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ISSN: 2162-0555 (Print) 2162-0563 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/mcsa20>

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To cite this article: Tony Huiquan Zhang, Jing Hu & Xichao Zhang (2020) Disparities in Subjective Wellbeing: Political Status, Urban-Rural Divide, and Cohort Dynamics in China, Chinese Sociological Review, 52:1, 56-83, DOI: [10.1080/21620555.2019.1654369](https://doi.org/10.1080/21620555.2019.1654369)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21620555.2019.1654369>



Published online: 11 Sep 2019.



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Disparities in Subjective Wellbeing: Political Status, Urban-Rural Divide, and Cohort Dynamics in China

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Abstract: *This paper investigates disparities in subjective wellbeing in China by analyzing the Chinese General Social Survey (2003–2015). Our hierarchical age-period-cohort models reveal how Chinese Communist Party membership, the urban-rural divide, and cohort differences have jointly shaped levels of happiness. Interestingly, the significance of political status in shaping happiness varies profoundly across birth cohorts and locations of residence. In earlier cohorts (1910–1948), Communist Party members in rural areas have a considerable advantage over nonmembers, but this advantage gradually diminishes later, except the 1977–1985 cohort. The advantage of urban party membership keeps increasing up to the cohort born during 1957–1965 but declines rapidly after that. Findings suggest that in the planned economy, political status plays a central role in promoting subjective wellbeing especially in urban China; the transition to a market economy in post-Mao China has reduced political disparities among younger cohorts, mainly for urban residents.*

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Introduction

In recent decades, China's economic success has improved the quality of life of Chinese people, evidenced by longer life expectancy, increased income, more educational attainment, and substantially improved subjective well-being (Shu and Zhu 2009). Since the rising subjective well-being (SWB) is situated in the context of a transitional economy with rapid economic growth accompanied by severe inequalities (Bian and Logan 1996; Wu and Li 2017), scholars are naturally curious about its determinants and the mechanisms driving it. They have reached some agreement on the roles of gender, age, race and ethnicity, religion, marital status, work-family interaction, job characteristics, and physical wellbeing, factors known to affect SWB (Di Tella, MacCulloch, and Oswald 2003; Easterlin 2003; Oishi, Kesebir, and Diener 2011; Ryan and Deci 2001; Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone 2015; Xie, Elangovan, Hu, and Hrabluik 2019; Yang 2008; Zhang, Siu, Hu, and Zhang 2014).

Others have noted factors unique to China that also affect SWB, such as political privilege, the transitional economy and marketization, the severe social inequality, disparities between state owned and private sectors, and the urban-rural divide (Appleton and Song 2008; Appleton et al. 2009; Chen, Wu, and Miao 2019; Fan, Wang, and Ma 2012; Huang, Wu, and Deng 2016; Wang and Xie 2015; Wu and Li 2017; Xin and Smyth 2010; Zhao 2012). Although these latter features are known to shape Chinese SWB, their interaction effects and dynamics over time have been understudied.

Our paper begins to fill this gap. Drawing on data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) 2003–2015, this paper investigates how political status, measured as membership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the urban-rural divide, and birth cohort together influence SWB in China, operationalized by the self-reported level of happiness. We are curious to learn how political status and location of residence shape SWB differently across the birth cohorts, and what implications that dynamic pattern has for understanding the social changes in China, especially the economic reform and market transition.

Our hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) modeling revealed a significant three-way interaction between party membership, the location of residence, and birth cohorts. Party membership was always a plus in people's happiness, but there was a rural-urban divide. Furthermore, the joint effect of political status and residence vary over different cohorts. The centrality of party membership was more stable in the rural population until very recent cohorts. In contrast, the role of party membership in the urban areas changed considerably across cohorts: urban party members' advantages climbed from the 1910–1948 cohorts to the 1949–1956 cohort and

continued climbing until they reached a peak in the 1957–1965 cohort; their advantages dropped in the 1977–1985 and post-1986 generations.

Our findings contribute to the study of happiness, social inequality, and social changes in China. First, we find membership in the CCP (political status) brings substantial advantages, but there are differences for different birth cohorts, and the advantages decline across time. Second, the dynamics of declining political advantages vary for urban and rural residents. Urban residents in China are more susceptible to political changes. The findings shed new light on the Chinese market transition literature (Bian and Logan 1996; Cao 2004; Fan, Wang, and Ma 2012; Nee and Cao 2002; Nee and Oppen 2010; Zhou 2000) and also the study of collective memory and Maoist nostalgia in China (Jiang and Ashley 2013; Lee 2007; Yang 2005). At least in terms of SWB, the shift to a market economy erodes the centrality of political status, and such erosion has a more significant impact on urban than rural China, suggesting expansion and then retreat of state influence on SWB over past decades.

SWB Studies: Global and Chinese Perspectives

As an important measure of the overall quality of life and mental wellness, SWB has received scholarly attention in a variety of subject areas, including economics, psychology, and sociology. A large body of the literature agrees on several basic tenets. At the individual level, first, wealth monotonically and positively contributes to SWB. Wealth's effect is significant, especially when an individual is in absolute poverty; after survival-level needs are satisfied, however, rising income generates diminishing marginal returns in SWB (Asadullah, Xiao, and Yeoh 2018). Second, in addition to wealth, other indicators of social statuses, such as educational attainment, employment, and occupational status, can contribute to feelings of happiness (Huang, Wu, and Deng 2016). Third, several basic demographics are associated with SWB in most social and cultural contexts: married, employed, religious individuals with children are often happier than their unmarried, uneducated, unemployed, nonreligious and childless counterparts (Diener et al. 2000; Easterlin 1995, 2003). Scholars have also looked for joint effects among these variables; for example, aging, physical wellbeing, and subjective wellbeing are often inter-related (Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone 2015); marriage and children can bring happiness, but the returns differ for males and females over the life course (Kohler, Behrman, and Skyttke 2005).

