



# Explaining the subjective well-being of urban and rural Chinese: Income, personal concerns, and societal evaluations



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 26 April 2013  
Revised 6 June 2014  
Accepted 8 August 2014  
Available online 18 August 2014

### Keywords:

Subjective well-being  
Income  
Personal concerns  
Societal evaluations  
Contextualization  
China

## ABSTRACT

This study makes an integrated investigation of how subjective well-being is associated with income, personal concerns, and societal evaluations and how these social and psychological correlates of subjective well-being are contextualized within a country. Data used for the empirical analysis come from a nationally representative sample survey conducted in China in 2009. It is found that subjective well-being is independently linked to income, personal concerns, and societal evaluations. Comparisons of urban and rural Chinese further reveal that income, structural attributions of inequality, and evaluations of governance are related to subjective well-being among both groups. Nevertheless, different sets of other evaluative correlates of subjective well-being between urban and rural people stand out, which is conjectured to be related to the long-time institutional, economic, and social segmentation of the two groups. This study has contributed to both the subjective well-being theories and the understanding of the consequences of social inequality.

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## 1. Introduction

Subjective well-being has received an increasing scholarly interest in the past several decades (Easterlin, 1974, 2001; Diener, 1984; Kahneman et al., 2003; Eid and Larsen, 2008; Veenhoven, 2008). Subjective well-being reflects individuals' satisfaction with their life, indicates "the quality of the social system in which they live" (Veenhoven, 2008, p. 11), and predicts many life outcomes such as longevity, health, income, and social skills (Danner et al., 2001; Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Recognizing its importance, the United Nations Development Programme has adopted subjective well-being as a crucial component of quality of life in its Human Development Report (UNDP, 2010).

Social scientists have found that subjective well-being is associated with income (Diener et al., 1999; Helliwell and Wang, 2012; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008), social psychological mechanisms including social comparisons and life goal orientations (Diener and Lucas, 2000; Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996; Michalos, 1985), and the macro context of living such as income inequality (Alesina et al., 2004; Oshio and Kobayashi, 2011), effectiveness of governance (Bjørnskov et al., 2007; Ott, 2010), and social capital (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004; Helliwell and Wang, 2011; Helliwell et al., 2013; Ram, 2010; Winkelmann, 2009). While being inspiring, the existing explanations of subjective well-being have a few limitations: First, the effects of income, personal concerns, and the macro context of living are usually examined in discrete studies rather than simultaneously. Second, the inquiry of the influence of the macro context such as income inequality and effectiveness of governance predominantly uses objective measures such as the Gini coefficient, government size, and quality of public services (Bjørnskov et al., 2007; Oshio and Kobayashi, 2011; Ott, 2010), but seldom tests the importance of subjective evaluations of the macro context (Kim and Kim, 2012). Third, research on the contextualization of the correlates of subjective well-being,

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such as income and values, primarily focuses on cross-national differences (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002; Inglehart and Rabier, 1986) and is yet to be extended inside a society marked by systematic economic and social stratification.

This study attempts to address those limitations. It examines how income, personal concerns, and evaluations of social circumstances are related to subjective well-being *simultaneously* and whether and how those correlates vary between systematically segmented social groups, using data from a nationally representative sample survey in China. China is a particularly suitable setting for addressing our research questions given the dramatic transformation it has experienced over the last three decades. It has witnessed impressive economic growth, drastic expansion of inequality, widespread internalization of consumerism, growing tension between the state and society, and prevailing of individualism and atomization over the collectivist-oriented social fabric. Those dynamic developments make China a pertinent case to examine how money and multi-faceted evaluations of individual and social circumstances bear on subjective well-being. Furthermore, there have been sweeping disparities in income, standards of living, social welfare, outlooks on life, and values between urban and rural Chinese, which are larger than what have been found in many developing countries and developed countries during industrialization (Knight, 2008; Whyte, 1995). The sharp urban–rural inequality makes China theoretically relevant to study whether and how the correlates of subjective well-being are contextualized across systematically divided groups within a country.

Empirical research on subjective well-being in China using national data is emerging but scarce. Appleton and Song (2008) find that income and satisfaction with economic growth and low inflation contribute to overall life satisfaction among urban Chinese. Knight et al. (2009) discover that happiness is weakly affected by income but highly sensitive to the subjective relative position of one's household's income in the village, perceived importance of personal relationships, and the degree of personal materialism in rural China. Studies that directly compare the correlates of subjective well-being between urban and rural Chinese are even rarer. Among them, Knight and Gunatilaka (2010) reveal that happiness is significantly related to income and social comparisons in both urban and rural China and to perceived extent of fairness of income distribution in the city. Han (2012b) finds that livelihood satisfaction is significantly associated with social comparisons among both urban and rural residents and with material aspirations only among urbanites. Brockmann et al. (2009) discover that relative deprivation measured by financial dissatisfaction plays a robust role in life satisfaction among both groups and that political disaffection matters only among urban people. While these findings are informative, different measures of subjective well-being are used and varying sets of predictive variables are examined across studies. It is unclear how the patterns of the subjective well-being for urban and rural Chinese look like when the associations with income, personal concerns, and societal evaluations are simultaneously scrutinized in one study.

In sum, this study makes a comprehensive investigation of how subjective well-being is related to income, personal concerns, and societal evaluations, factors that have been either discretely or rarely examined in previous research. It pays particular attention to the contextualization of those correlates of subjective well-being within a country through comparison of urban and rural Chinese.

## 2. Income, personal concerns, and subjective well-being

Existent social science literature attributes subjective well-being to an array of social and psychological factors. Income has shown a positive association (Diener et al., 1999). Recent studies at the individual level further elaborate that the income effect varies by different measures of subjective well-being. Specifically, income is more closely and steadily correlated with cognitive evaluations of life, while its effect on the emotional report of feelings is often smaller and may flat at a threshold (Helliwell and Wang, 2012; Kahneman and Deaton, 2010). Findings at the aggregate level are mixed. Easterlin (1974) finds that increases in national income over time do not generate increases in national average happiness, while Stevenson and Wolfers (2008) discover robust links between economic growth and increase in overall subjective well-being with data from more countries.

Other explanations than income have been provided for subjective well-being. Social comparison theorists argue that feelings about life partly depend on comparison of one's own life with that of relevant reference groups (Diener and Lucas, 2000; Merton and Rossi, 1968), particularly people of similar social characteristics such as the level of educational attainment and within the immediate social milieu such as relatives, coworkers, and neighbors (Michalos, 1985; Walker and Pettigrew, 1984). If individuals believe that what they receive is more than what is possessed by their relevant reference groups, they are likely to feel happy (Crosby, 1982; Diener and Lucas, 2000; Stouffer et al., 1949).

The goal orientation approach suggests that the nature of the life goals that are valued most affects subjective well-being. The contrast between materialistic and non-materialistic pursuits is particularly stressed. Materialistic goal orientation implies that the aspiration for wealth is elevated by the increase in income; therefore, the improvement in material conditions does not produce greater happiness automatically (Easterlin, 2001; Kahneman, 1999). In contrast, if priority is given to intrinsic, non-materialistic goals such as family life and social relations, subjective well-being may be enhanced (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996; Ryan et al., 1999; Sheldon and Kasser, 1998). The ultimate influence of life goal orientations depends on how materialistic and intrinsic goals countervail each other.

## 3. Societal evaluations and subjective well-being

Inspiring as they are, explanations for subjective well-being from the social comparison and goal orientation perspectives focus on personal concerns. However, people also attempt to make sense of the social environment in which they live.

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