the shallowness of his life and that of his rich friends, I developed an allergic reaction to the mindless pursuit of personal success and happiness. Even in my primary school, I knew intuitively that there was something missing in my father's life. At that time, I did not have the vocabulary for or even the concept of "meaningful life," I just knew that life was more than money and happiness. I had a very different concept of living a good life – it is a life of serving humanity and glorifying God. It is a life of pursuing virtues or goodness that enables people to rise above the deadly traps of materialism, inordinate carnal pleasures and egotism. In short, my life orientation was determined at a very early age by not wanting to live like my father, who was ruined by his insatiable desires for money and women. Do not get me wrong: my father was not a person totally devoid of virtues. I have to give him credit for practicing the Confucius virtue of filial piety and caring for all the members of our Wong clan.

According to my mother, father was a loving and respectful son all his life. Even when he was married and with children, he still handed over to his father all his earnings according to the traditional feudal system. He did so dutifully and willingly. In return, my grandfather would give him a small allowance each month. My mother had only an elementary school education, yet she was a capable transmitter of our family history and cultural values. She was stern in teaching her children, yet we all know that she loved each one of us more than her own life. She was tormented by her father's infidelity, yet she forgave him totally and refused to divorce him. She never held a paid job, yet she was able to keep the family together through turbulent times and kept all her children on track. All her children loved and admired her unconditionally because they all knew how she sacrificed herself for them. It is her selfless love that held the family together. In 1948, my father made a last-minute decision to move to Hong Kong before Tianjin fell into the hands of the People's Liberation Army. As an 11-year-old boy, I was caught up in both the excitement of moving to Hong Kong and the fear of an uncertain future.

After my older brother fought off a rebellious young servant who tried to use violence to prevent us from leaving with our luggage, we were able to board the last ship leaving Tianjin. My father had to pay the crewmen gold for yielding their own berths to us. In a big family with seven siblings, as a middle child, I had to be good to get any attention. My childhood memories were rather pleasant, except for my various health problems, the frequent siren sounds, sibling rivalries, parental conflicts and the traumatic experience of being forced out of our own house by the Japanese. My happy memories were almost associated with my successes and special favors from all my teachers. In my old age, a throbbing pain still pierces my heart because I feel like an exile without a homeland, a prophet without recognition from his country, and a lone voice in the wilderness. Does anyone hear my soul's cry? Will anyone discover my footprints on the sand?

Young adult and early career

Thanks to my Christian education in Christian schools (St. Stephen Boys School and Pui-Ching Middle School in Hong Kong), I became a Christian and dedicated my life to serving God. However, my experience of Christian ministry was mainly painful. All the spiritual abuse I have

witnessed compelled me to search for servant leadership modeled after Christ and true spirituality of worshipping God in truth and spirit beyond the organized institutional church. As a result, I have learned that true Christian spirituality is based on the promise of paradox (Palmer, 2008), such as the Sermon on the Mount taught by Jesus according to Luke (Figure 1).

F1

In an upside-down world, true happiness can only be found in paradoxical truth – living through dying, winning through losing and happiness through suffering. Jesus promised that all those who suffer for righteousness's sake would be blessed. Clearly, he was talking about a different kind of happiness – you would feel favored by God if you dare to follow Jesus Christ and suffer persecution. Your joy comes from the creator of life and the source of all blessings; it also comes from within you for remaining true to your core values and mission. The paradox of suffering is based on the same dialectical principle. All the powerful forces against you will only make you work harder, reach higher and search deeper to persevere and find a way to fulfill God's purpose for you. Most of my creative ideas have come from my darkest moments (Wong, 2019b).

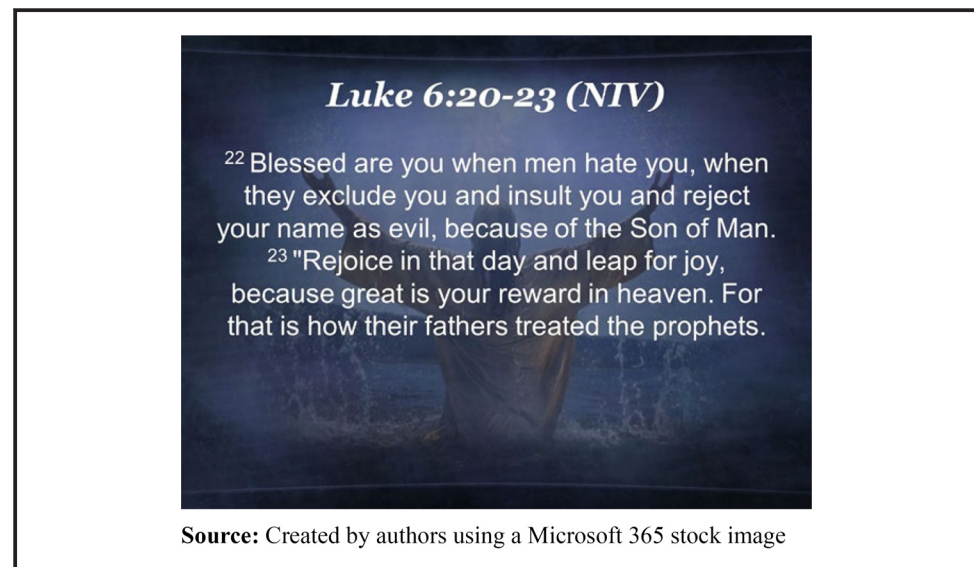
Family life and academia. As a war baby growing up in war-torn China, I learned even as a child that life was a constant battle. My parents believed that endurance of suffering and higher education was essential to living a good life. It is not surprising that my lifelong research revolves around the positive psychology of suffering (Wong, 2019b). It is also natural that all the members of my family have advanced degrees. My wife, Lillian C.J. Wong, PhD (UBC), is a school psychologist and a registered psychotherapist. Our first son, Austin, M.A. (Queen's), J.D. (U of T), is an entertainment lawyer and movie producer; he is Head of Legal and Business affairs at Wattpad WEBTOON Studios. Our younger son, Wesley, PhD, in Biophysics (Harvard), is an Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School in the Departments of Biological Chemistry, Molecular Pharmacology and Pediatrics.