For societal level factors, the level of economic development in society can contribute to the happiness of its citizens (Stevenson and Wolfers 2013), and economic recession or a rise in the unemployment rate can hurt it (Di Tella, MacCulloch, and Oswald 2003). The role of economic inequality remains controversial—it brings spillover happiness in some

countries but generates discontent and tensions in others (Schneider 2016). Gender equality and low levels of religious fractionalization can also benefit a society's SWB (Mookerjee and Beron 2005).

In recent years, with increasingly available social survey data, Chinese people's SWB has become a hot topic in social science research (Appleton and Song 2008; Asadullah, Xiao, and Yeoh 2018; Chyi and Mao 2012; Ren and Treiman 2015; Shu and Zhu 2009; Tang 2014; Wang and Xie 2015; Wu and Li 2017; Xin and Smyth 2010; Zhao 2012; Zhou and Xie 2016). As mentioned, some of the findings listed below are consistent with global patterns, while others show the uniqueness of the Chinese context. First, China has experienced a steadily rapid economic growth, but this has been accompanied by severe internal inequality along multiple lines: the disparities between Western, Middle and Eastern China, the urban-rural divide (Knight and Gunatilaka 2010; Xie and Jin 2015), class inequality in wealth and income (Cao and Nee 2005; Chen, Wu, and Miao 2019), a generational inequality in education and values (Zhang, Brym, and Andersen 2017), and so on. These should influence Chinese people's SWB, especially those in a disadvantaged position. For instance, although global findings often suggest inequality does not affect or has only a marginal influence on SWB (Schneider 2016), its impact in China is significantly negative (Wu and Li 2017). This finding corresponds with a famous comment by Confucius from the *Analects*, "[rulers] do not worry about scarcity, but rather about inequality (不患寡而患不均)."

Second, in China, state power and individuals' political status are central in shaping the quality of life, career opportunities, and access to resources and welfare (Appleton and Song 2008; McLaughlin 2017; Shu and Zhu 2009; Walder 2003). Affiliation with the Communist Party and employment in the state-owned sectors (vis-à-vis private sectors) are positively associated with an advantageous situation in China's distributional system, which implies a positive impact on SWB. However, it is unclear how political forces and social inequality collectively shape the Chinese people's SWB. For example, we know CCP membership means better quality of life, and urban residents enjoy more economic opportunities and better infrastructure, but we do not know whether these two factors interact. Does CCP membership matter more in urban areas? Or is it the opposite? And if such interactions exist, do they change over time? In this research, we focus on the joint effects of three factors which play unique roles in the Chinese context: political status, cohort dynamics, and the urban-rural divide.

Happiness in China: Political Status, Cohort Dynamics, and the Urban-Rural Divide

Political status in contemporary China is often measured, as we do here, by whether an individual is a CCP member. CCP membership is associated with

happiness (Appleton and Song 2008; Appleton et al. 2009). Being a CCP member has various advantages in China that could lead to a happier status. First, CCP membership usually indicates a higher level of human capital. Individuals who are better educated and trained are more likely to be recruited (Dickson and Rublee 2000). Even though CCP has changed its recruitment criteria and preferences over recent decades (Bian, Shu and Logan 2001; Zhao 2009), the Party is still selecting new members based on meritocratic principles. Second, and related to the first, CCP members usually have better socioeconomic status (Appleton and Song 2008; McLaughlin 2017; Shu and Zhu 2009). Third, after being recruited, CCP members enjoy privileges reserved for party members, such as opportunities to be promoted in enterprises and party-state apparatuses or priority access to resources (Dickson and Rublee 2000; Dickson 2007; Walder 2003; Walder and Zhao 2006; Zhao and Ge 2014). Chinese political terminology often makes a distinction between “the leaders” and “the people” (those who are “led”) referring to the difference between Party members and nonmembers. Such discourse suggests party members are a superior group.

Given that party membership is associated with higher human capital, better social status, Party recognition and privileges after recruitment, CCP members are expected to have better SWB. Accordingly, the first research hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: Chinese Communist Party members are happier than non-members.

Though scholars argue for a positive effect of political status on happiness in China, we know little about how/whether this effect changes in different historical periods or alternatively, how/whether it differs for various birth cohorts. Part of the reason for the limitations in previous findings on temporal dynamics is the lack of longitudinal data, especially panel data, on the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Chinese social scientists and survey methodologists began nation-wide representative social surveys only in the past 20 years¹. Therefore, it is difficult to investigate the Chinese people’s SWB during the Mao era. Fortunately, with age-period-cohort analysis as a powerful statistical tool, we can isolate and identify the cohort effect. Though the cohort effect cannot fully reveal what happened in the Republic of China era (pre-1948) or the Mao era (1949–1976), it can indirectly reflect the various experiences of different populations. In this paper, we use HAPC models to reveal the SWB statuses of different generations of Chinese people.

