

An Analysis of the Lack of Correlation between Subjective Wellbeing and Objective Indicators for Human Development in China

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Abstract:

It will be argued in this paper that there are at least three lenses through which we could try to make sense of a series of paradoxical phenomena which indicate a lack of correlation between subjective wellbeing and objective indicators for wellbeing or human development in certain sections of the Chinese society, such as Chinese rural residents and rural-urban migrants. They are the lenses of: 1) social wellbeing which is a center yardstick for mental health; and 2) adaptation which was addressed within the hedonic tradition of the happiness approach to subjective wellbeing as an increasingly important factor that can determine people's feelings; and 3) lack of correlation between more choices and opportunities and actual happiness which could serve as a critical point for the capability approach to subjective wellbeing whose focus is on capabilities themselves, or an increasing number of capabilities within the capabilities set instead of on whether or how these capabilities can transform into an improvement in subjective wellbeing.

Key Words: Subjective wellbeing, Objective indicators, Human development, Chinese rural residents, Chinese rural-urban migrants

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of human well-being, an umbrella term consisting of a series of factors that contribute to the quality of life, could be, and should be measured with “both subjective and objective measures”.¹ But the quality of an individual's life used to be measured and evaluated mainly by others based on objective indicators for human development, such as income, wealth, and education and so on until the late 1950s when subjective approach emerged as an important alternative to the objective approach to measuring people's wellbeing as social scientists tried to pursue a humanistic scientific agenda by developing indicators of quality of life to examine social change and to advance policy-making.² Research on subjective wellbeing, or happiness in layman terms, has been gaining more and more popularity not only in the social scientific fields such as psychology or philosophy but among economists³ as well nowadays when economics was venturing into the new world of subjective wellbeing previously inhabited by psychologists. The traditional stress on objective conditions as the most and probably the only important determinant of subjective wellbeing in the economic academia has been challenged since economists such as Easterlin have come to realize the crucial role that individual's psychological characteristics as well as how they understand, value and expect their objective living standards, such as absolute income to be in the future, could play in their subjective wellbeing.⁴ Although it's widely considered that the "Easterlin paradox" indicating the lack of correlation between increased income and higher level of subjective wellbeing applies mainly in the case of developed countries, Easterlin didn't ignore the similar trend in some of the developing countries, like China.⁵ Recent researches on subjective wellbeing in developing country context backed up the adaptation theory rooted in the hedonic psychology claiming that people's expectations and aspirations of their objective circumstances may have a much more powerful effect on their happiness than their objective conditions such as their current income do, and these researches confirmed that Easterlin's income-happiness paradox is applicable to less developed countries such as China.⁶ However, adaptation theory whose focus is on the association between people's aspirations of their objective conditions and their

¹ *National Statistician's Reflection on the National Debate on Measuring National Well-Being*, 2011, released by the UK Office for National Statistics. Available at <<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html>>.

² Land, K.C., 1975, Social indicators models: An overview, in *Social Indicator Models*, eds., Land, K.C., and Spilerman, S., Russell Sage, 5-36.

³ Among all the economists who have shown an interest in subjective wellbeing, the most representative include Easterlin, R., Layard, R., Sen, A., and Stiglitz, J., etc.

⁴ Easterlin, R.A., 2006, Life cycle happiness and its sources. Intersections of psychology, economics, and demography, in *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 27(4):20, 463-82.

⁵ Bhutan's Falling Happiness Index, Wednesday, 14 November 2007, in *Marketplace*.

⁶ Knight, J., and Gunatilaka, R., 2012, Aspirations, adaptation and subjective well-being of rural-urban migrants in China, in *Adaptation, Poverty and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*, ed., David, C., Palgrave Macmillan, 96.

subjective wellbeing isn't enough to explain the puzzling results that have been revealed by subjective wellbeing surveys conducted in China in recent years.

2. THREE LENSES THROUGH WHICH WE ANALYZE THE LACK OF CORRELATION BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING AND OBJECTIVE INDICATORS FOR WELLBEING IN CHINA

According to *the Blue Book of China's Society* released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) from the period of 2006 to 2012, there was an overall decline in happiness and/or life satisfaction among total population,⁷ and the most significant decline was reported by residents of small towns followed by that of big cities, while the level of happiness of rural residents was generally higher than that of urban residents.⁸ It has been recently discovered that among total population, Chinese rural-urban migrants have the lowest mean happiness score (2.3) compared to that of rural residents (2.7) and of urban residents (2.5).⁹ This finding is of great importance to the study of both current and future studies of wellbeing or human development in China's society when China's urbanization project has now reached a critical point when the urban population accounts for more than 50% of total population for the first time in the Chinese history thanks to an increasingly growing number (130 million) of rural-urban migrants.¹⁰

It will be argued in this paper that there are at least three lenses through which we could try to make sense of a series of paradoxical phenomena which indicate a lack of correlation between subjective wellbeing and objective wellbeing in the Chinese society. They are the lenses of: 1) social wellbeing which is a center yardstick for mental health;¹¹ and 2) adaptation which was addressed within the hedonic tradition of the happiness approach to subjective wellbeing research as an increasingly important factor that can determine to a great extent pleasurable and unpleasurable feelings;¹² and 3) lack of correlation between more choices and opportunities and actual happiness which could serve as a critical point for the capability approach to subjective

⁷ Considering the traditional theoretical conflation of happiness and life satisfaction in the works of Easterlin, R. (2003), Layard, R. (2005), etc., as well as Hofstede's empirical study (2001) which indicates a highly correlation between collectivism and per capita income and the greater importance of the conflation of happiness and life satisfaction in poor countries, it seems reasonable that happiness and life satisfaction can be treated as synonyms in China which falls into the middle-lower-income country categories.

⁸ See *the Blue Book of China's Society 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011* released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

⁹ Knight, J., and Gunatilaka, R., 2012, Aspirations, adaptation and subjective well-being of rural-urban migrants in China, in *Adaptation, Poverty and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*, ed., David, C., Palgrave Macmillan, 91-92.

¹⁰ See *the Blue Book of China's Society 2011* released by the CASS in 2012.

¹¹ Keyes, C. L. M., 1998, Social well-being, in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(2), 121-140.

¹² Kahneman, D., et al., eds., 1999, *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, Russell Sage Foundation, xii.

wellbeing whose focus is on capabilities themselves, or an increasing number of capabilities within the capabilities set instead of on whether or how these capabilities can transform into an improvement in subjective wellbeing.¹³

2.1 Social Wellbeing

A comparative study of the subjective wellbeing of Chinese rural residents and that of rural-urban migrants will help us get a clearer look at the complex matrix of social wellbeing, subjective wellbeing and poverty in Chinese society. It will point to a possibility that a higher level of social wellbeing may bring about an increasing social capital which could be used as a powerful tool for alleviating poverty, especially participatory or chronically/critically poverty, from which rural-urban migrant workers living in the big or small cities suffered the most; and a possibility that an increasing level of social wellbeing will curb the decline in the subjective wellbeing reported by residents of both big and small cities which are consisted of both urban residents and rural-urban migrants.