Ever since my childhood in China, I have been obsessed with two questions:

- Q1. Why do bad people prosper and good people suffer? And
- Q2. How can we find happiness when life is so hard and unfair?

What prompted these questions was personal suffering rather than philosophical curiosity. Many years ago, I wrote an article entitled "What is the ancient Chinese secret to resilience and happiness?" (Wong, 2008). I had the following observations:

Figure 1 Sermon on the Mount according to Luke



The hegemony of American psychology will hinder the discovery of universal principles and cultural specifics in positive psychology. Integration between Eastern and Western perspectives of PP would be a good start towards internalizing PP (Snyder and Lopez, 2007). The positive psychology as advocated by Martin Seligman and associates (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder and Lopez, 2005) is the product of American culture with its ideology of liberal democracy, positive expectations and individualistic values; it is best for a time of peace and prosperity [. . .].

Being a Chinese means at least three things: descendants of the Chinese race, bearers of the burdens of Chinese history, and recipients of some fundamental Chinese cultural beliefs stemming from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These are the three common elements shared by Chinese people everywhere.

I can understand why a psychology nurtured by Chinese culture might sound strange to my American friends. That is why I have championed a global positive psychology based on the universal principles of human existence and cultural specifics of the good life according to indigenous psychology (Wong, 2023a; Wong, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). That is why every cell of my body cried out against the simplistic Pollyannaish view of American PP as something foreign. From the depth of my soul, I instinctively recoiled from its promise of easy happiness because it was totally against all my life experiences and understanding of the world I live in. That is why I have spent many years of lonely struggles in developing a balanced interactive model of the good life called PP 2.0 (Wong, 2012a). This is the real story of the reluctant origin of PP 2.0, also known as existential positive psychology. PP has evolved since the early days, but its conceptual framework has remained the same – it is still dominated by positivist epistemology, individualist materialist cultural values and a one-sided focus on positivity.

It would be amiss if I did not mention that over the years, I have become friends with numerous positive psychologists such as Chris Peterson, Bob Emmons, Todd Kashdan and Michael Steger. Notably among them were Tim Lomas and Itai Ivtzan, who invited me to speak at the University of East London (2015) on PP 2.0 and in their symposium on the same topic at the conference of International Positive Psychology Association 2015 in Florida. The main proposition of PP 2.0 is still that we need to fully integrate the suffering and evil inherent in human condition with our aspirations for meaning and flourishing. A complete science of human flourishing can only be built from the depths of human suffering and the heights of spiritual aspirations.

Academic contribution. My professional contributions include serving on the Biological/Psychological Review Panel of the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Advisory Council on Aging for the Government of Canada. I am also the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology* and orchestrated the Biennial International Meaning Conferences for 20 years (INPM, 2021).

From my early research on the animal model of positive psychology (Wong, 2019c) to my recent research on self-transcendence (Wong and Mayer *et al.*, 2021), my main contribution to quality-of-life research is the new science of how to transform the positive potential of suffering into global flourishing (Wong, 2023b). My entire life is a testimony to the validity of PP 2.0, just as Viktor Frankl's experience in Nazi death camps was a testimony to the validity of logotherapy. My autobiography (Wong, 2019a) documents how I heroically shifted the direction of the Titanic because I could clearly see that it was heading toward disaster while people on board were still dancing to happy music. All of human history, literature and religions attest to the fundamental fact that life is suffering, just as all of medical research attests to the fact that life is full of viruses, bacteria and toxins. Evil is the virus that has infected every aspect of life. If we ignore it, it will eventually destroy us as individuals and as a species.