The reason why we speculate that the effect of political status varies across different historical periods is that the CCP has shifted its leadership styles and policy orientations multiple times since the 1949 establishment of the PRC regime. For instance, though historians usually label 1949–1976 as the “Mao era,” the Party set quite different priorities and agendas during those

27 years, such as the “Socialist Reform (1949–1956),” the “Socialist Construction” (1957–1965), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The most profound change began with Mao’s death in 1976, when the “Mao era” became the “Deng era” (Walder and Zhao 2006) or “post-Mao era” (Chan 1996). After 1976, CCP under Deng and his successors gradually abandoned Mao’s Leninist planned economy and embraced the market economy and an open-up policy (Shirk 1993). In addition to the major shift from Mao to Deng, within the Mao and Deng eras, there were a number of noteworthy policy changes, such as the shift from Liu Shaoqi’s pragmatism to Mao’s radical populism during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution (Li 2011) or Zhu Rongji’s State-Owned Enterprise Reform in the late 1990s (Zweig 2001). With Jiang Zemin’s “Three Representatives” being incorporated into the CCP charter and the PRC constitution, the Communist Party started to welcome capitalists to join the Party (Dickson 2007; Ho 2013). All these shifts in political and economic policies have affected the way party membership is perceived and practiced in society. Dingxin Zhao (2009) notes some of these changes and their implications:

According to traditional Leninist ideology, the communist party is the vanguard of the working class. Yet in today’s China, most state industries have gone bankrupt, and many workers have been laid off. The social status of the workers whom the CCP supposedly represents has sharply declined, whereas foreign and joint ventures and private businesses in China have boomed. The young and well-paid professionals in the foreign and joint venture companies, together with the owners, managers, and skilled workers of the newly rising private companies, now comprise the backbone of China’s new upper class, upper-middle class, and middle class. Incorporating these new elites into the political system is a serious issue for the regime. Facing the challenge, the Chinese government not only allowed private business owners to join the communist party but also created “three representatives” to justify the CCP rule in the new era. (2009, p. 426)

Given the above, we anticipate membership in CCP, or political status, contributes differently to SWB in different periods and for different cohorts, leading to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The impact of political status on SWB varies across birth cohorts.

China’s urban-rural divide is an essential source of social inequality (Bian 2002; Chen, Wu and Miao 2019; Fu and Ren 2010; Knight and Gunatilaka 2010; Wu and Zhang 2010) and is deeply intertwined with China’s political and social transformations. Even though the state capacity of the Communist regime is at an unprecedented level (Yang and Zhao 2015), its presence is more pronounced in urban than rural areas. This may be partially explained by the Imperial legacy; in Ancient China,

local governance in rural areas was dominated by nonofficial or quasi-official representatives (Huang 2008). Or it may be explained by the limits of the infrastructural power—it may not yet extend into the peripheral areas in China. In any case, Chinese urban residents see more state influence than their rural comparators.

The relative importance of political status in life opportunities is changing more radically in urban than rural China (Walder and Hu 2009), as illustrated by the political movements² and economic reforms in PRC history. In the Mao era, the state centralized all economic power, and political status assumed a central role (Zhang, 2019). Workers in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) enjoyed an “iron rice bowl” until Zhu Rongji’s SOE reform during 1998–2000 (Cook 2001; Zweig 2001), and this reversal had a profound impact on urban Chinese people’s happiness (Wang and Xie 2015).

In other words, in urban China, political status once offered career opportunities and a better quality of life, but this role has weakened. For example, studies of post-Mao social mobility find that conventional cultural and social elites suffered in the Mao era but reclaimed their status post-Mao (Liang et al. 2016; Walder and Hu 2009). Meanwhile, rural CCP members may have had fewer political privileges, but their status has remained relatively stable. Zhou (2000) also notes that “the redistributive economy has been more entrenched in urban areas than in rural areas” (2000, 1166). To sum up, urban China is more susceptible to political changes, and we anticipate that urban Chinese people’s happiness is more influenced by politics. This leads to our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Interaction effects between political status and cohort are conditioned by the location of residence.

H3a: The advantages of urban CCP members are more relevant for birth cohorts under Mao’s rule and less relevant under the market economy. (the marketization thesis)

H3b: The advantages of rural CCP members remain relatively stable across birth cohorts. (the urban-rural gap thesis)

Data and Methods

Data: CGSS, 2003–2015

To examine our hypotheses on happiness in China, we drew on data from a nation-wide survey project, the CGSS. The CGSS is a repeated cross-sectional survey project conducted jointly by the Renmin University of China and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. The CGSS

employs a multistage stratified random sampling method to obtain a nationally representative sample of all Chinese adults. Since 2003, the CGSS has been conducted multiple times; as of 2018, there were nine waves of data: 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, and the latest wave, 2015. For most waves, 28 to 31 provincial-level units within mainland China were surveyed,³ yielding sample sizes from 5,000 to 12,000 (see [Table 1](#) for details).

We chose the CGSS dataset as it served our research goals. First, all waves of CGSS data contain the focal items in our research questions—self-reported happiness, political status measured by party membership, and the location of residence measured by urban versus rural. Second, the respondents represent a wide range of birth cohorts (1910s–1990s), allowing us to probe inter-generational dynamics. Third, the CGSS collects information from other correlates of happiness suggested by the literature, thus helping us rule out potential confounding effects. Lastly, the CGSS data is of high quality and low missing rate⁴; we used multiple imputation method provided by R package “Amelia II” (Honaker, King, and Blackwell 2011)⁵ to handle the remaining missing information.

