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The More, the Merrier? on the Relationships of Democracy and Happiness in China

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***Abstract*—Happiness is associated with and precedes numerous successful outcomes. According to the research conducted by United Nations Development Program, the subjective feeling of happiness, or more formally subjective well-being (SWB), serves as a critical indicator for quality of life - health, longevity, income and social skill.**

Among many potential antecedents of SWB, political and social scientists have long debated on whether democracy can bring happiness. Despite numerous research conducted, the results are far from conclusive. I argue that one important reason causing the inconsistencies of the findings is that the definition of democracy varies across countries, especially among non-western countries. In the specific context of China, researchers have found that the majorities in the country agree on the Confucian model of democracy, characterized by strong support for the governing regime and the Confucian culture. Because of the various potential definition of democracy, the application of subjective measurements of democracy is preferable in that it effectively takes into account the variations of the personal definition of democracy.

The current study investigates the impact of subjective measurement of democracy (i.e. perceived level of democracy of the nation) on individual's SWB, using a sample of Chinese residents. In addition to directly examining the effects of democracy on SWB, I tested additional hypotheses concerning the group differences of such effects. I utilized the Chinese dataset from World Value Survey (WVS) Wave 6, which consisted of the responses from a representative Chinese sample. The hypotheses were tested with stepwise linear regression.

The results confirmed my hypothesis that the perceived level of democracy was positively related to individual SWB, and that the income level positively moderated such effect. However, surprisingly, I also found that the social class negatively affected the relationship between perceived level of democracy and individual SWB. The potential explanation as well as the implications of the findings were discussed. Last, I address the limitations of the current study and pinpoint two directions for future research: (1) longitudinal studies could be carried out to theoretically avoid the endogeneity problem and replicate the current findings; (2) more researches are needed on how social policies would affect SWB in non-western context.

Keywords: subjective well-being, China democracy, heteroscedasticity

I. INTRODUCTION

Happiness, according to Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener [1], is associated with and precedes numerous successful outcomes. In research, happiness has always been operationalized as the extent of subjective well-being, or SWB. According to Veenhoven [2], SWB reflects individuals' satisfaction with their life, indicates ''the quality of the social system in which they live''. It has been repeatedly argued as a critical indicator for quality of life, and is closely related to health, longevity, income and social skill.

Sociologists and political psychologists are particularly interested in investigating the political, societal and cultural determinants of SWB. One of the most widely debated question concerns whether democracy can bring happiness to individuals across countries and nations. Despite numerous research conducted, the results are far from conclusive. Studies conducted in countries such as Latin America [3], North America [4] and Europe [5] supported the significantly positive impact of democracy on SWB, while the negative effects were reported in certain non-western countries. For example, Fosu [6] have found that in Africa, politically accountable governments are linked to more chance of political disorder, which may in turn reduces citizens' well-being. Similarly, in Switzerland, Dorn, Fischer, Kirchgässner, and Sousa-Poza [7] have concluded that democracy does not significantly affect well-being of the citizens.

I argue that one important cause of such contradicting results is that the commonly-recognized definition of democracy, elaborated and quantified for example in Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)'s Democracy Index, may not be well-suited to every society. In other words, the societal agreements on the form of democracy might vary substantially across different societies, and such variations are largely neglected in the attempts to operationalize a "common" definition of democracy. For example, Tianjian and Jie [8] argued that majorities in China are driven by Confucian concept of democracy, claiming strong support for collectivism and, at the same time, a high level of satisfaction with the country's authoritarian regime, which is in sharp contrast to many western countries. In Confucian theory, the most important premise of a democratic society is the assurance of societal harmony – the democratic processes should only be taken place with the presence of great order. Indeed, extended literature indicates that the goal of

democracy in China, characterized by authoritarianism and populism, refers to building more trust in authority than the west and always comes with the obedience to the current regime. Such definition and democratic culture differ significantly from that of the western. Therefore, direct adaption of the universally objective measure of democracy may lead to a partial or an inaccurate measurement of the level of democracy that is in accordance with the local society.