From the perspective of PP2.0, a complete science of well-being necessarily involves researching the interactive process of building what is good and healthy (Yang) and working with what is bad and painful (Yin). A one-sided approach, whether positive (positive psychology) or negative (clinical psychology), can never result in authentic happiness and sustainable well-being. In spite of marginalization and opposition, I still enjoy grassroots support from all over the globe as attested by [Google Scholar \(2024\)](#).

Life after academia. I have never fully retired. I have never stopped lecturing around the globe and getting my articles and book chapters published, as attested by my CV ([Wong, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d](#)). Week after week, I remain the most read scholar either in the Psychology Department of Trent University or the entire university itself according to ResearchGate. Even though my health is failing, and I suffer from aches and pains constantly, I still work long hours and develop new theories (e.g. [Wong, 2023c](#)). I am actually enjoying my most productive years. In many ways, I am having a second childhood. Free from any obligatory work and financial worries, I have the luxury of sleeping in and doing as much or as little as I wish. Indeed, the best way to live your life is to do so as if you are being given a second chance to start your 18 years again, after you have learned all the lessons at the age of 80. The truth is, I have grown old even without realizing how I got here, except for the annual reminder of the calendar year. But I still feel young at heart, and my mind remains clear and creative. I can still work long hours to the point where I have been lovingly called “insane” by my brother and close friends for working so hard.

I feel profoundly grateful and lucky. I could not have done it by myself. It may sound pious and preachy, but truly it was God who has been my refuge and strength during my most turbulent years. My wife Lilian, with whom I have been married for almost 60 years, has taken good care of me and my family and friends continue to be an important source of support. Indeed, there is life after retirement. There is still a lot of life left in the 80s or even 90s, as long as we have good health, good relationships, meaningful engagement and faith in God’s grace.

Ten questions posed to Wong by Gonot-Schoupinsky

1. *What are your top tips for mental health?*

Here are the three most important pillars for mental health:

1. Assume personal responsibility as an instrumental and ethical agent to live meaningfully.
2. Consider yourself as a relational or social being with basic needs for belonging, connections and caring for others.
3. We all have a soul with a spiritual hunger for union with God and with nature.

We will enjoy mental health to the extent that we meet the three basic needs for agency, community and spirituality. It took me a long time to discover this fundamental truth ([Wong, 2019d](#)). The spiritual dimension is just as important as agency and community; we ignore it at our own peril. Research has shown that illness can be viewed as a spiritual phenomenon according to Dame Cicely Saunders’ ground-breaking concept of total suffering as comprising physical, emotional, social and spiritual sources of pain ([Balboni and Balboni, 2018](#)). By the same token, we can also have total well-being, which includes the spiritual-existential source of well-being ([Wong, 2023a](#)). This is the leitmotif according to my understanding of mental health and well-being.

2. *What is a resilient mindset, and why is it so important for mental health?*

Do not look at the world through either a positive or negative lens. A clear lens serves you best. You need to embrace life as it really is, with both bright and dark sides, before you can transcend and transform it. The first building block of positive mental health is the five overlapping mindsets or attitudes:

1. The mindful mindset sees things as they are – the reality principle.
 2. The meaning mindset sees the true meaning and purpose of each situation – the demand of the situation.
 3. The dialectical mindset sees the balance between opposites – the appropriate response.
- F2 4. The resilient mindset, as shown in [Figure 2](#).
- F3 5. The growth mindset – by going deeper and deep as illustrated by [Figure 3](#).