Dependent Variable: Happiness

In CGSS, the respondents are asked: “On the whole, how do you feel about your life?” They select from five options: 1 = very unhappy, 2 = unhappy, 3 = average, 4 = happy, and 5 = very happy. We used this as our dependent variable. The wording of the question in 2008 slightly differed from other waves; *Kuai le* is used in the questionnaire instead of *Xing fu*, as it is pronounced in Mandarin Chinese. However, we included CGSS 2008 and treated this item in the same manner for the following reasons. First, the frequency distribution of happiness in CGSS 2008 differs little from the previous and the following waves (2006, 2010), indicating that the different wordings do not generate variations in responses. Second, they have similar meanings in Chinese, and their corresponding English translations are the same, supporting the item’s validity and comparability.⁶

For similar five-level measures, previous work has used either ordered logistic models or ordinary least square (OLS) models depending on the research question (Asadullah, Xiao, and Yeoh 2018; Qian and Qian 2015; Wu and Li 2017; Zhao 2012). In this paper, we use the dependent variable as a continuous measure and present our OLS regression modeling. Note that for comparative purposes and to check robustness, we fitted both models, following other work (Wang and Xie 2015; Wu and Li 2017). The findings were similar, and in what follows, we present results from the OLS models.

Table 1

Summary of Individual-Level Variables

Variables	<i>N</i>	Percentage or Mean (SD in parentheses)
Year of Survey		
2003	5894	7.02%
2005	10372	12.35%
2006	10151	12.09%
2008	6000	7.15%
2010	11783	14.03%
2011	5620	6.69%
2012	11765	14.01%
2013	11438	13.62%
2015	10934	13.02%
Age		47.43 (15.91)
Male (Female = 0)	40465	48.2%
Married (Unmarried = 0)	63593	75.74%
Ethnic Minority (Han = 0)	11659	13.89%
Religious Affiliation		
None	71093	84.68%
Buddhist/Tao/Folk	7941	9.46%
Catholic/Protestant	2662	3.17%
Islamic	2261	2.69%
Income (in 1,000 yuan)		18.588 (46.491)
Birth Cohort		
1910–1948	17335	20.65%
1949–1956	13881	16.53%
1957–1965	16059	19.13%
1966–1976	19791	23.57%
1977–1985	10787	12.85%
1986–	6104	7.27%
Urban Residence (Rural = 0)	46713	55.64%
CCP Member (Nonmember = 0)	9530	11.35%
Happiness (1–5 scale)		3.668 (0.859)
Total	83957	100.00%

CCP = Chinese Communist Party.

Determinants of Happiness: Focal and Control Variables

Previous literature has identified a number of important predictors of happiness. At the individual level, gender (female = 0), marital status (unmarried = 0), ethnic and racial identity (Han = 0, minorities = 1), educational attainment, income and wealth are all relevant to happiness in various cultures and societies, including China (Asadullah, Xiao, and Yeoh 2018; Chyi and Mao 2012; Qian and Qian 2015; Shu and Zhu 2009; Tang 2014; Wang and Xie 2015; Wu and Li 2017; Zhao 2012). Therefore, we included these factors in all our models. Though religious affiliation and commitment are found relevant in previous literature (Ferriss 2002; Francis and Lester 1997), they are perfectly correlated with our focal variable, party membership, as CCP members cannot be affiliated with any religious denomination. Therefore, we chose not to include religion or religious practice in our regression models.

Given our research questions, we were specifically interested in the following variables: political status, the location of residence, and birth cohort. We defined political status as CCP membership/lack of membership. In the CGSS, all respondents are asked whether they are CCP members or not in a consistent way. They are given the following possible responses: “CCP member,” “Communist Youth League member,” “other political parties,” and “no political affiliations.” Of these, only CCP members enjoy substantial privileges in career promotions, political participation, and social welfare and benefits. Therefore, we recoded this item into a dummy variable, with CCP members = 1 and all nonmembers as the reference group (= 0).

The location of residence was a dummy variable as well, with urban area = 1 and rural area = 0. Though it is a fairly straightforward measure, there is one thing to be noted: CGSS 2003 only surveyed residents in *Cheng Zhen* (城镇). According to the *Urban and Rural Planning Law of the PRC* (the bill passed by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on October 28, 2007), both *Cheng* and *Zhen* were officially defined as urbanized areas. In other words, technically speaking, all respondents from CGSS 2003 belong to the “urban” category, which puts our research goal of investigating the urban-rural divide at risk. However, considering the heterogeneous levels of development between cities, counties, and townships in Western, Middle and Eastern China, we decided to distinguish cities (*Shi* 市) from counties (*Xian* 县) and townships (*Zhen* 镇) for this survey. We recoded the latter categories, namely the counties and townships, as “rural.” To ensure this practice did not distort our findings, we modeled both with and without CGSS 2003 data. The results were consistent; therefore, we are confident in reporting our findings generated from the complete data.

We converted birth years into different cohorts. The following cohorts are constructed based on major historical markers in contemporary Chinese history: 1910–1948 (the pre-PRC era); 1949–1956 (the phase of socialist reform); 1957–1965 (the phase of socialist construction); 1966–1976 (the Cultural Revolution); and 1977–1998 (the post-Mao era, or Deng era of economic reform). We have two reasons to construct this variable in the current way. First, the current grouping practice ensures all groups contain similar numbers of observations and sample size in each group is sufficient for estimation. Second and most importantly, each category represents an important historical period that is relevant to our research purpose (MacFarquhar et al. 1987; Ye 2013).

