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Life satisfaction in urbanizing China: The effect of city size and pathways to urban residency

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ABSTRACT

Although Durkheim, Simmel, and other early social theorists posited causal links between urban life and individual despair or distrust, most contemporary analyses of subjective well-being attribute variations primarily to individual characteristics. However, China's recent warp-speed urbanization requires a more dynamic and multi-level analysis that simultaneously models individual and geographic attributes. Using a representative survey conducted in 2011 of adults living in urban China, we find that, while age, marital status, and household wealth have an impact on life satisfaction, the characteristics of the surrounding county or city district, the size of the city, as well as the route by which an individual became an urban resident, often have an independent impact. Our results indicate that after controlling for individual socio-demographic characteristics, health status, and household wealth, the new urbanites (rural-to-urban migrants and *in situ* urbanized rural residents) who settle in cities with urban populations between 200,000 and 500,000 are more satisfied with their lives than those who settle in either larger or smaller cities. We argue that in China, where urban centers vary greatly in size, research on individual life satisfaction should factor in the characteristics of the urban location and the means by which individuals become urban residents. Our work suggests a new research and policy direction for small cities undergoing urbanization and their future trends.

1. Introduction

To date, research in wealthy economies shows that living in very dense cities lowers both the affective and cognitive dimensions of subjective well-being (Morrison, 2011). For example, in a study of American cities between 1972 and 2008, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011) found the lowest levels of happiness in large central cities and the highest levels in the small-town rural periphery. Morrison (2007, 2011) surveying 12 areas in New Zealand in 2004 similarly found that the growth of the most populous cities is associated with a decrease in the residents' subjective appreciation of quality of life, even after controlling for individual characteristics. Brereton, Clinch, and Ferreira (2008) study of subjective well-being in Ireland, using GIS-based techniques to explore the impact of local factors, found that residents of Dublin had lower life satisfaction scores than country dwellers. Empirical evidence from economically less-developed countries, however, reveals the opposite pattern: subjective well-being is highest in urban areas (Veenhoven, 1994; Veenhoven & Ehrhardt, 1995). Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn's (2009) analysis of World Values Survey (WVS) data for 81 countries between 1995 and 2004 shows that in many parts of Asia undergoing particularly rapid urbanization, life satisfaction is consistently highest in big cities.

Yet, with the exception of geographers, few scholars have systematically developed models and theories that attempt to look at the interaction of geographic variation and individual attributes when examining subjective well-being (Bian, Zhang, Yang, Guo, & Lei, 2015; Diener, 2000; Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Layard, 2010; McGillivray & Clarke, 2006; Qiu & Li, 2012; van Hoorn, 2008). And when scholarship does add in the larger context, they favor the impact of economic development as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (e.g., Easterlin, 2013; Easterlin, McVey, Swite, Sawangfa, & Zweig, 2010; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008; Veenhoven & Vergunst, 2013).

To address both the conflicting findings in developed Western economies and rapidly developing Asia and the challenge of

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integrating characteristics of a city and attributes of residents, our project uses a representative sample of adults residing in urban China to document how characteristics of the city of residence may increase or lessen the impact of individual variables on life satisfaction after controlling for variation in individual socio-demographic characteristics, health status, and household wealth. Before presenting our results, however, we outline how our study of Chinese urbanites relates to the broader literature on subjective well-being and provide a brief overview of the somewhat distinctive Chinese urbanization process where urbanization has been "urbanization of place" as much as "urbanization of people." We then describe our sample and core variables, and discuss our findings in some detail before summarizing our argument.

1.1. Subjective well-being (SWB)

The literature on subjective well-being (SWB) is contentious. Some herald a new "science of happiness" (Ballas, 2013), with enormous potential to guide government policy (Layard, 2010; McGillivray & Clarke, 2006; van Hoorn, 2008). For others, SWB is an abroad category of both emotional and evaluative phenomenon that defy easy measurement (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), and some even question its value, arguing that it is too adaptive or distorted to capture any underlying construct (Jordan, 2008; Scott, 2012). We do not intend to enter into these debates but employ the generally accepted focus on a global cognitive assessment of life satisfaction which scholars such as Appleton and Song (2008) and Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2015) have used and validated.