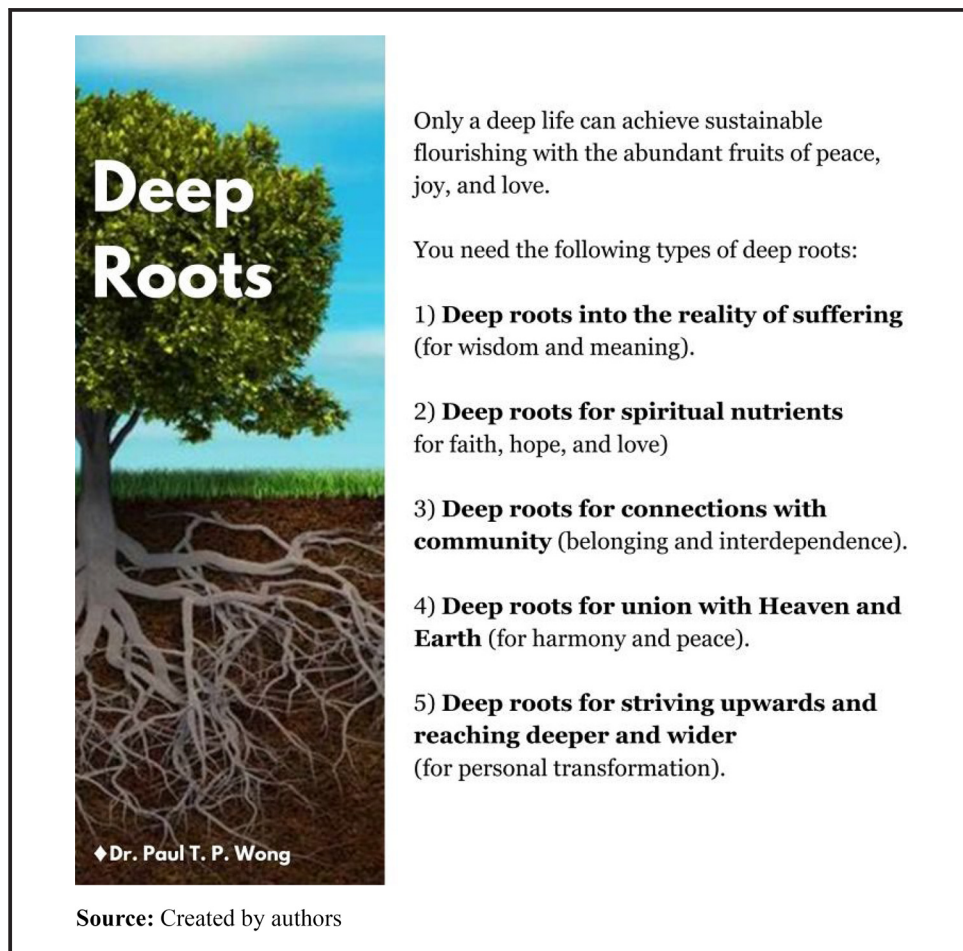
These five mindsets enable us to act and react purposefully and wisely; they are needed for every human being who seeks healing and flourishing.

3. You have written about existential meaning – what do you mean by this?

In my six-decades search for the Holy Grail of true happiness and meaning in life, I have gone through the deepest dark valleys and scaled the highest mountains. I have researched every arena of human struggles, from coping with frustration, stress and cancer to coping with aging and living in the dark shadow of death and dying. I have also tried to bridge the cultural gap between the East and the West. At long last, I have found the missing piece of well-being research: existential well-being. This is the kind of well-being, based on the optimal meaning in life, that one could achieve in the context of human existence with all its suffering and opportunities; that is why this optimal meaning can also be referred to as existential meaning. The process of experiencing existential meaning involves navigating the dialectical interactions between opposites, or Yin and Yang, aspects of life and finding an optimal balance between suffering and happiness, despair and hope. When one is in harmony with one's self, one will be able to live in harmony with

Figure 2 Resilient mindset



Figure 3 Growth mindset

others and with Heaven and Earth, resulting in mature happiness of balance, harmony and equanimity in all seasons of life. The wholistic nature of existential well-being is illustrated in [Figure 4](#).

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4. Can you describe the seven principles of self-transcendence

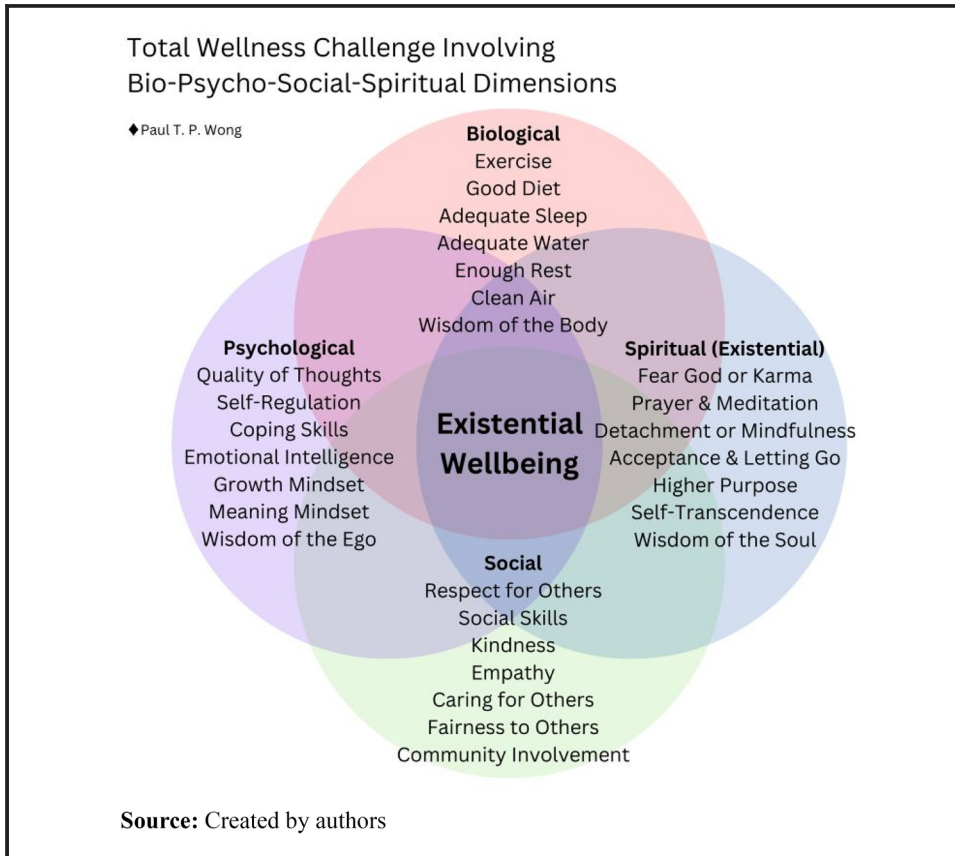
According to [Wong et al. \(2021\)](#), self-transcendence remains one of the main themes in the new science of suffering because it has the dual function of transcending personal/external limitations as well as connecting with God and Humanity (or Heaven and Earth) for strength and a sense of significance. That is how we are able to transcend and transform suffering into sustainable well-being. The seven principles of self-transcendence, according to [Wong \(2022\)](#), are shown in [Figure 5](#).