Despite that the impact of social wellbeing on the happiness of Chinese residents is a much less studied issue compared to other possible determinants of happiness such as income and welfare, a close study of subjective wellbeing of Chinese rural population - which is consisted of both rural residents in rural areas and rural-urban migrants in urban areas who haven't successfully obtained an urban residential identity or hukou - and urban population will point to an extremely important yet somehow unrecognized fact especially in China's context that social wellbeing can affect happiness in a profound way.

2.1.1 The correlation between social wellbeing and subjective wellbeing in relativistic judgment models

A hypothesis that may help us solve the question about why Chinese rural residents seem to have generally higher level of subjective wellbeing denoted by happiness and/or life satisfaction compared to economically better-off rural-urban migrants and urban residents is that the former may have a generally higher level of social wellbeing. The importance of social wellbeing to human being, especially to subjective wellbeing, became increasingly clearer to us as we came to realize that objective circumstances, income as one of the most heatedly discussed and valued among them all, may not be the most crucial, let alone the solely determinant of subjective wellbeing. Theories of need advocated by Veenhoven and Maslow indicating a positive correlation between income and happiness at least until basic needs are met have been challenged by relativistic judgment models such as the one suggested by Easterlin who argues that raising income may not necessarily end up with raising happiness because people evaluate the adequacy of their income not in absolute terms but in social

¹³ Hirata, J., 2008. The division of labor between the capability and the happiness perspectives, in *Capabilities and Happiness*, eds., Bruni, L., et al., Oxford University Press, 175.

comparisons with others.¹⁴ From these perspectives, social wellbeing which is defined by Keyes as "individuals' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with other people, their neighborhoods, and their communities" could be a vital determinant of subjective wellbeing denoted by happiness or by human flourishing.¹⁵ From the perspectives of social psychology which thinks highly of the fulfillment of the fundamental human need to connect, to be valued and appreciated by other people,¹⁶ it's very understandable why people's wellbeing, especially subjective wellbeing, relies to a large degree on people's positive social functioning and good social relationships within families, communities and even workplace.

The importance of social groups such as communities and endogenous groups to individuals lies firstly in that they could serve as social institutions that help members of the group to have access to economic, social and cultural channels and capital.¹⁷ The neoclassical argument indicating that the market is necessarily the best institution to allocate resources has been re-evaluated in modern context by the growing realization that the market needs to be understood alongside other institutions, taking societal institutions including social norms for example, that could play a crucial role in the production of goods and services.¹⁸ Secondly, the importance of social groups such as communities and that of endogenous groups to individuals also lies in that while the designation of national development project by state power is typically based on market logic with a focus on economic values, social groups and endogenous groups often take traditional culture and values into consideration. Compared to the massive empirical evidence and some well-developed theories suggesting that the disregard for communal and traditional rights to resources especially common poor resources such as land, river and forest by the state power has often ended up with the undermining of the livelihoods of community groups and hence with conflicts between the state and such societal groups,¹⁹ there is rarely well-

¹⁴ Veenhoven, R., 1991, Is happiness relative?, in *Social Indicators Research*, 24(1), 1-34; Veenhoven, R., 1993, *Happiness in Nations: Subjective Appreciation of Life in 56 Nations: 1946-1992*, Risbo; Maslow, A. H., 1954, *Motivation and Personality*, Harper and Row; Easterlin, R.A., 1974, Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence, in *Nations and Households in Economics Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramowitz*, eds., David, P.A., and Reder, M.W., Academic Press, 89-125; Easterlin, R.A., 1995, Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all?, in *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 27, 35-47.

¹⁵ Keyes, C. L. M., 2006, Subjective Well-Being in Mental Health and Human Development Research Worldwide: An Introduction, in *Social Indicators Research*, 77(1), 5.

¹⁶ Diener, E., and Seligman, M.E.P., 2002, Very happy people, in *Psychological Science*, 13(1), 81-4.

¹⁷ Fennell, S., 2009, *Rules, Rubrics and Riches*, Routledge; Beteille, A., 2011, *The Andre Beteille Omnibus: Comprising Caste, Class and Power*, OUP India.

¹⁸ Fennell, S., 2009, *Rules, Rubrics and Riches*, Routledge, Ch.1.

¹⁹ For empirical studies on how indigenous people's rights were often denied and violated and about the progress that has been made in this area, see *The Indigenous World* released by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs in the time period of 2005 to 2012. For much well developed theories, see Ostrom, E., 1990, *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*, Cambridge University Press; Ostrom, O., 2005, *Understanding Institutional Diversity*, Princeton University Press; Cornwall, A., and Scoones, I., 2011, *Revolutionizing Development: Reflections on the Work of Robert Chambers*, Earthscan; Fennell, S., 2011,

articulated discuss about the dynamics between social groups such as communities and ethnic groups and group members' subjective wellbeing.

From the perspectives of subjective wellbeing, an individual's relative status within social groups such as family or community could be closely related to their happiness and life satisfaction. In the context of China, residents living in small towns and cities reported the most significant decline in happiness and/or life satisfaction according to *the Blue Book of China's Society 2011*. A crucial reason why China's urban population finally outnumbers rural population by 1% by 2011 is that a growing number of rural-urban migrants have been moving into cities for the past few decades. We could infer from the large numbers of rural-urban migrants currently living in small cities that their low level of happiness may have contributed to a great extent to the significant decline in overall happiness detected among residents in small cities.²⁰

An empirical study of subjective wellbeing of some of the rural-urban migrants currently living in small cities in Liaoning Province indicates that rural migrants who have made the transition into urban employment are living in a state of human languishing instead of human flourishing.²¹ A possible explanation for the mental status of these rural-urban migrants in Liaoning Province is that they feel less satisfied with their lives after they compare themselves with urban residents who are relatively well-off in terms of both income and social status. In other words, they are less happy because they don't feel like they are able to "keeping up with the Jones" after they relocate from small villages in rural areas in which there is less hierarchy in income and status to urban areas with relatively bigger gap in wealth and social status within communities.