Therefore, I argue that the divergence in the definition of democracy may confound the effects of the objective measurement of democracy (e.g. the Democracy Index) on SWB. In other words, while previous research that investigated the effects of the objective measurement of democracy on SWB partly illustrated the psychological and sociological foundation of democratic values, they fail to take into consideration the important role of the culture context. In this sense, the application of subjective measurements of democracy could supplement the previous findings in that it effectively takes into account the variations of the personal definition of democracy. To fill in the research gap, in the current study, I tested the impact of subjective measure of democracy, as quantified by the Perception of Democracy (POD) scale, on individual's SWB. As I rationalized previously, such investigation should be especially insightful when the definition of democracy is expected to be controversial among the general population, since then a significant margin emerges between objective and subjective measurements of democracy. Following the previous studies, I have therefore conducted the research in the Chinese context. Despite the mixed findings of the effects of level of democracy on SWB, based on the procedural justice theory, I hypothesize that the subjective measurement of democracy (i.e. POD) would positively influence SWB in Chinese sample. This is because the higher level of POD would result in a more positive opinion of the procedural justice and a more definite perception that the personal voice could be heard, which might in turn lead to higher level of SWB.

In addition to examining the direct effects of POD on SWB, I have also hypothesized and tested the potential moderators of such effects, namely income, social class and education level. Recent studies at the individual level elaborated that the effects of income levels on SWB follow a non-linear relationship. To be specific, the income level is positively related to SWB when the income level is low to medium; nevertheless, when the income level is higher than a certain threshold, the increase in the income level would no more affect SWB [9], [10]. With regard to the moderation role of the income level, I hypothesize a negative moderation effect, such that the effects of POD on SWB is stronger among higher income participants comparing to the lower income participants. This is because for the higher income participants, they would have more financial, political and societal resource, which could guarantee their SWB regardless of the perceived level of democracy. On the contrary, for the participants who only have low-level income, the perceived level of democracy might be a more important resource in securing individual SWB. With similar arguments, I expect that the social class would also negatively moderate the effects of POD on SWB among the Chinese participants. Last, I consider the moderation role of the education level. Hayward, Pannozzo and Colman [11] reported that higher education level is positively associated with high wage, health status, healthy lifestyle and longevity. Therefore, I would expect the education level plays a similar role as the income level and the social class, which might negatively moderate the impact of POD on SWB. However, on the other hand, according to previous researches, higher educated individuals would also value level of democracy to a greater extent; as a result, a higher level of democracy could fulfill their expectation towards the ideal society, therefore result in a higher level of SWB. Taken together, it is difficult to formulate a decisive hypothesis concerning the moderation role of the education level. I will leave it open in the current study.

Overall, the current study investigates the impact of subjective measurement of democracy (i.e. perceived level of democracy of the nation) on individual's SWB and the group differences of such effects among sub-populations with different income levels, social classes and education levels. The current study is carried out based on a sample of Chinese residents. I have chosen to conduct the current research with a Chinese sample based on two reasons. First, Asian countries are generally under-representative in previous researches; therefore, researches conducted in these countries are necessary to supplement the existing findings. More importantly, the definition of democracy is especially controversial in this authoritarian country, thus weakening the appropriateness of the objective measurement of democracy. Based on extensive relevant literature across the world, I expect that perceptions of democracy in China has a positive impact on SWB and that such effects would be negatively moderated by individual's income level and social class.

Theoretically, the current research supplements the existing literature by examining the impact of subjective measurement of level of democracy for the first time. Because of the limitation of the objective measurement of level of democracy, such investigation would contribute to the existing theory by detailing the social cognitive consequences of higher subjective perception of level of democracy. Furthermore, by testing the boundary conditions of such effect, I could gain more insight into the actual mechanisms of such effects. Empirically, the current research could inform the policy makers on the potential societal intervention aiming to increase the psychological well-being of the citizens.

II. METHOD

A. Sample

The current study utilizes the Chinese dataset from World Value Survey (WVS) Wave 6, which consists of the responses from a representative Chinese sample. The interviews, which were conducted in 2013 with strict compliance to the protocol of WVS, have been proven methodologically sound in various researches. The total sample size was 2300. Data Collection Organization was The Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University Fieldwork. The data collection period stated on07-11-2012 and ended on 21-01-2013. The target population was the Chinese citizens who were elder than 18. The primary Sampling Units (PSUs) was county

level administrative units (municipal districts, county-level cities, counties) while the secondary Sampling Units (SSUs) was Half-square minutes (HSM) of latitude and longitude. Furthermore, Tertiary Sampling Units (TSUs) was Spatial square seconds(SSS) of approximately 90m*90m

B. Measures

1) Dependent variables: The dependent variable in this study was self-reported satisfaction with life, operationalized as subjective well-being, or SWB. In WVS6, that the participants were requested to answer a single question "All things considered, how satisfied are you with ymy life as a whole these days?" on a ten-point Likert Scale with 1 indicating "completely dissatisfied" and 10 referring to "completely satisfied".