F5

a) accept life as it is with gratitude. Accepting life as it is rather than one's own illusions or unrealistic expectations is an effective antidote to the human tendency of avoidance.

b) believe in creating a better future with help from God or providence. "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." – Hebrews 11:1.

Hope is like oxygen. We need to have hope for a better future to move forward. More importantly, we need tragic optimism ([Leung et al., 2021](#); [Wong, 2009](#)) even in situations which seem hopeless from the human point of view.

Figure 4 Wholistic nature of existential well-being

c) commit to worthy goals and a life purpose. Frankl (1946/1985) makes love the central point of meaning and purpose because at the end of your life, you will find your life meaningful, not by how much money you have made, but by how much value you have created for others through your kindness, love and compassion:

d) discover the hidden treasures by digging deeper. The most precious things in life are on the other side of fear. If you dig deep enough and search wide enough, you will always find a way out or get what you are looking for.

e) enjoy inner peace and harmony. Mature happiness is based on being attuned with the self, with others and with God, resulting in inner peace and harmony (Wong, 2014a, 2020b).

f) love others as yourself. This is an overall life attitude of benevolence or caring for others as caring for oneself. This balanced attitude can reduce conflicts between egos and promote world peace. To extend this idea further, all life is sacred.

g) do no harm – fear god and obey his commandments. “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” – Ecclesiastes 12:13.

The fear of God or a Higher Power is a needed to remind us of our boundaries and our need to fear the consequences of harming ourselves or others by going beyond our boundaries. We need to act as if God exists (i.e. God watches us and holds us accountable).

Figure 5 Seven principles of self-transcendence (from Wong, 2022)

THE 7 PRINCIPLES OF SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

◆ DR. PAUL T. P. WONG

The first five principles are proven strategies of overcoming and transcending suffering...

1. Accept life as it is with gratitude.
2. Believe in creating a better future with help from Providence.
3. Commit to worthy goals and a life purpose.
4. Discover the hidden treasures by digging deeper.
5. Enjoy inner peace and harmony.
6. Love others as yourself.
7. Fear God and obey his commandments.

...The last two principles are the moral foundations of caring and doing no harm.

Source: Created by authors

5. How can we improve our well-being, and are laughter and humor important?

A long time ago, I wrote an essay on Humor and Laughter in Wartime (Wong, 2003). Charlie Chaplin once said that “Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.” There is no greater absurdity than the sacrifice of millions of lives to satisfy the ambition of a few fools. There is no greater grief than to mourn the young men who die horribly for a silly reason. There is no greater tragedy than to repeat the same deadly mistake over and over again without learning from history. The terror and pain are so great that one can only burst out laughing and crying at the same time.

Humor, especially dark humor, can help us cope with bad situations by being detached from it and laughing at the circumstances and at ourselves. In treating anxiety, Viktor Frankl often used a technique called *paradoxical intention*. Basically, Frankl challenged his patients to confront their fear in the worst imaginable situations. In fact, the feared object was so exaggerated that it became ludicrous and laughable rather than arousing anxiety.

Indeed, there is nothing funny about war and suffering, but if we laugh at some aspects of the horrors of war, we regain a new perspective of human existence. Norman Cousins, winner of the Peace Medal from the United Nations for his global peace-making efforts, discovered the magic of laughter. After his diagnosis of ankylosing spondylitis, a life-threatening degenerative disease, he watched comedy videos in his hospital room and literally laughed himself to health. His experience was recorded in his seminal publication *Anatomy of Illness*.

6. *Your faith-hope-love model strikes a chord; can you tell us more?*

After my recent major operation, I developed a new model of spiritual existential well-being (SEW) based on faith, hope and love (Wong, 2023d). This new model can also be described as the pain-brain-culture way of healing and flourishing because the processes involved in solving the problem of pain and existential suffering makes full use of our brain, life experiences and the cultural ideals of faith, hope and love. More specifically, this Faith-Hope-Love model can be summarized as the ABC principles of achieving SEW through awareness of our need for change, belief in achieving a better future with divine providence and commitment to making daily steps of improvement in striving toward a meaningful life goal.