For instance, the first group (1910–1948) represents senior citizens born in the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China period; those in the 1949–1956 group were born after the establishment of the PRC, had their elementary education during the early PRC years, and were deeply influenced by the Cultural Revolution in their teenage and early adult years. It is also during their young adulthood that urban working class people had the most privileges under Mao’s rule. Those in the group of 1966–1976 witnessed the end of the Mao era and experienced Deng’s economic reform; they were also the main victims of the breaking of “the iron rice bowl,” an important safety net and source of happiness for state-sector employees (Cook 2001; Wang and Xie 2015). People from the 1977–1986 cohort have been the main beneficiaries of China’s economic miracle; most had secured career and residence before China’s real estate market went wild. The last group, namely the post-1986 cohort, has grown up in the age of the Internet and the mobile revolution. We believe such categorization could reveal theoretically valuable patterns for our understanding of happiness. Descriptive statistics of all the independent and dependent variables are reported in Table 1.

Modeling Strategy: HAPC Method

It is crucial to properly model and identify the cohort effect since the cohort effect and its interactions with the location of residence and political status are our primary research concern. However, this is a challenge using a conventional method since the three temporal factors—age, period, and cohort—are in a perfectly linear dependency. As a result, models containing all three factors face the identification problem (Yang and Land 2006). If researchers only fit the model with one of the three, this creates difficulties in interpretation: what are recognized as cohort effects could be age effects undercover, and vice versa.

Ultimately, we opted for the HAPC method (Yang 2008; Yang and Land 2008). Following Yang and Land's (2006, 2008) recommendation, we centered the age variable around the grand mean value and used its quadratic term in our HAPC model. Respondents from all waves of CGSS data are grouped into cross-classified categories by birth cohorts and survey years. Our hierarchical models treat the respondents as Level 1 (the individual level) and the cross-classified groups as Level 2 (the aggregate level). We fitted all models with the fixed effects at Level 1 and the random intercepts at Level 2. The total number of Level 2 units is 53, with six cohorts by nine survey years minus one empty category—there is no respondent born after 1986 in the 2003 survey. We reported the frequency distribution of respondents within Cohort-Period cells in Table 2. As we can see from Table 2, the frequencies of Level 1 (minimum = 77) and Level 2 units (No. of obs. = 53) meet the “30/30” requirement recommended in multilevel modeling (Maas and Hox 2005).

At the individual level, all models control for gender, marital status, ethnic identity, the highest level of completed education, and the logged personal annual income. In addition to these controls, we fitted the fixed effects of the CCP membership (dummy, nonmember = 0), location of residence (dummy, rural = 0), and birth cohort (categorical variable, with the 1910–1948 cohort as the reference group) in the models as the focal predictors. To examine each research hypothesis, we fitted the HAPC models so that each focused on one hypothesis as listed below:

Model 1: All individual and fixed contextual effects + CCP membership;

Model 2: Model 1 + Birth Cohorts;

Model 3: Model 2 + Location of Residence;

*Model 4: Model 3 + CCP membership * Birth Cohorts;*

*Model 5: Model 3 + CCP membership * Birth Cohorts * Location of Residence.*

The first model serves as the baseline model with all individual and contextual level covariates and our first focal variable, Communist Party membership, to test Hypothesis 1. Model 2 and Model 3 include the other two predictors, birth cohort and location of residence, to examine whether their effects are still significant or are mediated or even canceled. Model 4 adds the two-way interaction between Communist Party membership and birth cohort to see the generational dynamics of political status, the concern of Hypothesis 2. Finally, Model 5 adds the three-way interaction between political status, cohort, and location of residence (urban vs. rural), to investigate Hypothesis 3. All models contain a personal weight

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Cross-Classified Cohort and Period (Year of Survey) Groups

Cohort	Year											TOTAL
	2003	2005	2006	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015	2032		
1910-1948	1275	2311	1621	891	2289	2490	2354	2072	2032	17335		
1949-1956	1119	1712	1714	914	1851	1064	1915	1837	1755	13881		
1957-1965	1399	2173	2057	1157	2305	1042	2065	1968	1893	16059		
1966-1976	1455	2632	2754	1661	2884	678	2740	2604	2383	19791		
1977-1985	646	1335	1517	967	1548	269	1552	1617	1336	10787		
1986-	0	209	488	410	906	77	1139	1340	1535	6104		
Total	5894	10372	10151	6000	11783	5620	11765	11438	10934	83957		

variable provided by the CGSS 2003–2015. The HAPC modeling results are shown in [Table 3](#) and will be discussed in detail in the “results” and “discussion” sections.

Robustness Checks

Before interpreting the modeling results, we need to address reliability and robustness concerns. First, we constructed the cohort variable in a number of ways. Even with different cohort variables, the models yielded patterns like the reported final results.⁷ Second, we used the bootstrapping method and took 5 percent subsamples (approximately 4,200 observations out of nearly 84,000 cases) from the complete data. We repeated the resampling for 1,000 iterations. Bootstrapping results were consistent with our main findings from the final models.⁸

Third, we used the propensity score matching (PSM) method to deal with a potential self-selection bias problem. Self-selection bias is a valid concern in our study, especially for one focal predictor, CCP membership. As CCP membership is achieved status, not an ascribed one, individuals who apply for party membership and are successfully recruited differ from those who do not apply or are not recruited. To ensure that we were analyzing comparable populations, we adopted the nearest neighbor algorithm in PSM (Austin 2014). We tried other PSM algorithms as well, including caliper matching, interval matching, and kernel matching; we compared their estimates and found no noteworthy discrepancies. PSM was accomplished by matching on the conditional probability of mobility given a series of observed variables. We adopted the ignorable treatment assignment assumption (Rosenbaum and Rubin 1983), whereby individuals’ assignment to treatment or control is independent of the potential outcomes if observable covariates are held constant. After matching, differences between CCP members and nonmembers can be seen as purely the membership effect and not caused by other covariates. We held the following variables constant in our nearest neighbor PSM procedures: gender, age, marital status, education, location of residence, and annual income. As noted above, we did not consider religious factors, as CCP members are all nonreligious. The matching results can be found in [Table 4](#), along with a comparison of the complete data and the post-matching sample.