We also would like to emphasize how the choice of words that is used in Chinese makes a difference to what elements of subjective well-being the respondent may be evaluating. In English language research on SWB, "happiness" and "life satisfaction" (*xingfu* and *manyi* in Chinese) are often used interchangeable. In fact, the two terms are not identical and also are not identical in English and Chinese. In English, "life satisfaction" refers to an overall evaluation of one's life and has a much wider scope than "happiness" (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). The relationship between the two terms, however, is reversed in Chinese. That is, happiness when translated as x*ingfu* is closest to an overall evaluation of one's life especially in terms of interpersonal relationships, whereas life satisfaction when translated as *manyi* invokes concern with relative standard of living or material comforts (Hsu & Zhang, 2014). Since we are primarily focused on the impact of economic development and urbanization, our dependent variable for operationalizing life satisfaction, uses a response to the question "Are you satisfied (*manyi*) with your current life?" rather than "How happy (*xingfu*) are you now?" Then using responses to this single question, we argue for the importance, even necessity, of incorporating analysis of the characteristics of the surrounding county or city district, the size of the city, as well as the route by which an individual became an urban resident, in research on SWB particularly in the urbanizing context of China.

1.2. Urbanization in China

In 2011, for the first time in Chinese history, the majority of the population lived in towns and cities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012a). The speed and scale of population migration and city expansion in China is without precedent in human history. In 1978, 17.92% of the population lived in urban areas; by 2013, the percentage had risen to 53.73 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014). Between 1978 and 2010, the total number of cities increased from 193 to 659, among which the number of megacities increased from 2 to 16, large cities from 27 to 124, medium–sized cities from 35 to 138, and small cities from 129 to 380. The number of towns leapt from 2173 to 19,410 (Central Committee of the Communist Party and State Council of China, 2014).

Driving this massive demographic shift was the migration of over 200 million rural residents who left their home villages to start new lives in cities as migrant labor (Chan, 2013; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012b). Equally momentous was the incorporation of former villages into new urban districts (Lin, 2007). Between 1981 and 1999, the annual expansion of urban areas averaged 800 km^2/annum. After 2000, the growth rate more than doubled to 1700 km^2/annum. By 2011, urban space was almost six times that of 1981 (Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development of China, 2012; Yeh, Xu, & Liu, 2011) and more than 200 million villagers became urbanites without ever having left their hometown (Friedmann, 2005; Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010). Thus the urbanization in China is the result of two distinct and somewhat independent transformations. On one hand, there is the pattern of cities and towns growing because people leave their villages and move to urban centers. On the other, there is the phenomenon of *in situ* urbanization, where villagers become urban residents not because they decided to try their luck in the city but because their land was reclassified as urban. Rather than go to the city, the city came to them.

Another government policy that has had a crucial effect on the conditions of urban life in China is the household registration (*hukou*) system, which was introduced in the 1950s to guarantee social stability and to balance an agricultural surplus with urban industrialization (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Solinger, 1999). Through the *hukou* system, each Chinese citizen is categorized as either rural or urban. Those who live in villages and on farms are responsible for growing their own food and for delivering a set amount of grain to the state at state prices. When the *hukou* system was introduced, villagers were not allowed to leave their village unless it was to marry another rural person, to join the army, or to attend college. Before the 1980s, the approximately 20% of the population who lived in urban areas were paid cash salaries, and qualified for subsidized food, housing, and medical care. If they wished to change residence, they were required to seek the approval of the local police station.

In the 1980s, the most rigid constraints on movement were lifted. If rural residents could feed themselves with products grown in their village, they could leave to find other types of employment. Millions left at once for jobs in construction and peddling. When food rationing eventually ended in 1993 and the new factory jobs opened in coastal export zones, the number of people leaving their home villages soared. However, because the urbanization process in China is still very much "urbanization of place" rather than "urbanization of people", the overwhelming majority of these new urbanites still are officially registered as rural *hukou* holders. Even though they live in towns and cities, they are denied most of the subsidies and protections that urban *hukou* residents have been granted since the early 1950s. For this reason, we add an additional element to our analysis: the pathway to urban residency. Did the respondents move from a village to the city (rural-to-urban migrants)? Or, did the city come to them (*in situ* urbanized rural residents)? The reference group is established urban residents (urban *hukou* residents).

In November 2014, the State Council of China issued the Circular on Adjusting the Criteria for the Classification of City Sizes (State Council [2014] No. 51) in which the original criteria for classification were adjusted and new criteria introduced. Henceforth, cities may be divided into five classes and seven grades ranging from Type II small cities with populations below 200,000 to megacity behemoths with populations over 10 million (see Table 1). We have adopted a simplified version of the new classifications in our analysis: cities with less than 200,000 urban residents (Type II small cities), cities with more than 200,000 but