7. *You have written about suffering; why is this concept important within positive psychology?*

For a more extensive discussion of this new science of suffering, please read Wong *et al.* (2021). Nothing can change us like suffering or trauma. Suffering can restore our soul by making us aware of our need to be connected with our spiritual dimension, or spiritual values such as compassion, humility, forgiveness, connections and self-transcendence. This theme has a venerable history in psychology from James (1902/1912)' need of rebirth for the sick soul, Jung's (1949) search for the hidden soul, Frankl (1946/1985)'s unconscious God and McAdams (2013)'s redemptive self.

According to the *Dark Night of the Soul* (Saint John of the Cross, 1577/1959) "God may seem absent in the darkness, but He is always there, silently guiding us towards a greater purpose."

There are two ways to interpret my obsession with suffering: at the superficial level, one may conclude that I must be suffering from spiritual and psychological depression because of my unhealed wounds from all the past traumas. But at a deeper level, one may sense that I am just journeying through the dark night of the soul because I need to be crushed by life to learn how to endure the darkness and see the light in darkness. In other words, my life story is a story of my spiritual struggle in the darkest hours so that I may become more detached from all the things of this world, purified from all my personal failings, and trained to walk in the light of God's love.

8. *How would you describe and define positive aging?*

In a book review (Wong, 2015a), I point out how my view of positive aging is different from the dominant American view. According to MacArthur's Successful Aging project led by J. W. Rowe, positive aging is defined in terms of good physical health and productivity in spite of age. Rowe and Kahn (1997) emphasize physical health, cognitive functioning and active engagement in social and productive activities. Thus, higher well-being is associated with older people who enjoy good physical health and engage in productive activities. In contrast, the Ontario Successful Aging Project conducted by Wong and Reker (Wong, 1998; Reker and Wong, 2012) focuses on elderlies' psycho-social-spiritual adaptation. In summarizing the Ontario Successful Aging Project (Wong, 2014b), I conclude that "successful agers" are able to enjoy higher levels of well-being in spite of deteriorations in various domains of life because they have more spiritual resources (religious activities and meaning making), social resources (social and marital relationships) and psychological resources (intelligence, positive attitude and self-reliance). A high level of life satisfaction is achieved only when seniors use the above resources and apply existential coping strategies of acceptance, meaning making and benefit making.

According to my meaning hypothesis (Wong, 2023a), meaningful living and happiness depend on meeting the needs for faith in God, hope for a meaningful life and love for others. The meaning hypothesis provides a comprehensive framework for positive aging and positive transformation (Wong, 2015b).

9. You have written about faith, can you describe its role in your life?

Now behold, as the LORD promised, He has kept me alive these forty-five years since He spoke this word to Moses, while Israel wandered in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old, still as strong today as I was the day Moses sent me out. As my strength was then, so it is now for war (Joshua 14:10-11).


I think I can say the same thing as Caleb: "I am today eighty-seven years old, still as mentally strong as when I was doing research on the positive psychology of suffering 50 years ago." My mental strength is still strong enough to do battle with all the Goliaths in my life with God's help. All through my career, my faith in Jesus Christ and in all the promises in the Bible has sustained me in many trials and tribulations. I believe that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). The following graphic (Figure 6) illustrates my faith.

F6

10. What are the biggest challenges facing positive psychology research, and how can they be addressed?

All my research in the past 60 years, the recurrent leitmotif is that we can only achieve sustainable well-being and global flourishing through overcoming and transcending suffering. Unfortunately, positive psychology's one-sided focus on what is positive has

Figure 6 Moving mountains



Moving Mountains

The Chinese myth of a foolish old man who tries to remove mountains with a hoe and basket has the most impact on my life and the Chinese people in general.

For me, the appeal of this myth is that we can accomplish the impossible by affirming the power of faith in oneself, in others, in future generations, and in the Creator God.

Yes, "faith can remove mountains"(Matthew 17:20), but a living faith involves action, perseverance, and our ability to inspire others.

But I have not been very successful inspiring others in carrying on my mission of transforming suffering to success and happiness. Is it because of generational differences or because the Chinese myth of a foolish old man is nothing but a myth, which has never worked?