As [Table 4](#) indicates, the matched sample shows minimal differences in gender, age, educational attainment, location of residence, and income. However, the treatment group (CCP members) and the control group (nonmembers) still show significant differences in marital status and ethnicity. The higher rate of marriage among CCP members is easy to understand, given the evidence from the complete unmatched data: CCP members are older and richer and therefore more welcome in the marriage

Table 3
Estimates from HAPC Linear Models (Standard Errors Omitted)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Fixed Effects					
Intercept	3.23***	3.42***	3.43***	3.43***	3.43***
Age	-29.86***	-32.40***	-31.30***	-30.88***	-30.66***
Age ²	25.98***	26.48***	26.47***	26.13***	26.31***
Male (Female = 0)	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.11***
Married (Unmarried = 0)	0.29***	0.29***	0.29***	0.29***	0.29***
Ethnic Minority (Han = 0)	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Education (Elementary or Less = 0)					
Middle School	0.09***	0.09***	0.10***	0.10***	0.10***
High School	0.12***	0.12***	0.14***	0.14***	0.14***
College or Above	0.19***	0.19***	0.21***	0.22***	0.21***
Income (in 1,000 yuan, logged)	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***
CCP Member (Nonmember = 0)	0.15***	0.15***	0.15***	0.17***	0.19***
Birth Cohorts (1910–1948 = 0)					
1949–1956		-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.07***
1957–1965		-0.21***	-0.21***	-0.21***	-0.19***
1966–1976		-0.28***	-0.28***	-0.28***	-0.28***
1977–1985		-0.33***	-0.33***	-0.32***	-0.36***
1986–		-0.28***	-0.28***	-0.26***	-0.28***
Urban (Rural = 0)			-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.05***
Interactions (2-Way)					
CCP* 1949–1956				-0.00	-0.02
CCP* 1957–1965				0.03	0.00
CCP* 1966–1976				-0.04	-0.07

market; in addition, CCP discourages divorces and extra-marital relationships among its members (Jeffreys 2007).

The remaining difference in ethnicity is not surprising as many ethnic minority groups in China are religious. For example, Uighurs and Hui people are mostly Muslims. Similarly, a large number of Mongolians and Tibetans would identify themselves as Buddhists. Since religious beliefs and the Communist ideology are mutually exclusive, it is reasonable that their likelihood of joining the CCP is lower. However, as CCP members are more likely to be married and less likely to be an ethnic minority, and these two effects are opposite—as Table 3 reveals, marriage contributes positively to happiness, while ethnic majority membership does not—they largely cancel each other. Therefore, the remaining gap in SWB between CCP members and nonmembers in Table 4 can be seen as simply a treatment effect of party membership. We fitted the same HAPC models on the matched sample,⁹ and the three-way interaction pattern of party membership, location of residence and birth cohorts were consistent with what we report here in the final models in Table 3 and Figure 1. Thus, we consider the findings from the HAPC models to be robust.

Results

The HAPC modeling results are displayed in Table 3. Our key independent variables of interest, as discussed previously, were political status measured by CCP membership, birth cohort, and location of residence measured by a dummy variable (urban = 1, rural = 0). As explained above, we fitted Model 1 to test Hypothesis 1 on the impact of political status. Then, we fitted additive regression models: Model 2 adds birth cohorts based on Model 1, and Model 3 adds the location of residence to Model 2. We added two-way interactions of CCP membership and cohorts in Model 4, and in Model 5, we fitted three-way interactions of all three focal predictors. In all models, we controlled for year dummies, gender, marital status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, the highest level of completed education, and logged personal annual income.

We begin with Model 1, which examines whether CCP membership increases SWB. Regression analysis reveals that being a CCP member raises SWB by 0.15 points on a 1–5 scale ($p < 0.001$), as predicted by Hypothesis 1. Findings from the control variables are largely consistent with previous work. The year dummy variables show an overall increasing trend in happiness, arguably related to the economic growth from 2003 to 2015. Other scholars have found a similar pattern but say the increase may be a compensational growth after the decline in the late 1990s, not a long-term monotonic growth (Asadullah, Xiao and Yeoh 2018; Tang

Table 4

Comparisons of Treatment and Control Group (CCP and non-CCP members) from the Complete Data and the Matched Sample

