



Happiness and Health in China: The Paradox of Progress

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Summary. — Life satisfaction in China declined dramatically precisely at the time of its unprecedented economic growth and poverty reduction. We posit that a “progress paradox” is among the possible channels explaining these contrasting trends. Using data from the Chinese Livelihood Survey, we explore the role of reported physical and psychological health. The standard correlates of life satisfaction—such as age, income, and health—hold. In addition, we find that those with insufficient rest and leisure are significantly less satisfied. Urban, educated respondents are more likely to report depression, while rural and uneducated respondents are more satisfied with their lives and are less likely to report poor mental health. We also find that insufficient rest, stress, and low life satisfaction have a strong correlation with mental health problems. Given the gains in growth and poverty reduction in China, it is time to consider policies that focus on quality of life and mental illness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The past two decades in China brought unprecedented rates of economic growth, development, and poverty reduction. Indeed, much of the reduction of the world’s extreme poverty rates during that time can be attributed to the millions of people who exited poverty in China. GDP per capita and household consumption increased fourfold between the years 1990 and 2005 (Easterlin, Morgan, Switek, & Wang, 2012). China had moved 10 places higher on the Human Development Index from 2008 to 2013, ranking 93rd out of 187 countries, and life expectancy in the country increased to 75.3 years from 67 years in 1980.¹

However, during the same period, life satisfaction levels in China demonstrated a somewhat mixed picture according to previous studies on China. In particular, the levels declined precipitously in the initial stages of rapid growth and then recovered slightly thereafter (Easterlin, Morgan, Switek, & Wang, 2012). The downtrend in life satisfaction was accompanied by increases in the suicide rate² and in incidence of mental illness (Helliwell & Huang, 2008; Layard, 2005). China had one of the highest suicide rates in the world in the 1990s (Phillips, Liu, & Zhang, 1999). Approximately 23.2 suicides per 100,000 people per year were recorded from 1995 to 1999, and the rate gradually decreased to 9.8 per 100,000 over the period from 2009 to 2011 (Wang, Chan, & Yip, 2014). By contrast, mental health disorders increased as suicide rates fell, perhaps because more individuals sought treatment. The annual growth rate of inpatients admitted into mental health hospitals was 13.4% from 2007 to 2012 (reaching 1.2 million people). Outpatient visits increased at a similar rate—12.4% (reaching a magnitude of 27 million outpatient visits in 2011).³

Are these phenomena an anomaly? Is there something unique about China’s life satisfaction and well-being? Is it China’s growth trajectory? Although income metrics provide us with one account of China’s progress, well-being metrics, including measures of mental health—are telling us a very different story. What explains this discrepancy?

Surely each country has a unique trajectory. Yet China’s unhappy growth story fits into a broader set of progress paradoxes related to rapid change and development in countries

around the world. China’s economic boom occurred as a centrally planned economy shifted to free market principles, and at the same time social welfare and other institutions experienced equally dramatic changes. The trends were particularly stark in the case of China due to the dismantling of traditional safety nets as millions migrated from rural to urban areas in search of new opportunities. While changes associated with economic progress usually bring increases in well-being levels over time, in the short term it is often associated with drops in life satisfaction and other dimensions of well-being. This is likely because changes in the pace and nature of economic growth tend to bring increases in insecurity (as rewards to different skill sets change) and in inequality, as there are winners and losers in the process (Graham, 2009; Graham & Lora, 2009; Graham & Pettinato, 2002). One of the early findings—and paradoxes—in the well-being literature, which is particularly relevant to China, is that of “happy peasants and frustrated achievers,” in which upwardly mobile respondents in growing developing economies report lower levels of satisfaction with their lives than very poor respondents with no change in their income levels (Graham & Pettinato, 2002).

Part of the explanations could be attributed to the rising expectations and access to new information that come with upward mobility; meanwhile, reverse causality is also possible, which suggests that more frustrated, unhappy respondents may be more likely to seek changes and to improve their situation. More recent work on the well-being of migrants is suggestive along these lines. We find potential migrants from Latin America (and in some transition economies) are wealthier and more educated than the average, but also less happy and more critical of their economic situations prior to migrating. They then tend to make modest gains in well-being once they actually migrate (Graham & Markowitz, 2011; Graham & Nikolova, 2015). However, what is missing from the puzzle is that the extent to which progress paradox might channel to life satisfaction directly through the dimension of mental health, as life satisfaction is quite strongly (inversely) correlated with at least one distress dimension, depression (Headey, Veenhoven,

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& Wearing, 1991). Additionally, disproportionate allocation of time between working hours and leisure, which is the by-product of urbanization, has been verified as a risk factor for mental health problems such as depression and anxiety symptoms (Cao et al., 2011).

Ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages are critical challenge for nations worldwide, as they are the essence of sustainable development. China has made remarkable progress in combating poverty, from one-third of Chinese people suffering hunger to less than one-tenth. Yet that progress is associated with a decline in well-being levels which is associated, at least in part, with changes in psychological status and a skewed time allocation between leisure. The interactions between these trends need to be better understood and purposely addressed in the policy arena (Figure 1).