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

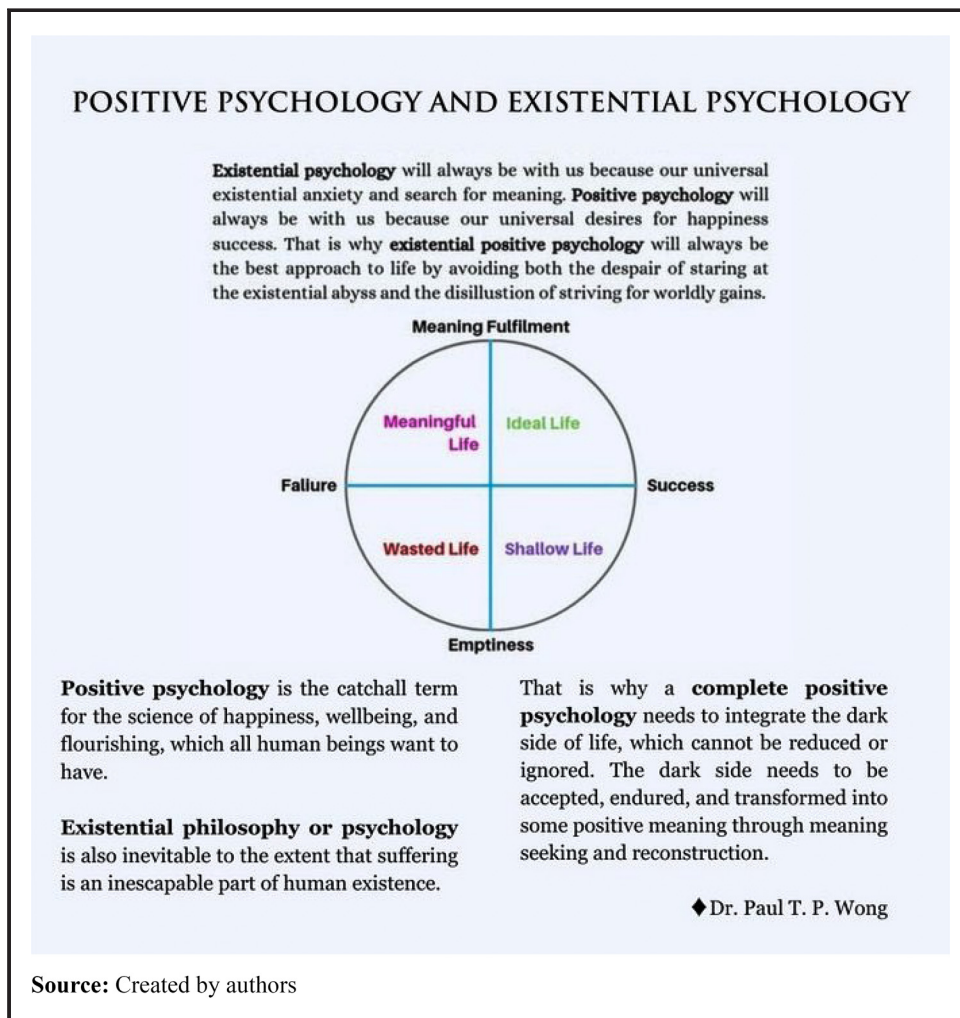
Source: Created by authors

F7 prevented them from doing research of the transforming power of suffering. Figure 7 summarizes the need for existential positive psychology.

The greatest challenge for positive psychology is to test out my suffering hypothesis. More specifically, I challenge the positive psychology community to explore how to cultivate the power of positive suffering. More specifically, they can test out the validity of the PSM through the following mental disciplines:

- The meaning mindset – how to discover the hidden meaning in difficult situations (Wong, 2010).
- The dialectical mindset – how to navigate opposites and discover the optimal balance (Wong, 2012b).
- The resilient mindset – how to endure and transform suffering (Arslan and Wong, 2023).
- The self-transcendent mindset – how to transcend all limitations (Wong, 2016; Wong, 2022).
- The growth mindset – how to grow stronger through going deeper and wider (Wong and Worth, 2017).