2.1.2 The importance of social wellbeing denoted by social integration, social acceptance, social actualization, and social contribution to subjective wellbeing

Another possible explanation for the low level of happiness of rural-urban migrants is that they used to feel much respected and accepted within their villages where villagers usually keep a quite close relationship, while a city lifestyle is usually followed by a strong sense of alienation. The fact that these rural migrants don't normally fit in well with, or feel accepted by their urban peers either in communities or in work places could easily put a dent in their subjective wellbeing given the importance of individuals' social relationships to their subjective wellbeing. "It appears that status, ... and levels of social interaction are universal determinants of

Contested Constructions of Water, in *Seminar*. Available at < http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/626/626_shailaja_fennell.htm >.

²⁰ See *the Blue Book of China's Society 2011* released by the CASS in 2012.

²¹ Shouting, Lu, 2009, An analysis of the migration flow of minority groups in the North-Eastern China during the urbanization process, in *Manchu Minority Research*, 1, 1-7.

subjective happiness across cultures".²² The importance of "social integration" to an individual's subjective wellbeing is well researched in Keyes' work where he recognized the significance of the quality of individual's relationships to, and functioning in, social groups and society to their wellbeing, both objective wellbeing including health and subjective wellbeing.²³ In Keyes' eyes, mental health should be seen as a syndrome of individual's positive feelings and functioning in their everyday lives within social groups and society. That's the reason why social integration indicating the extent to which individuals feel they belong to and are accepted by social groups, such as their communities or by extension the whole society, is considered so important to how individuals view the quality of their relationships to, and functioning in life, and hence to their mental health as well as physical health.

Keyes's theoretical research based on an empirical study on Americans' social wellbeing turns out to be consistent with what has been observed in China's context. There is a growing realization in recent years about the positive correlation between the extent to which the first as well as the second generation rural-urban migrants living in cities feel accepted by their urban peers in the communities, and their happiness and/or life satisfaction as well as their physical health, followed by some investigations on how "identity threat", which occurs when these rural migrants don't feel accepted by their urban peers, could significantly undermine their mental health.²⁴

In addition, due to limited education and market opportunities, rural-urban migrants usually end up doing unskillful works with minimal wage. Leaving aside how low income of such works could affect their subjective wellbeing, it's not surprising that the feelings about what they do are neither challenged enough for their potential growth in the long term or self-actualization, nor worthwhile to society, may have caused a drop in these rural migrants' happiness and/or life satisfaction considering Maslow's theory of needs suggesting that increases in income above the basic needs level may not be matched by an increasing satisfaction if it cannot contribute to self-actualization which is considered to be the highest of all goods achievable by human action within the eudaimonic tradition in subjective wellbeing studies.²⁵ Furthermore, people's functioning, especially in the social dimensions, was much well comprehensively discussed in Keyes's framework than in Maslow's. High correlations between rural-urban migrants' subjective wellbeing and their valuations about their potential for growth within workplace and by extension in society and about their contribution to the society could be well understood

²² Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L., 2001, On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, in *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 147.

²³ Keyes, C. L. M., 1998, Social well-being, in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(2), 121-140.

²⁴ Jian, Guan and Wanwen, Dai, 2011, The construction of stigma and intergenerational differentiation of identity among immigrants in urban areas, in *Nanjing Social Science*, 4(80), 115-25.

²⁵ Maslow, A. H., 1954, *Motivation and Personality*, Harper and Row; Maslow, A. H., 1968, *Toward a psychology of being*, Van Nostrand.

within Keyes' framework in which "social actualization" (whether society possesses potential for personal growth, which can be seen as the extension of Maslow's "self-actualization" in the social context) and "social contribution" (whether individuals consider themselves as having something worthwhile to contribute to society) are viewed as being crucial to social wellbeing, and hence to subjective wellbeing considering the high correlation between these two.²⁶

2.1.3 The influence of social norms on social wellbeing and subjective wellbeing

In contrast to social groups such as communities which usually appreciate social norms such as cultural and indigenous values, endogenous groups such as ethnic groups put a even greater emphasis on these social norms. According to China's National census data released in recent years, the largest number of minority groups in the North Eastern China is now found living in city areas in Liaoning Province.²⁷ A large percent of these minority groups are coercively moved out of their original habitats in Hei long Jiang Province and Jilin Province which are normally filled with natural resources such as forests and swamps that the local governments feel obligated to protect against overly exploiting and undermining. The traditional culture and values, such as "nurture the nature now so that the nature will nurture you later" and "don't ask for more than your fair share from the mother nature and appreciate no matter how small mercies that nature offers you", deriving to a large extent from their ancestors' experience with and understanding of the natural environment, have been strictly followed by these minority groups before they made the transition to urban living. The minority groups felt increasingly detached from their ancestral culture and values which advocate for lowering expectations for material things, and often found themselves lost in the "commodity fetishism" which worships excessive desires for material goods after they relocated to city areas.

Putting aside how overly exploitation of natural resources driven by the commodity fetishism based on the logic of capital could negatively affect the sustainable economic development which will in turn determine human wellbeing - both objective and subjective wellbeing - in the long term,²⁸ an individual's feelings of being lost and detached to the cultural and values rooted in their traditional way of living and original living environment may have caused a decline in happiness and/or life satisfaction according to the qualitative analysis of minority groups in the North-Eastern part of China by many indigenous scholars or even writers. "When there was no road, we used to be lost; but when there are too many roads, we are lost as well since we're not

²⁶ Keyes, C. L. M., 2006, Subjective Well-Being in Mental Health and Human Development Research Worldwide: An Introduction, in *Social Indicators Research*, 77(1), 5.

²⁷ Shouting, Lu, 2009, An analysis of the migration flow of minority groups in the North-Eastern China during the urbanization process, in *Manchu Minority Research*, 1, 1-7.

²⁸ On one of the most well-articulated and sophisticated analyses about commodity fetishism and the operation of the logic of capital, see Marx, C., 1887, *Capital*, especially *Volume I: The Process of Production of Capital*, Progress Publishers.

sure where to go anymore".²⁹ Says the heroine in *The Right Bank of the Argun River* through which we could get a glimpse of the gradual rural-urban migration of Oroqen Tribe, a minority group who used to live in the Da-xing-an-ling Forest, whose livelihoods used to be based on reindeer taming. This feeling of being lost so vividly described in *The Right Bank of the Argun River* may be the primary reason why some of the Oroqen tribe members finally found a way to move back to their original hunting sites on the mountain top after they were coercively relocated to Gen-he city at the foot of the mountain.³⁰