Variables	Nonmembers	CCP Members	p-Value
<i>Complete Sample (N = 83957)</i>			
Male = 1 (%)	33499 (45.0)	6966 (73.0)	<0.001
Age (Mean (SD))	46.79 (15.86)	52.41 (15.41)	<0.001
Married = 1 (%)	55737 (74.9)	7878 (82.6)	<0.001
Minority = 1 (%)	10499 (14.1)	1160 (12.2)	<0.001
Education (%)			<0.001
Elementary or Less	25635 (34.4)	1290 (13.5)	
Middle School	21459 (28.8)	1771 (18.6)	
High School	14124 (19.0)	2354 (24.7)	
College and Above	13199 (17.7)	4125 (43.2)	
Urban = 1 (%)	39784 (53.5)	6929 (72.6)	<0.001
Income (Mean (SD))	16999.91 (40661.16)	29772.61 (77315.51)	<0.001
Happy (Mean (SD))	3.64 (0.87)	3.86 (0.77)	<0.001
Num. of Observations	74417	9540	
<i>Matched Sample (N = 19080)</i>			
Male = 1 (%)	6961 (73.0)	6966 (73.0)	0.948
Age (Mean (SD))	52.32 (16.08)	52.41 (15.41)	0.697
Married = 1 (%)	7627 (79.9)	7878 (82.6)	<0.001
Minority = 1 (%)	1757 (18.4)	1160 (12.2)	<0.001
Education (%)			0.283
Elementary or Less	1271 (13.3)	1290 (13.5)	
Middle School	1677 (17.6)	1771 (18.6)	
High School	2415 (25.3)	2354 (24.7)	
College and Above	4177 (43.8)	4125 (43.2)	
Urban = 1 (%)	6930 (72.6)	6929 (72.6)	1
Income (Mean (SD))	29140.36 (81758.53)	29772.61 (77315.51)	0.583
Happy (Mean (SD))	3.74 (0.82)	3.86 (0.77)	<0.001
Num. of Observations	9540	9540	

2014). Female, married, educated, and minority individuals are, on average, happier than their male, unmarried, less educated, and majority Han counterparts. However, a noteworthy finding challenging previous results (Wu and Li 2017; Zhao 2012) is that the provincial median income and Gini coefficient show no significance in shaping SWB.

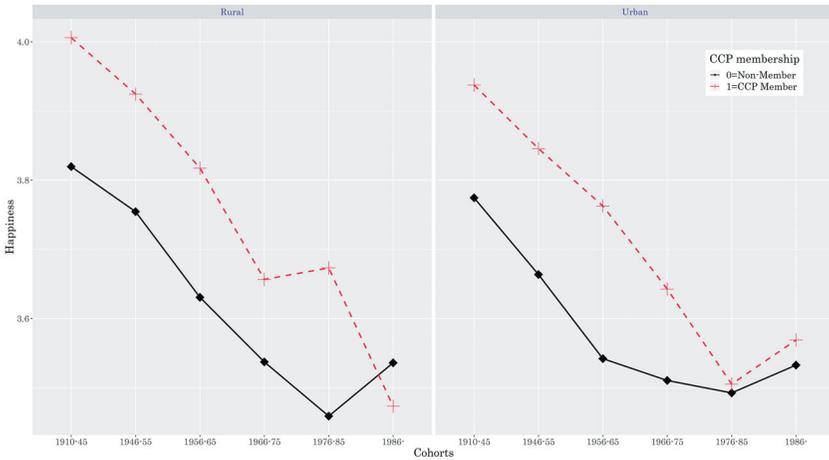
Model 2 includes the birth cohorts in the analysis. We clearly see an overall declining trend in SWB, whereby the earlier cohorts (1910–1948, 1949–1956) are happier than the later cohorts after 1966. Model 3 includes the third focal predictor, location of residence, which taps into the concept of the urban-rural divide in China. As we can see, living in urban China is negatively correlated with an individual's SWB, by 0.03 ($p < 0.001$) on a 1–5 scale. Other covariates do not change so impressively as we move from Model 2 to Model 3.

Model 4 adds the two-way interaction effect between CCP membership and birth cohort. As in Model 2, the main effects of birth cohort show a step-down pattern, where older cohorts are happier than later cohorts. CCP membership's main effect remains positive overall, but the effect weakens pronouncedly for younger cohorts, especially for 1977–1985 (-0.10 , $p < 0.01$) and post-1986 cohorts (-0.16 , $p < 0.001$). The interaction pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 2: CCP membership still matters, but its importance gradually fades for younger Chinese. After years of market transition, political status seems to matter less in shaping access to wealth, welfare, and privileges. In Model 2, most estimates on control variables remain similar to those observed in Model 1.

Model 5 in Table 3 introduces the three-way interaction among CCP membership, urban/rural divide, and birth cohort while keeping variables from previous models in. Given the model selection statistics, especially the log-likelihoods and the AIC values¹⁰, we selected Model 5 as the final model to interpret. We also plotted the interaction effect¹¹ in Figure 1, displaying the interaction effects in a more intuitive way.

We find a significant three-way interaction among the three focal variables. First, the group of urban Communist Party members born between 1957 and 1965 shows the highest relative level of happiness (0.22 on a 1–5 scale). Communist Party membership positively contributes to happiness, but the contribution diminishes and even becomes invisible for younger Chinese. Second, the changes in the effect of CCP membership differ in urban and rural China. In rural areas, CCP membership has a salient positive impact on the cohort of 1910–1948; such impact is getting weaker but relatively stable for cohorts between 1949 and 1976 (less than 0.15 on a 1–5 scale), and the advantage is no longer significantly different for the cohort after 1986. One noteworthy exception for rural Chinese is the 1977–1985 cohort: the advantage of party membership rises to 0.2, exceeding other cohorts. This might suggest a resurgence of politicization in rural China in recent years (2003–2015, while the 1977–1985 cohort is in their 30s and 40s) when the urban is experiencing a de-politicization and marketization. In urban China, the positive effect of CCP membership begins in the 1910–1948 cohort, becomes more important in the 1949–1956 cohort, and reaches its peak in the 1957–1965 group. Urban party

Figure 1. Political status, urban-rural divide and cohort effects on happiness in China. Fitted values are from Model 5, Table 3. All variables except education and freedom are set to typical values (i.e., means for quantitative variables and proportions for categorical variables).



members’ advantage in happiness quickly diminishes for 1966–1976, 1977–1985, and post-1986 groups.