Figure 7 Need for existential positive psychology



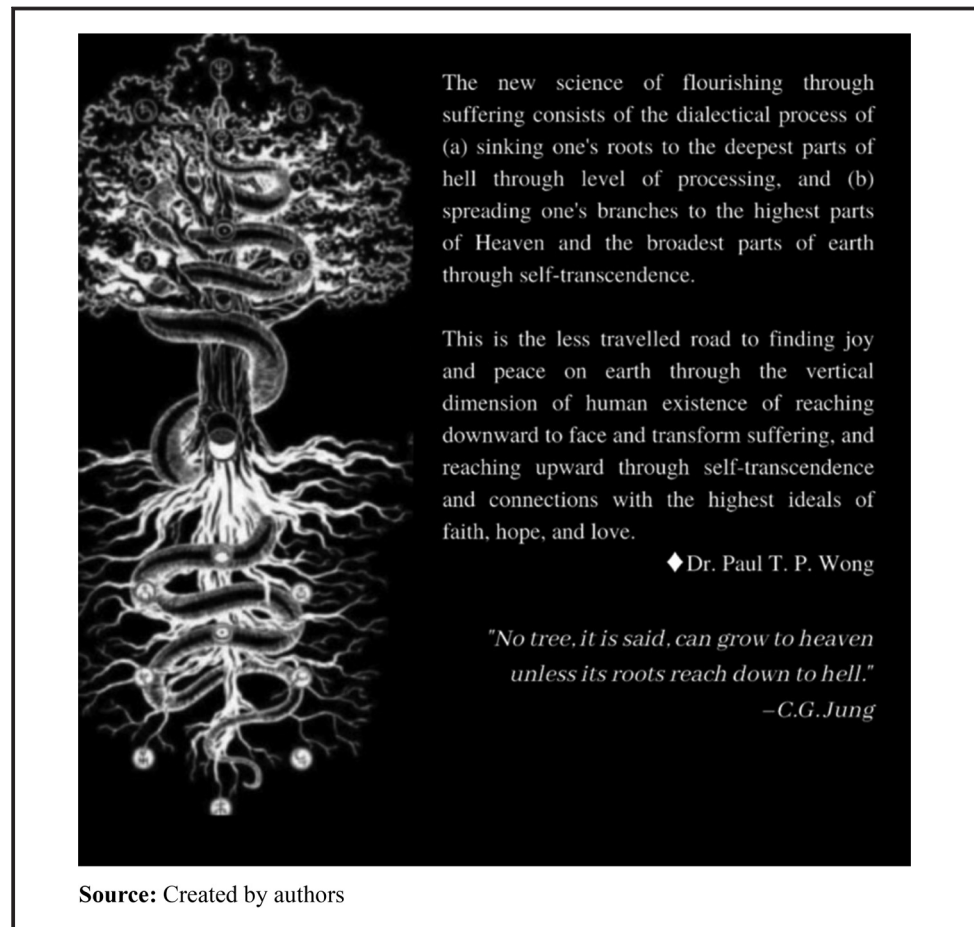
There is nothing more urgent than to integrate East and West by incorporating the Ancient Chinese wisdom into positive psychology (McLeod, 2020; Sharma, 2022). I also believe that Indigenous Asian psychology can model after the OCT of Black psychology. OCT is very similar to my view of existential positive psychology and multicultural psychology. Myers et al. (2018) discuss the challenges in the production of psychological knowledge on sustainable well-being in hostile sociohistorical contexts. OCT is a theory of human development culturally grounded in the wisdom tradition of African deep thought, from ancient civilization to contemporary times. Myers and Speight (2010) emphasize the ethical imperative of innovations in psychological knowledge production beyond the hegemony of Euro-American-centric psychology to one that is congruent with the social and cultural realities of persons of African descent.

I have repeatedly pointed out that suffering is the important missing link within positive psychology or the science of well-being. The turning point is the broad acceptance of the legitimacy of the mission of second-wave positive psychology (PP 2.0), or existential positive psychology, during COVID-19. Here is my latest definition of PP 2.0's mission:

The mission of Existential Positive Psychology or PP 2.0, is to help people see the light and be the light in the darkness. It also seeks to rekindle a spark in all those who have lost all hope and all interest in life. No matter how small my light is, I still hope to rekindle a million candles even in my old age. Together, we are stronger. With God's help, let us all strive to be the light for those in despair and spread true positivity wherever we go. Figure 8 is another way to understand the importance of suffering.

F8

Figure 8 New Science of flourishing through suffering



I have never wavered in my conviction that a positive psychology that does not address the reality of evil and suffering only contributes to our deadly illusion and ignorance, and a positive psychology that does not incorporate indigenous psychology can never discover the universal truths of global flourishing. My prayers and wishes are that a new day will dawn, when all the oppressed and suffering people will stand up and speak with one voice: "We will not be silenced or marginalized by the rich and powerful. We want to build a society based on compassion, respect, and justice rather than money and power. We can fulfill this dream, if we have the courage and vision to support each other in this positive revolution." Three powerful ideas that can transform psychology and society for the betterment of humanity are found in

F9 [Figure 9](#).

Conclusions

In this positive autoethnographic case study we meet Emeritus Professor Paul Wong, who has left an indelible impression on the field of Positive Psychology. Wong recounts his life story using positive autoethnography. We learn how his childhood in China imprinted him and propelled him in his search for and discovery of meaning, and insight into the meaning of suffering. Wong's narration and his answers to ten questions impart rich wisdom, and philosophical, scientific and practical insights on living a meaningful life. Despite the presence of so much suffering in this world, Wong shows us that we can find light in the darkness and balance and harmony, and that furthermore, suffering can even be important for us to fully flourish.

AQ: 6

Figure 9 Three powerful ideas

Here are three powerful ideas that can transform both psychology and society for the betterment of humanity:

1. Polarity—all things in nature exist not as opposite poles on the same dimension but as two complementary and opposite dimensions.
2. Transcendence—the creative force or tension holds the opposites together.
3. Balance and Harmony—Inner peace and wellbeing result from navigating a balance between opposites.

The **Self-transcendence paradigm**, based on the above three inter-related tenets, charts a new path towards global wellbeing, world peace, and individual flourishing even in turbulent times.

♦ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

"In the self good and evil are indeed closer than identical twins!"
— Carl Jung, *CW 12, Para 24*

Source: Created by authors

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