2.1.4 Social wellbeing as the bridge between subjective wellbeing and poverty studies

Social wellbeing is also a crucial concept that can be used to bridge the study of subjective wellbeing and that of poverty. Wellbeing, or health in other words, has been seen as one of the most significant sources of the wealth of a country not only because of high correlations between mental and physical illness, and direct as well as indirect economic and social burden to a country, but also because that health, or wellbeing, is closely related to the sustainable growth and development of a country.³¹ An increasing level of subjective wellbeing which shouldn't be equated with, but is closely correlated with being free from mental diseases could be extremely helpful in relieving economic and social burden to society by reducing mental and physical illnesses, considering studies that consistently linked high level of subjective wellbeing to increased protection against the beginning and rise in physical illness as people age by improving their immune and cognitive system.³² And social wellbeing which is seen as a center yardstick for mental health can thusly be used as a major indicator for subjective wellbeing and sustainable economic development of a country.³³

Wellbeing, or health in other words, which includes both mental and physical health, is recognized as a major form of human capital nowadays. Social wellbeing can be beneficial for alleviating poverty, for it can not only be seen as a form of human capital considering that it is a major indicator for subjective wellbeing denoted by mental health, but it is also tied to social capital which has come to be seen as an important anti-poverty instrument. The idea within both classical and neoclassical economic frameworks that the individual is best placed to diminish risk does not seem to be consistent with the empirical evidence of economic

²⁹ Zijian, Chi, 2005, *The Right Bank of the Argun River*, Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House.

³⁰ Shu zi, 2012, When the hunters are disappearing, in *Chinese National Geographic Magazine*, 10, 33-39.

³¹ Berger, M. L., et al., 2003, Investing in healthy human capital, in *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 45(12), 1213-1225.

³² Keyes, C. L. M., 2005, Mental illness and/or mental health? Investigating axioms of the complete health model, in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73(3), 539-548; Keyes, C. L. M., and Waterman, M.B., 2003, Dimensions of well-being and mental health in adulthood, in *Well-being: Positive development throughout the life course*, eds., Bornstein, M., et al., NJ, 477-497; Diener, E., and Seligman, M. E. P., 2004, Beyond money: Toward an economy of well-being, in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5(1), 1-31.

³³ Keyes, C. L. M., 1998, Social well-being, in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(2), 121-140.

development in the last century. There is an increasingly popular market related theory claiming that the poor are different from the non-poor in their ability to withstand shocks, so they need social protection; and this theory leads to a risk minimization approach that looks to manage risk in the lives and livelihoods of critically/chronically poor individuals, households and communities in increasing participation and social relations.³⁴

It has been shown that personal networks and participation in community programs can help increase social capital.³⁵ In the light of a growing realization that individuals are shaped by their community, and communities are shaped by their individual numbers as a result, Bradshaw criticizes the other major theories of poverty for not fully exploring relation between individuals and their community, and considers the community based anti-poverty program which is built on an explanation of poverty which places the origin of poverty from cumulative and circumstantial origins to be the most efficient anti-poverty approach among others. This community-based anti-poverty theory strongly advocated by Bradshaw proposes developing comprehensive approaches to poverty based on a multifaceted approach including education as well as personal networks and participation in community programs that increase social capital.³⁶ It has been pointed out by Putnam among others that individuals through association memberships create communities characterized by more trust and reciprocity, and these communities with more social capital have been shown to be more resilient to adversity and thus protect their residents from the spiral into poverty which less civic communities experience when facing similar challenges.³⁷ This theory was later championed by an observation that communities which value equality and have narrow gaps of opportunity also have institutions that reflect these values and try to not leave anyone behind too far to a greater extent.³⁸ To understand why not getting behind too far is crucial to an individual's subjective wellbeing we have to be aware of the importance of an individual's relative status within social groups such as communities to their subjective wellbeing.

We have mentioned earlier that the dynamics between an individual's relative status within social groups, such as communities, and their subjective wellbeing is best understood within the relativistic judgment models such as the one suggested by Easterlin claiming that the rapid growth in the incomes in high income countries since the 1950s has typically been associated

³⁴ Chambers, R., 1997, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, ITDG Publishing.

³⁵ Bradshaw, T.K., 2007, Theories of Poverty and Anti-Poverty Programs in Community Development, in *Community Development*, 38(1), 5-18.

³⁶ Education is considered by Duncan as the most important local institution which could increase social capital that will help reverse the dynamic of poverty in poor communities. See Duncan, C.M., 1999, *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America*, Yale University Press.

³⁷ Putnam, R., 2001, *Social Capital: Measurement and Consequences*. Available at <www.oecd.org/edu/.../1825848.pdf>.

³⁸ Duncan, C.M., 1999, *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America*, Yale University Press.

with stable or declining happiness.³⁹ The explanation for this so-called Easterlin Paradox is that people care more about their status in their own society than their economic wealth in absolute terms. Putting aside the debate about whether China should be identified as a high-income country right now,⁴⁰ even if we could assure that China could make its way into a high income country in the far or near future, there is no guarantee that Chinese rural residents (including rural-urban migrants who are temporarily living in urban areas but haven't obtained an urban hukou) who fall into the lower half of the income distribution in this country will be happier by then given Easterlin's paradox which is highly consistent with the current mental status of Chinese rural residents. As a matter of fact, Chinese rural residents are not happier when the per capita GDP of Chinese rural households is now 38 times than 30 years ago thanks to China's highest periods of economic growth in human history in the past 30 years.⁴¹ The growing concern of Chinese rural population (including rural-urban migrants who haven't successfully obtained an official urban hukou) about their declining social status and position relative to more wealthy and socially significant urban population in China's society makes them nearly as unhappy as decades ago despite the huge amount of economic wealth created by the booming agriculture and overall rapid economic development. From these perspectives, it seems reasonable to say that as long as China's society concentrates on getting ahead in economic terms regardless of the increasing inequality between economically and socially disadvantaged rural population and urban population, China's society can never be truly happy considering the large percentage that rural population still takes up in China. The increasing agriculture productivity and per capita GDP reported by the total population and the declining social status as well as subjective well-being of Chinese rural residents pose a vital question for policymakers in China: should we focus on building a faster growing economy, or a happier society? Considering China's increasing GDP and per capita GDP of rural households, declining happiness as showed in rising mental illness along with skyrocketing suicide rates among rural residents, it is reasonable and perhaps even urgent for Chinese policymakers to pay greater attention to curb the declining subjective well-being of the vast disadvantaged rural population by spreading the economic wealth more evenly across the whole country instead of

³⁹ Easterlin, R.A., 1974, Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence, in *Nations and Households in Economics Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramowitz*, eds., David, P.A., and Reder, M.W., Academic Press, 89-125; Easterlin, R.A., 1995, Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all?, in *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 27, 35-47. Although Easterlin's finding about the low correlation between income and happiness was called in question by the later reassessment of the relationship of income and subjective wellbeing indicating that there is indeed a positive correlation between these two (Stevenson, B. and Wolfers, J., 2008), these new arguments have been counteracted to a certain extent by Easterlin's counter-argument (Easterlin et al., 2010).