In this paper we take advantage of the Subjective Survey for Chinese Livelihood Status (SSCLS) (2011–12)—a new national-level well-being survey in China to explore channels that may be driving China's story of life satisfaction. This survey has detailed information about reported health (chronic and acute health problems, as well as anxiety and depression), sufficiency in rest, frequency of leisure activities, education, income, marital status, formal household registration (*hukou*), and housing status in addition to life satisfaction. Our work is distinct from previous studies of life satisfaction pertaining to China in its exploration of the relationships between reported mental health/life satisfaction and physical health (chronic disease) and also time use (sufficiency in rest or frequency of leisure activities). We build on detailed work on life satisfaction trends around the world, progress paradoxes, and the links between happiness and health (See Graham 2008a, 2009; Graham, Higuera, & Lora, 2011).

We find that the standard determinants of well-being are the same for China as they are for most countries around the world. At the same time, China stands out in that unhappiness and reported mental health problems are highest among the cohorts who either have or are positioned to benefit from the transition and related growth—suggesting a progress

paradox. These are urban residents, the more educated, and those who report to have insufficient leisure time and rest. We hope that our findings contribute new insights to the extensive work that has already been done on life satisfaction in China, particularly from the perspective of the linkages between well-being and mental health and time use (Clark & Senik, 2015; Easterlin et al., 2012; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2015).

2. THE NEW “SCIENCE AND METRICS OF WELL-BEING

There is a burgeoning literature on well-being, much of which finds consistent patterns in its determinants in countries and cultures around the world. Many of these patterns are predictable: Income matters to individual well-being, but after a certain point other things such as the incomes of others also start to matter. Health is essential to well-being (more so than income, although the two tend to be correlated), and stable partnerships, marriages, and social relationships also play a role. Because these patterns are so consistent across diverse countries and cultures, scholars in the field can control for these factors and explore the well-being effects of phenomena that vary more, such as inflation and unemployment rates; crime and corruption; smoking, drinking, and exercising; and the nature of public goods, among others. Not surprisingly, the approach is well-suited for exploring the relationship between well-being and economic change (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Graham, 2009; and Graham, 2008b).

Well-being has two distinct and measurable dimensions, each of which captures different aspects of human lives.⁴ The first is hedonic well-being, which captures the manner in which individuals experience their daily lives, the quality of those lives, and their moods (both positive and negative) during those experiences. The second is evaluative well-being, which captures how people think about and assess their lives as a whole. The latter dimension implicitly includes eudemonic

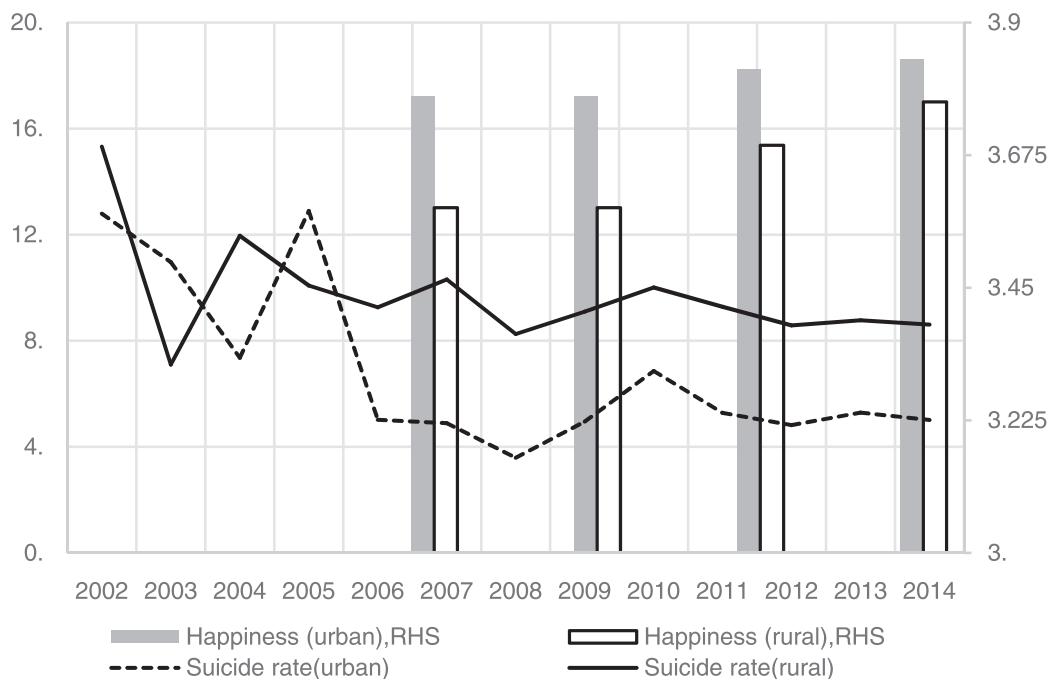


Figure 1. China urban and rural suicidal rate from 2002 to 2014. Source: Suicide data are from the Yearbook of Health of PRC (2003–13). Happiness data are from Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010–12).

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