2) Independent variables: The independent variable in the current study is the perceived level of democracy of the society, or POD. Again, it was measured with a single question in WVS6. The question read as "how democratically is this country being governed today?" The participants again rated in a ten-point Likert Scale, with 1 indicating "not at all democratic" while 10 meaning "completely democratic".

3) Moderating variables

- Income

In WVS6, the income level was measured by a self-report question. The participants were asked to indicate on a ten-point Likert Scale their self-rated income level, with 1 representing the lowest income group and 10 representing the highest income group. Although the self-reported income level may have important drawbacks that it might be influenced by the personality and the social desirability of the respondents, it has nevertheless showed good psychometric property in previous studies.

- Social Class

The participants' self-reported social class was measured by a self-report question as well. The question was "People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper or lower class. Which class would you describe yourself as belonging to?". The participants answered on a four-point Likert scale, with higher value indicating higher self-perceived social class.

- Education Level

In the interview, participants were also instructed to indicate their highest education levels among five ordered ranging from "no formal education", up until "university – level education, with degree".

4) Control variables: To exclude the impact of potential confounding variables, in the current analysis, I include three my demographic variables as covariates which have been shown in previous research to have significant effects on SWB (see, e.g., [12]; [13]; [14]; [15]). The three variables were age, gender of participants, and the number of children in the household, as they are frequently seen in relevant researches. While age and number of children were considered as a continuous variable, gender was treated as a dummy variable (0 = female and 1 = male).

C. Analytical Strategy

To test the main effects of POD and the moderation effects of income, social class and education level, I have applied a step-wise regression approach, where Model 0 contained only covariates, and the variables whose main effects and moderation effects are in question were entered into Model 1 and Model 2, respectively.

III. RESULT

The means, standard deviations and the correlations of the variables are shown in Table I, which offers a first sight to the relationship between the variables in question. Not to my surprise, POD and SWB were positively related among the Chinese samples (r = .18, p < .01). Furthermore, echoing the findings of previous research, the income level, the social class and the education level of the participants were all positively correlated with SWB, indicating that on average people with more resource were also happier. To formerly tested my hypotheses, I have tested three regression models, and the results were shown in Table II.

The first column of Table II indicates the effects of control variables on SWB. The results suggest that none of the control variables were significantly correlated with SWB. The second column demonstrates the effects of POD on SWB, while controlling for participant's income level, social class and education level. In accordance to our hypothesis, POD shown a positive effect on SWB (B = .15, $S.E.$ = .02, p < .01), suggesting that participants who perceived higher level of democracy would also have better SWB. The results of moderation models (i.e. Model 3) are illustrated in the third column. To my surprise, participant's income level positively moderated the effects of POD on SWB, such that the positive effects of POD were stronger among those with higher income level. My hypothesis is not supported (see Fig. 1). Both participant's social class and education level did not significantly moderate the effects of POD, though one should take into account that the moderation effects of social class was very close to be significant (p=0.052).

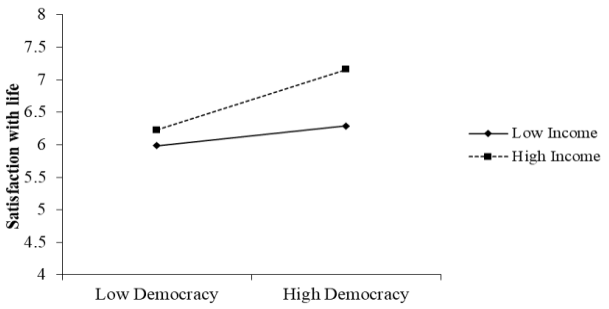

Fig. 1. The effect of perceived level of democracy (POD) on SWB at different levels of income.