⁴⁰ It has been argued by some scholars such as Ken Pomeranz that we should identify China as a high-income country right now considering the provocative finding in his work *Great Divergence* claiming that the average incomes in China was comparable to or even higher than those in western Europe even in the late 18th century.

⁴¹ See the *Statistical Yearbook of China* released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2011. Available at <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/t20050228/_402231854.htm>

just focusing on getting ahead in economic terms, or, put it another way, "pilling up material goods", at the price of growing inequality and declining happiness of vast rural population. Michael Prowse has warned us: "just pilling up material goods will never solve the problem of status differences".⁴² According to him, "concern about status is bred into us by natural selection: high-status monkeys are happier than low-status ones".⁴³ Since people's concern about their status in their own society is a result of natural selection, it seems unwise for policy makers to ignore this inevitable human nature and the great influence of equal distribution of wealth on people's subjective wellbeing, and just focus on the increase of wealth as a whole.

To sum up, the concept of social wellbeing might be able to bridge the hedonic (or psychological) and eudaimonic (or social) tradition within the framework of the happiness approach, the capability approach, as well as the mental health approach, which are three major approaches to subjective wellbeing studies, at least within China's context. I also came up with a hypothesis that the key to improve subjective wellbeing of Chinese rural-urban migrants who reported the lowest level of subjective wellbeing among total population lies not merely in the promotion of their happiness, or hedonic wellbeing in other words, but in the whole society's effort to improve their social wellbeing by enabling them to develop their eudaimonic capabilities which are helpful in improving their social integration, social acceptance, social actualization and social contribution.

Before we move to another possible explanation for the paradoxical phenomena of low level of subjective wellbeing and improved objective conditions observed in the same time among Chinese rural-urban migrants, it's important to point out one last point about social wellbeing. Whereas the positive influence of satisfying social relationships on happiness have been discussed quite often, the positive influence of happiness or a high level of subjective wellbeing on people's social functioning in life doesn't seem to be appreciated enough. Studies have shown that people who are happier are far more likely to develop a positive attitude towards other people in society and feel welcomed by other people, to make good friends and get into marriage, and to have more positive life and career outcomes as a result.⁴⁴ In this light, a virtuous circle between social wellbeing, subjective wellbeing and positive life results can be created as a result of improving social wellbeing.

2.2 Adaptation

Apart from the possibility that Chinese urban residents and rural-urban migrants have a lower level of subjective wellbeing compared to rural residents because the first two social groups

⁴² Prowse, M, 2005, Joy Divisions, in *FT* magazine. Available at <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0f6678ce-8b>>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Harker, L., and Keltner, D., 2001, Expressions of positive emotions in women's college yearbook pictures and their relationship to personality and life outcomes across adulthood, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(1), 112-24.

have a generally lower level of social wellbeing than the latter, there is another possible explanation for the higher level of subjective wellbeing of Chinese rural residents which is disproportional to their lower level of incomes and welfares: Chinese rural residents tend to adjust their aspirations downwards because of their disadvantaged circumstances and hardship in the context of the growing urban-rural inequality in terms of both incomes and welfares. On the contrary, Chinese urban residents tend to have generally higher aspirations, and rural-urban migrants tend to adjust their aspirations upwards after they relocate to urban areas.

The strength of the growing interest in the psychological phenomenon of adaptation by not only psychologists, philosophers but also economists following Easterlin's thinking recently found echoes in a series of empirical works on adaptation in developing country context including China.⁴⁵ Generally speaking, there are mainly two strands of work on adaptation in the context of development studies. The first stream of work which sheds light on adaptation is concerned with the ability of the individuals, household or community to adjust to climate change and by extension to environmental, economic and social disasters.⁴⁶ The second stream of work, with a much smaller following in development studies than the first one, integrates adaptation with subjective wellbeing through the study of the dynamics between income and happiness.⁴⁷ The relationship of income and happiness is more crucial to the study of subjective wellbeing in a middle-lower income country like China than in more developed countries in the light of livability theory which indicates that income may not be followed with a rise in subjective wellbeing anymore above the basic needs level.⁴⁸

Among all six major forms of adaptation and related phenomena that influence mental reactions,⁴⁹ two types of adaptation are most likely to have affected subjective wellbeing of

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, M, 2001, Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options, in *Economics and Philosophy*, 17, 67-88; Sen, A., 1977, Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6(4), 317-344; Easterlin, R.A., 1974, Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence, in *Nations and Households in Economics Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramowitz*, eds., David, P.A., and Reder, M.W., Academic Press, 89-125; Easterlin, R.A., 1995, Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all?, in *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 27, 35-47; Easterlin, R.A., 2001, Income and happiness: Towards a unified theory, in *Economic Journal*, 111(473), 465-84. For the recent empirical work on adaptation in developing country context, see David, C., 2012, Adaptation and development - issues, evidence and policy relevance, in *Adaptation, Poverty and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*, ed., David Clark, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 1-31.

⁴⁶ Smit, B. and Wandel, J., 2006, Adaptation, adaptive capacity and vulnerability, in *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 80-96; Janssen, M.A., and Ostrom, E., 2006, Resilience, vulnerability, and adaptation: A cross-cutting theme of the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change, in *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 282-92.

⁴⁷ David, C., 2012, Adaptation and development - issues, evidence and policy relevance, in *Adaptation, Poverty and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*, ed., David Clark, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 1-31.

⁴⁸ Veenhoven, R., 1991, Is happiness relative?, in *Social Indicators Research*, 24(1), 1-34; Veenhoven, R., 1993, *Happiness in Nations: Subjective Appreciation of Life in 56 Nations: 1946-1992*, Risbo.

⁴⁹ David, C., 2012, Adaptation and development - issues, evidence and policy relevance, in *Adaptation, Poverty and Development: The Dynamics of Subjective Well-Being*, ed., David Clark, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 3-4.

