Life Satisfaction in China 2013: A Survey Study in Two Main Chinese Cities¹

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Abstract

The Chinese economic growth rate has been much higher than many countries of the world for many years now. Nowadays, China is experiencing significant economic transformation and structural adjustment. Its speed of development is slowing, and housing and commodity prices are slowly rising. Consequently, a series of economic and social problems have come into being. Under these circumstances, how satisfied are Chinese people on the seven aspects of daily living such as Housing Situation, Household Income, Health, Family Life, Food, Human Relations and Job? The Media and Public Opinion Research Center of Fudan University (FMORC) conducted a phone survey of 606 people living in Beijing, the capital and political and cultural center of China, and Shanghai, the Chinese economic center. The survey results show that the overall satisfaction of Chinese people with their daily life is high. The levels of Family Life and Human Relations are on the top, those of Food, Health and Jobs are listed from the third to the fifth, and satisfaction levels of their Housing Situation and Household Income are on the bottom. The satisfaction levels of males with their Family Life and Health are higher than those of females. Age has a significantly negative correlation with satisfaction with personal health. Monthly income has positive relationships with four aspects of daily life – house income, job, house situation, and family life. Owning a house in cities is another important factor that influences satisfaction with the house situation, house income, food, and family life. Shanghai residents also show higher satisfaction with their health than Beijing residents.

Key words: Quality of life, daily life, satisfaction, China, Shanghai, Beijing

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Public satisfaction with daily life is related to a country's economic development. China's economic growth rate was 7.7% in 2013, which was a little lower when compared to the double-digit rate in former years. However, in the environment where the global market was fatigued and the overall growth rate was on the low side, Chinese development was still rather strong, which contributed substantially to the global economy. Currently, China is carrying out an economic structural adjustment that aims to reduce the excess production capacity and upgrade the industry structure, by appropriately slowing the growth rate that resulted from only pursuing size increases and speed. Xu (2014) believes that in the critical era of transformation and upgrading there would be several outstanding changes in the Chinese economy: growth rate would shift from double-digit to single-digit and healthy and sustainable development would be paid more attention to; developing models would shift from the extensive development to an intensive pattern which favors quality and efficiency of development; developing motivation to shift from labor, land and resources to creation, thus emphasizing scientific and technological development and innovation; the goals of development, people-oriented management orientation would be adopted, and development gains would be shared by a wider population.

China's rapid economic development has gradually improved people's living standards. However, in the transformation period, problems of pollution, food safety, the rising cost of housing and CPI (Consumer Price Index), as well as the other social problems, have led to concerns about the food, health, and household conditions. How satisfied are the Chinese with various dimensions of their daily life, including family life, human relations, health, food, job, housing situation, and household income? To answer this question, the Media and Public Opinion Research Center of Fudan University (*FMORC*) conducted a random sample survey in Beijing and Shanghai. We choose these two cities because Beijing is the political and cultural center in China while Shanghai is the economic center. Furthermore, there are different social groups living in these two cities and both have migrants from around the country. Choosing these two cities allows scholars to examine internal differences in life satisfaction. Even so, we should still be careful not to generalize the conclusion to the whole country. In this paper, we will

first review relevant literature, and then report the findings. We will conclude this paper with a discussion.

Literature Review

As an important dimension of human well-being, life satisfaction refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of his or her quality of life (Boyraz, Waits, & Felix, 2014). Shin and Johnson (1978) argue that life satisfaction should be viewed as an assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own criteria. Chinese scholars have carried out some national and regional investigations, using measurements of household income, work environment, education, health conditions, and so on. Other scholars have examined the factors affecting life satisfaction. Zhang and his colleagues (Zhang, Yao, Fang, 2008) believe that there is no significant difference between males and females, but some studies found that gender is a crucial influence on an individual's life satisfaction (Wen, Mi, Zhu, 2011; Zi et al., 2012; Wang, 2013). Specifically, Zi et al. (2012) conclude that women feel more satisfied with their lives than men, whereas Wang (2013) has a contrary finding on the relationship between gender and life satisfaction. In terms of the impact of age and income, most scholars arrive at a similar conclusion that the degree of life satisfaction is higher for older people and is positively correlated with income (Zhang et al., 2008; Wen et al., 2011; Zi, et al., 2012; Wang, 2013). Yi and Wang (2007) find that married people are more satisfied with family and social relationships than separated and divorced people. Wang (2013) discovered that people who have their own houses have higher degrees of life satisfaction compared to their counterparts. In addition, life satisfaction is much higher among those with private cars. Based on the above studies, this study aims to track the most recent status of people's life satisfaction and discover the major factors affecting life satisfaction in China.