TABLE I. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND CORRELATIONS MATRIX OF VARIABLES IN QUESTION

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. SWB	6.85	1.983								
2. Democracy	6.43	1.993	.180**							
3.Income	4.36	1.841	.210**	.153**						
4. Social Class	2.29	.845	.207**	.136**	.616**					
5. Education Level	5.17	2.052	.083**	-.039	-.229**	-.244**				
6. Sex	1.49	.500	.021	-.003	-.034	-.007	-.116**			
7. Age	42.29	14.366	-.007	.029	-.073**	-.037	-.351**	-.008		
8. Marital Status	1.71	1.675	-.029	-.044	-.040	-.005	-.183**	-.034	-.307**	
9. Number of Children	1.44	1.012	.021	.065**	-.043	-.020	-.337**	-.051*	.548**	-.420**

[a.] *Note*: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficient. *M* and *SD* refer to the means and standard deviations of variables in sample. The correlations of each variables are presented at the cross section of each variables and its correlation significance is two-tailed test manifested in * (p<.05), ** (p<.01), *** (p<.001). Sample size *N* = 2300

TABLE II. THE STEP-WISE REGRESSION RESULTS OF THE EFFECTS OF CONTROL VARIABLES, DEPENDENT VARIABLES AND MODERATING VARIABLES

	Model0		Model1		Model2	
Predictors	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
(constant)	6.891	.200	6.426***	.224	6.414***	.224
Sex	-.004	-.003	.054	.091	.045	.090
Age	.076	.084	.009*	.004	.009*	.004
Number of Children	.049	.052	.026	.058	.027	.090
Democracy			.152***	.023	.155***	.023
Income			.153***	.031	.151***	.031
Social Class			.217**	.069	.211**	.069
Education Level			.087***	.025	.090***	.025
Democracy*Income					.043**	.014
Democracy*Social Class					-.065	.033
Democracy*Educational Level					-.006	.013

[b.] *Note*: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficient. The dependent variable is participants' self-reported subjective well-being (SWB). The regression coefficients significance is two-tailed test manifested in * (p<.05), ** (p<.01), *** (p<.001).

IV. DISCUSSION

SWB has been a strong indicator for happiness and satisfaction with life. My study empirically investigates the impact of perception of democracy (i.e., POD) on subjective well-being (i.e., SWB) contextualized in China. Due to authoritarian and populistic characteristics, the definition of democracy among Chinese citizen is argued to be quite distant from a more standard and westernized version. Consequently, previous research that applied an objective operationalization of democracy and tested its effect on SWB might fail to capture the true social cognitive process and thus resulted in biased conclusion. To address such drawback, in the current study, I adopted a subjective measurement of democracy (i.e. POD) and examined its impact on SWB with the data extracted from World Value Survey (WVS) Wave 6. Furthermore, to advance the understanding of the mechanism of such effect, I examined the moderation role of participant's income level, social class and education level.

The results have confirmed one of my hypotheses that the perceived level of democracy is positively related to individual SWB. However, surprisingly, I have also found that individuals in lower level of income tends to be less affected by POD level, which is contradicting to my previous hypothesis. The potential explanation of such unexpected finding is two-fold. First, comparing to people with lower income, people with higher income might need more democracy at work and life to reach their goals and maintain their living standards. For example, the reality in China is that people who owns small-to-medium-size enterprise (SMEs) need to work with government sections on a daily basis, and only with a somehow more democratic government would they run the business smoothly. Second, given the high correlations between income level and education level (see Table I), people with higher income on average would have

higher education level, and thus hold higher expectation to the level of democracy in the society. Future research should test these findings and address the mechanisms therefore.

The current study is not without limitation. The most important limitation is that I use solely self-reported measurements, and thus leaving the potential endogeneity issue unsolved and the common responses bias undetected. Therefore, I suggest future research to use longitudinal or panel datasets to avoid the endogeneity problem and adapt multi-source measurements to control for the common responses bias. I also call for more research to examine how social policies would affect SWB in non-western context. Furthermore, because of the limitation of the available WVS data, I was not able to control some potential confounding variables that could offer alternative explanation for the relationships between POD and SWB. Namely, the social norm of a specific society could potentially determine both POD and SWB, thus acting as an important confounding variable. I call for more detailed cross-culture studies to rule out these alternative explanations.

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