Chinese rural residents and rural-urban migrants: 1) non-grumbling acceptance or resignation when facing inequalities and adversity;⁵⁰ and 2) hedonic treadmill.⁵¹ Although there is another major type of adaptation identified by Nussbaum as natural adaptation which happens when people adapt their expectations according to their age, sex, social status, etc, this third type of adaptation will not be discussed in this paper since it's not particularly helpful in improving our understanding of the differences in the level of subjective wellbeing reported by different sections in the Chinese society and reasons lies behind these differences.⁵²

2.2.1 Non-grumbling acceptance

The first possible reason for the higher level of subjective wellbeing of Chinese rural residents which are at a considerable income disadvantage compared to urban residents as well as rural-urban migrants is that the former may have learned to "take pleasures in small mercies and cut down their desires to modest - 'realistic' - proportions" so that their unfortunate and disappointed lives may look or at least feel less unfortunate and disappointing.⁵³ This explanation about the greater happiness and/or life satisfaction reported by Chinese rural residents is applicable to another paradoxical phenomenon which indicates a higher level of subjective wellbeing of certain social groups in unfavorable circumstances such as women in the Chinese society. Chinese women who, despite their relatively income disadvantage, have reported generally higher level of subjective wellbeing than Chinese men according to the very first official happiness survey ever conducted in China by Guangdong government in 2011 as well as a series of non-official researches on happiness conducted in most of the provinces within China including Beijing, Tianjing, Chongqing, Shanxi, and so on during the past decade.⁵⁴ It is possible that the dominated and sometimes even abused housewives have learnt

⁵⁰ Elster, J., 1983, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*, Cambridge University Press; Sen, A., 1984, *Resources, Values and Development*, Basil Blackwell; Sen, A., 1985, *Commodities and Capabilities*, Elsevier Science Publishers; Sen, A., 1987, *On Ethics and Economics*, Blackwell; Sen, A., 1990, Development as capability expansion, in *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*, eds., Griffin, K., and Knight, J., Macmillan, 41-58; Sen, A., 1999, *Development as Freedom*, Anchor; Sen, A., 2002, *Rationality and Freedom*, Belknap Press; Sen, A., 2009, *The Idea of Justice*, Allen Lane.

⁵¹ Easterlin, R.A., 1974, Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence, in *Nations and Households in Economics Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramowitz*, eds., David, P.A., and Reder, M.W., Academic Press, 89-125; Easterlin, R.A., 2001, Income and happiness: Towards a unified theory, in *Economic Journal*, 111(473), 465-84.

⁵² For the third type of adaptation, see Nussbaum, M., 2000, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press.

⁵³ Sen, A., 1990, Development as capability expansion, in *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*, eds., Griffin, K., and Knight, J., Macmillan, 43.

⁵⁴ For the details about the happiness survey conducted in Guangdong Province in 2011, see <<http://www.likeneews.us/>>. For non-official happiness surveys conducted in Beijing, Tianjing, Chongqing, and Shanxi, see *Beijing Social life index system report* released by Capital University of Economics and Business in 2007. Available at <<http://health.sohu.com/20080123/n254840194.shtml>>; See *Happiness index in seven provinces of China*. Available at <<http://bbs.315che.com/forums/showtopic-330020.htm>>. See *Happiness index evaluation in Chongqing Province: women report greater happiness than men*. Available at

to suppress their painful feelings and to take pleasure in no matter how small satisfaction that their disappointed life has to offer them so that they could continue to survive by keeping their displeasure and disappointment to a manageable level. This process of resignation in the face of injustice, exploitation and abuse towards women may overlap with natural adaptation to sex and social status.⁵⁵

2.2.2 Hedonic treadmill

In sharp contrast to non-grumbling acceptance or resignation which indicates that people who live in unsatisfying objective conditions may identify themselves to be better off than they are or should be, taking Chinese rural residents who reported an overall greater happiness and/or life satisfaction than objectively better off urban residents as well as rural-urban migrants for example, there is another common form of adaptation that could be seen as the reverse or opposite of non-grumbling resignation: hedonic treadmill to improved circumstances.

The finding about the fact that people's mental reactions to good events are temporary points to a high correlation between hedonic treadmill and the rate and extent of people's adaptation to events.⁵⁶ This finding is in accordance with Easterlin's later finding that there doesn't seem to be a positive correlation between raising income and raising happiness in time-series data sets.⁵⁷ A possible explanation for Easterlin's paradox indicating low level of correlation between raising income and raising happiness in the long term is that happiness is a function of not only income but aspirations.⁵⁸ It has been argued that people tend to raise their aspirations along with an increase in income and wealth because as their objective circumstances improve, so does their taste.⁵⁹ To satisfy their more expansive taste, people feel almost obliged to set higher adequate income thresholds. Raising aspirations, which, on the contrary to reduced aspirations which are usually expressed as non-grumbling resignation that often exerts a positive effect on happiness, tends to affect happiness in a negative way considering that the higher aspirations people have towards their income and wealth, the less possible that they

[Happiness index reported by Shanxi residents. Available at <<http://news.163.com/11/0120/02/6QQC52QH00014AED.html>>.](http://www.baidu.com/link?url=jmgCGJqjJ4zBBpC8yDF8xDherCavK9c8ZyoEbodO3AH53JgjHSI9t2YoRkTRpYuc4YyZ0IKvjDlm4JVw2aK>)

⁵⁵ Nussbaum, M, 2000, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Ch.6.

⁵⁶ Brickman, P. and Campbell, D. T., 1971, Hedonic relativism and planning the good society, in *Adaptation-level theory: A symposium*, eds., Apley, M. H., Academic Press.

⁵⁷ Easterlin, R.A., 1974, Does economic growth improve the human lot? Some empirical evidence, in *Nations and Households in Economics Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramowitz*, eds., David, P.A., and Reder, M.W., Academic Press, 89-125.

⁵⁸ Easterlin, R.A., 2001, Income and happiness: Towards a unified theory, in *Economic Journal*, 111(473), 465-84.

⁵⁹ Stutzer, A., 2004, The role of income aspirations in individual happiness, in *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation*, 54(1), 89-109.

could feel satisfied or happy with their current income and wealth and by extension with their lives as a whole.⁶⁰

Theoretically and empirically speaking, people in the middle of the income ladder or, in other words, people who are on the onward trend of social mobility often tend to report lower level of happiness and/or life satisfaction than those who are in the upper or lower bottom of income ladder due to hedonic treadmill.⁶¹ A possible explanation for the lowest mean happiness score of Chinese rural-urban migrants is that they can be identified as "frustrated achievers" in the middle of the income ladder whose feeling towards relative deprivation are much stronger than rural residents who unlike rural-urban migrants, rarely get to observe the rich and fancy urban lifestyle personally at such close distance or to experience discrimination in terms of access to jobs, wages, education as well as all kinds of welfares towards housing, health care, etc., due to China's residential registration system or hukou system.