Methods

The research used CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) and RDD (random digit dialing), to interview 606 residents aged 18 or over in China. Specifically, 302 respondents live in Beijing, and 304 respondents live in Shanghai. A series of

questions were asked using a 4-point scale (1=dissatisfied, 2=somewhat dissatisfied, 3=somewhat satisfied, 4=satisfied) to measure people's satisfaction with the following seven aspects: Family Life, Human Relations, Health, Food, Job, Housing Situation, and Household Income. Some demographic questions were also asked: gender, age, job, house location, education, marital status, family monthly income, family structure, the number of family members, whether they had a private car, and housing situation.

Results

In general, the levels of satisfaction with Family Life, Human Relations, Health, Food, and Job, are high. Specifically, satisfaction with Family Life is the highest ($M = 3.14$), followed by Human Relations ($M = 3.10$), Health ($M = 2.96$), Food ($M = 2.96$) and Job ($M = 2.94$). The level of satisfaction with their Housing Situation is relatively low ($M = 2.78$). Specifically, 71.4% of the interviewees feel "satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied," while 28.6% feel "dissatisfied" or "somewhat dissatisfied." The satisfaction with Household Income ranks the lowest ($M = 2.73$). Only 9.2% of the interviewees feel "satisfied," 61.7% feel "somewhat satisfied," and 29.1% feel "dissatisfied" or "somewhat dissatisfied."

This study also examines the difference between males and females. It finds that men have significantly higher levels of satisfaction with Family Life and Health than women (t-test, $p < .05$). Specifically, as to Family Life, the mean satisfaction level of males is 3.90, while that of females is 3.10. In addition, the mean of males' level of satisfaction with health is 3.02, which is higher than that of females ($M = 2.90$). For the other five aspects of life satisfaction, the differences between males and females are not significant.

Age has a minimal effect on life satisfaction. It has a significantly negative correlation with satisfaction with personal health ($r = -.132$, $p < .01$). For other aspects, its influences are not strong. Compared with age, monthly income has a more powerful influence. Its positive relationships with four aspects of life – house income ($r = .236$, $p < .001$), job ($r = .180$, $p < .001$), housing situation ($r = .142$, $p < .01$), and family life ($r = .107$, $p < .05$), are all significant. Having one's own house in cities is another important

factor influencing life satisfaction. T-tests show that people owning houses have higher degrees of satisfaction than those without houses for the following aspects: housing situation ($M = 2.88$ vs. 2.27), household income ($M = 2.81$ vs. 2.38), food ($M = 3.01$ vs. 2.79), and family life ($M = 3.18$ vs. 3.05).

As the most major cities in China, this study finds that for most aspects of life, people in Beijing and Shanghai do not show significant differences. The only significance in terms of life satisfaction is Health. The average level of satisfaction of Shanghai residents ($M = 3.02$) is higher than that of Beijing residents ($M = 2.90$).

By conducting an OLS regression analysis, this study finds that after controlling for all other demographic variables, income still positively correlates to the satisfaction with housing situation ($\beta = .030$, $p < .05$), household income ($\beta = .044$, $p < .001$), and job/work ($\beta = .029$, $p < .01$). Age is found to be positively related to satisfaction with household income ($\beta = .052$, $p < .001$) and job/work ($\beta = .035$, $p < .05$). Education is positively related to income ($\beta = .082$, $p < .01$) and job/work ($\beta = .096$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The current empirical study has shown that the overall satisfaction with life among the residents of two Chinese cities is high. Although China confronts many challenges such as food security, environmental pollution, and rising prices, to name just a few, the Chinese maintain a high level of life satisfaction. The Chinese highly value family and social relations, both of which are traditional values that the Chinese treasure.

Relatively speaking, satisfaction with housing in China is slightly lower, ranking second to last. It reflects the fact that the high prices in the housing market has made urban living more challenging, particularly in big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and other first-tier cities in China. It would be expected that if the property prices keeps increasing, residents' lower satisfaction with housing will continue in the future. Along with the housing situation, household income is ranked as the lowest level of satisfaction in people's daily life. Although China's social economy has been developing,

and per capita disposable income is also increasing, it is an indisputable fact that GDP increases more slowly than CPI. In 2013, consumer prices rose by 2.6% over the previous year. Respectively, food prices rose 4.7% over the previous year, clothing prices rose 2.3%. Coupled with rising housing prices and high house price-income ratio, it is very difficult for the general public to buy real estate. Thus, it is understandable that people evaluated the household income with the lowest degree of satisfaction.

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