Apart from the possibility that China's rural migrants living in city areas are exposed to stronger feelings of relative deprivation or discrimination than rural residents who remain in rural areas and tend to be more frustrated than the latter upon the fact that it is difficult for them to keep up with the Jones, or their neighbors who are better off in terms of both income and welfares, after the reference group of the former is transferred from rural residents in small villages to urban residents in big cities, there's another major determinant of low mean happiness of these rural migrants: they tend to raise their aspirations in the face of new opportunities and raising incomes, yet these rising aspirations often outpace rising absolute incomes.⁶² Psychologically speaking, frustration or depression is most likely to appear when people set higher expectations and aspirations than what they are able to achieve in the short term.⁶³ Speaking from these terms, it is not surprising at all that we observe the lowest level of subjective wellbeing denoted by lowest mean happiness score among Chinese rural-urban migrants who, after moving to a new environment, usually set higher aspirations than what they could possibly achieve in terms of both wealth and welfares in the near future. These rural migrants may not realize the fact that they have adapted to the new surrounding by comparing themselves to a new reference group - the economically and socially well-off urban citizens - and by setting higher aspirations based

⁶⁰ Nussbaum has a point when pointing out that adjusting to what is possible by reducing aspirations could be a good thing especially in the context of poverty because it reduces the amount of misery brought by adversity and hardship. See Nussbaum, M, 2000, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Ch.3.

⁶¹ For detailed discussion on "frustrated achievers" in the middle of the income ladder, see Graham, C., and Pettinato, S., 2000, *Frustrated achievers: Winners, losers and subjective wellbeing in new market economies*, Center on Social and Economic Dynamics Working Paper Series No. 20, The Brookings Institution.

⁶² Nussbaum, M, 2000, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 108.

⁶³ Taylor, S. E., and Brown, J. D, 1988, Illusion and Well-Being : A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health, in *Psychological Bulletin*, 103, 193–210.

on the comparison with this new reference group. They may not realize that even though they "think" or "feel like" they are not significantly or slightly happier than before, they actually are, or at least should be, happier if their aspirations remain in a state of homeostasis. In short, they don't feel happier when they should be because they have unconsciously set higher expectations or aspirations without even realizing it.

Considering that Chinese rural migrants began to compare themselves with a new reference group - their urban peers - after they moved to a whole new surrounding, and developed higher income aspirations as well as a set of much higher developmental needs and aspirations for, for example, better housing, comprehensive welfares, higher level of education for their children, more promising careers which allow personal growth, it seems reasonable to assume that these rural migrants might feel much happier if incomes and welfares were to be distributed more equally among them and their urban peers. However, philosophically speaking, this may not be the case.

Aristotle defined motion (or dynamics) of everything in the physical world in *Physics III.1* as "a process in which potentiality gets actualized".⁶⁴ Potentiality is equated by Aristotle with "privation" which implies the form which something should have but yet to be actualized. Privation not only determines the direction of motion, but also acts as potentiality of motion towards this direction. A statement made by Aristotle to which we should pay extra attention is that the actualization of potentiality is always temporal because whenever a certain potentiality gets actualized, another potentiality will occur immediately, and that's what constructs the continuity of motion in the physical world.⁶⁵ Aristotle's analysis on human action in the social world driven by human desires derives to a great extent from his analysis on motion in the physical world. In part VII of the second book of *Politics*, despite his emphasis on the importance of equalization of property or wealth, Aristotle also recognized that the contribution of the extent to which the distribution of property or wealth approaches equality to stabilizing polity is quite limited. "The equalization of property is one of the things that tend to prevent the citizens from quarrelling. Not that the gain in this direction is very great".⁶⁶ In his eyes, human beings tend to have unlimited desires by their own nature and these unlimited desires cannot possibly be satisfied even if an equal distribution of property and wealth could somehow be achieved. To put it in another way, we could see human desires as human potentiality that yet to be actualized in the social world. Whenever one potentiality, or human desire, gets actualized, a new potentiality or human desire will always follow. "At one time two obols was

⁶⁴ Aristotle, 1983, *Physics: Books III and IV*, ed., Hussey, E., Oxford University Press, 63.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Aristotle, 1999, *Politics: Book II*, Botache Books. Available at <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.2.two.html>>.

pay enough; but now, when this sum has become customary, men always want more and more without end".⁶⁷

In this light, it seems rather understandable why improving objective circumstances didn't make Chinese rural-urban migrants happier or more satisfied: after they became accustomed to their improved income level and by extension to their improved living standards after they made the transition into urban employment and living, they started to want more. And it also seems reasonable to infer in this light that happiness and/or life satisfaction of Chinese rural-urban migrants may not significantly improve even if urban-rural inequality in incomes and welfares were to be diminished somehow considering that it's very likely that they would have developed new desires either for income, property or other potential things that yet to be actualized by then. Perhaps just as Aristotle has sharply pointed out more than 2000 years ago, "it is of the nature of desire not to be satisfied 'because' the avarice of mankind is insatiable."⁶⁸

We could see the argument defining desire as a major source of frustration, insecurity and painful struggling in a large number of literatures on philosophy, psychology as well as in different religious doctrines. In this light, it's not difficult to come to the conclusion that subjective wellbeing or mental health will always be affected by human desires and more importantly, by how they handle them. Under the impression that as long as there are unfulfilled desires, human beings will always suffer from frustration, philosophers have come up with a lot of strategies by which people could possibly overcome frustration generated by desire. Among all kinds of strategies, stoicism is perhaps one of the most well-known ones. Contrary to common belief, stoicism is not just about inhibiting human desires ruthlessly or about naively ignoring these desires by denying their very existence. Rather, it recommends that people should adjust their unlimited desires to limited ones that are achievable in the short term on the basis of objective circumstances, instead of expecting things to happen just because they desire them to be, or "seek to have events happen as you want them to" in Epictetus's words.⁶⁹

These ideas brought up by Epictetus are quite similar to the spirit of accepting things as how they are and thusly adjusting to what is possible or feasible especially in objectively disadvantaged circumstances, a spirit serving as the pillar of a major form of adaptation that we have talked about earlier - non-grumbling acceptance or resignation when facing inequalities and adversity. According to our analyses, this spirit could be a main reason behind greater happiness and/or life satisfaction of Chinese rural residents who are at a considerable income and welfare disadvantage compared to rural-urban migrants, let alone urban residents.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *Epictetou Encheiridion*. Available at <<http://www.san.beck.org/Epictetus.html>>.

In conclusion, a major form of adaptation which is non-grumbling acceptance or resignation when facing inequalities and adversity is not necessarily a bad thing in the light of its actual effect in reducing negative feelings such as frustration that are usually generated by desires that cannot be fulfilled in objectively straitened circumstances, taking the greater happiness and/or life satisfaction of Chinese rural residents for example. In sharp contrast, another major form of adaptation, hedonic treadmill, tends to put a dent in subjective wellbeing because after people adjust their aspirations onwards in the face of improving objective circumstances, their rising living standards denoted by either rising incomes or improved welfares they are currently able to enjoy are very likely to be outpaced by their rising aspirations. That's probably what happened to Chinese rural-urban migrants who feel less happy and satisfied after they made the transition into a better objective surrounding.

2.3 Lack of correlation between more choices and opportunities and actual happiness

We've articulated two possible explanations for the paradoxical phenomena in China from the theoretical perspectives of social wellbeing and adaptation. Now, we come up with a third possible explanation which can be seen as a critique of the capability approach to subjective wellbeing which focuses mainly on capabilities and freedom of choice instead of on how or whether these capabilities and freedom can be transformed into an actual happy or happier life. As we can see from the declining subjective wellbeing of Chinese rural-urban migrants after they made the transition to urban employment and living, became economically better-off and had more choices and opportunities in life, that capabilities themselves, or an increasing number of capabilities within the capabilities set may not necessarily, let alone automatically, transform into an improvement in subjective wellbeing. Along with new choices made possible to Chinese rural migrant workers after they moved to urban areas - such as the choices to seek better employment opportunity, to enjoy more comprehensive welfares, to send their children to better schools, to obtain an urban hukou and become official urban residents, or to come back to their rural settings, etc. - they didn't seem to be leading a happier life than before considering that they reported the greatest decline in happiness as well as the lowest happiness score compared to both urban and rural residents.

It has been argued that "a larger range of options apparently makes people more likely to feel regret afterwards because the chance of choosing a suboptimal option is greater".⁷⁰ It's also been found out that there may be a positive correlation between more choice and depression.⁷¹ Schwartz noticed that new choices are usually accompanied by an increase in expectations for

⁷⁰ Hirata, J., 2008. The division of labor between the capability and the happiness perspectives, in *Capabilities and Happiness*, eds., Bruni, L., et al., Oxford University Press, 175.

⁷¹ Schwartz, B., 2000, Self-determination. The tyranny of freedom, in *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 80.

life.⁷² From a psychological perspective, it's rather natural that people will feel a sense of frustration and maybe even depression when things didn't go as they have expected. If the improved expectations are based on new choices, people are more likely to regret the choices they've made when faced multiple alternatives when the results of their choices couldn't live up to their higher expectations, and to blame themselves for making the allegedly wrong choices, or for not having made better choices.

Professor Dong-dong, Sun, at Peking University used to share with us some of his ideas on the association between higher education and psychological diseases, such as depression and melancholia, in a series of mental health lectures back in 2005 when I was a first year undergraduate student at Peking University.⁷³ Based on five years of experiences of working as a psychiatric doctor in the Beijing Anding Institute for Mental Health, Professor Sun noticed that intellectuals who have finished high level of education are much more likely to suffer from certain psychological diseases, such as depression and melancholia, than less educated people. He came up with an explanation for this association between intellectuals received high education and psychological ailments, based on his experiences in performing talk therapies and on his daily observation of his colleagues and students at prestigious academic institutions such as Peking University, that the fact that intellectuals are much more likely to over-think about everything in their lives than less educated people is most likely to be the trigger of their mental suffering. In other words, a much larger set of choices available to these intellectuals due to their distinguished intellectual capacities and the higher level of education they've received, compared to people with less intellectual capabilities, and the great struggle they experience when they have to choose between multiple alternatives could be held accountable for psychological diseases, such as depression and melancholia, from which these intellectuals tend to suffer.

A rather paradoxical phenomenon I've noticed in a particular province in China, Tibet - which despite of its relatively low, or perhaps the lowest level of education and literacy compared to other provinces in China, has reported highest happiness scores in the Chinese society in recent years - could be used to back up Professor Sun's analyses about the association between high levels of education and low levels of subjective wellbeing denoted by psychological ailments. When browsing through figures about literacy rates in China released by the World Bank in recent years, Tibet stuck out by its lowest rural literacy rates as well as its least significant improvement in literacy levels during the last three decades among all Chinese provinces. On the other hand, Lhasa, which is the capital city of Tibet, has been ranked in top three in some of the informal happiness surveys conducted nationwide - a much higher ranking than some of the

⁷² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷³ Dong-dong, Sun, 2004, *The Pursuit of Sunshine Mentality: a Collection of Mental Health Lectures at Peking University*, Huadong Normal University Press.

richest and most educated cities in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Chongqing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou - for 6 years in a row.⁷⁴

These analyses about the lack of correlation, and sometimes even inverse proportion between more choices in life - either as a result of higher education or of other objective conditions such as urban living and employment settings - and high levels of subjective wellbeing can be applied to the paradox of more choices for Chinese rural-urban migrants and their lower level of happiness and life satisfaction. Even though the reason for the increase in choices in life for the Chinese intellectuals with high level of education and for the generally much less educated Chinese rural-urban migrant workers are rather different - while the remarkable intellectual capacities and higher education may be the main reason for the increased choices that life offers for the former, the change of living and working locations may be the main reason for the new opportunities open to them for the latter - these different reasons seem to have led to similar results: more opportunities and new choices in life, as well as less happiness and life satisfaction. If, as we have discussed earlier, new choices can truly put a dent in people's subjective wellbeing, then it's rather understandable why more educated people are more likely to suffer from depression and melancholia than less educated ones according to Professor Sun's observation, and similarly, why rural-urban migrants who have a generally much higher per capita GDP, and are enjoying a more comprehensive welfare services than their rural peers who remain in rural areas and themselves before they moved to urban areas, somehow reported lower happiness scores than their objectively disadvantaged rural peers. From these perspectives, the happiness approach to subjective wellbeing which is concerned with not only capabilities themselves, but also with whether and how can we convert capabilities and freedom to choose to actual happiness, should be seen an indispensable supplement to the capability approach when it comes to measuring subjective wellbeing and understanding the results revealed by these measurements at least within China's context.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, judging from existing data on subjective wellbeing collected in China in recent years, subjective wellbeing is not always positively associated with, and in many cases is even inversely proportional to objective indicators for wellbeing or human development, such as per capita GDP or GNP, income level and education, etc., in certain sections of the Chinese society, taking Chinese rural residents and rural-urban migrants for example. And this lack of correlation, and sometimes even inversely proportion, between subjective wellbeing and objective indicators for human development among certain social groups in China may be not so puzzling after all if we see them through three lenses within the frameworks of happiness

⁷⁴ Why the city of Lhasa - the capital of Buddhism - ranked top six years in a row in happiness survey, August 23, 2012, *Phoenix New Media*.

approach, the capability approach, as well as the mental health approach, which are three major approaches to subjective wellbeing studies: 1) social wellbeing theory, 2) adaptation theory, and 3) a critical view of capability approach from a psychological perspective which indicates the negative effects that more choices, or an increasing number of capabilities within the capability set, could exert on subjective wellbeing.

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