Discussion

Social scientists are curious about how SWB reacts to social inequality and social transformations. Contemporary China serves as a perfect laboratory to pursue this curiosity, given the depth of its changes over recent decades. In this research on China, we analyzed the CGSS 2003–2015 data and investigated how political status (membership/non-membership in the Communist Party), location of residence (rural/urban), and birth cohort together shape Chinese people’s feelings of happiness. We find political status matters differently for different birth cohorts, and the interaction is further moderated by China’s urban-rural divide. This finding supports market transition theory and shows that market transition has more influence on urban residents than rural residents in China.

To be more specific, the research confirms the value of political status: CCP membership is conducive to a happier life. As previous literature has noted (Appleton and Song 2008; McLaughlin 2017; Shu and Zhu 2009; Walder 2003; Walder and Zhao 2006; Zhao and Ge 2014), CCP members have higher human capital and enjoy a wide range of privileges in China’s

political, economic and social life. The advantage is apparent in all our HAPC models for almost all birth cohorts (up until the very recent one), consistent with Hypothesis 1. This finding indicates how powerful CCP is in contemporary China: it is not only a ruling political party but also a redistributive force that provides incentives for its members.

That being said, CCP's advantage is diminishing, especially for younger cohorts, as anticipated by Hypothesis 2. This can be seen as evidence of marketization reform in post-Mao China. Previous work on China's market transition disagrees on whether marketization has eroded political power (Cao and Nee 2005), sustained it, or even reinforced it (Zhou 1995, 2000). However, all would agree that compared to the Mao era, people now have more options and more social ladders to achieve material success and upward social mobility, albeit to varying degrees. Political power may still be strong, but it is no longer the only force determining the quality of life. For instance, as Walder (2003) notes, conventional economic and cultural elites have reclaimed higher social status in post-Mao China. Analysis of contemporary China's educational stratification yields a similar pattern shift from the Mao era to the post-Mao era (Liang et al. 2016), where the importance of political capital in determining educational attainment gradually gives way to economic and cultural capital. Our findings that political status gradually matters less for younger Chinese can be seen as another piece of evidence supporting the marketization thesis.

The three-way interaction shows an interesting pattern, in that the patterns of the diminishing political advantages differ for urban and rural Chinese residents. We find support for both our Hypothesis 3a (the marketization thesis) and the Hypothesis 3b (the urban-rural gap thesis). To be specific, in rural areas, the gap between CCP members and nonmembers remains the same until the very recent cohort of 1986 and after. In urban areas, the gap between party members and nonmembers increases and reaches a peak for the 1957–1965 cohort; the gap becomes narrower for later cohorts and then closes. In other words, urban Chinese people's SWB is more susceptible to the social transformations from Mao to post-Mao China, while rural Chinese are less susceptible. We explain this by the fact that China's state power has always been stronger in urban areas.

We believe our study on party membership, cohorts, and happiness contributes to the unresolved debate on China's market transition. Though previous work has argued that the state influence has not withdrawn from economic activities and continues its control in various ways (Walder 2003; Zhou 1995, 2000), our findings suggest that at least for SWB, political status has largely become less relevant generation by generation. Moreover, the pattern observed for urban CCP members and nonmembers supports market transition theory; with the shift from a planned economy to a market economy, the importance of political status to happiness has diminished. Furthermore, this finding can help to explain the a prominent phenomenon

in contemporary China's public opinion and collective memory: many scholars have observed that in post-Mao China, there has been a rising nostalgia of the Mao era, especially among the urban working class Chinese who grew up during the Cultural Revolution (Jiang and Ashley 2013; Lee 2007; Yang 2005). Our paper provides a new angle to understand such nostalgia: they share this sentiment because it is during the Mao era that they enjoyed the greatest advantages in terms of subjective wellbeing.

The study has a few limitations that need to be noted, and we provided some suggestions for future research to improve on our work. First, as the earliest wave of data in this analysis was taken place in 2003, we do not have direct evidence from the Mao era and early Deng era to show how historical contexts affect the happiness of Chinese people. Our findings on the cohort effects should be interpreted as only suggestive of how different social and political environments shape SWB. To remedy for this limitation, future researchers could adopt qualitative research method. By conducting interviews with people grew up in the Mao era or early Deng era, inductive content analysis could shed light on this question. Second, as the younger generations, specifically the 1977–1985 and 1986 cohorts, have not yet reached their senior years, it is possible that the patterns discovered in this paper may transform with the ongoing social changes and individual aging processes. Future researchers could keep track and revisit this issue with updated empirical evidence.

In sum, we have investigated how political status, the urban-rural divide, and birth cohort jointly influence the SWB of Chinese people. We find that the meaning of party membership changes profoundly for different cohorts. For rural Chinese people, we see a relatively steady diminishing gap between CCP members and nonmembers; for urban residents, the importance of party membership increases for a while but drops rapidly for post-1966 cohorts. Overall, the study illuminates the evolving dynamics of market transition and the resulting implications for politics, happiness, and quality of life in China.

Notes

1. The CGSS program began in 2003 and the latest publicly accessible wave is CGSS 2015; the CFPS program carried out by Peking University started in 2010.

2. The following political movements mainly took place in urban China: the Three-Anti and Five-Anti campaigns (1951–1952); the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–1959); the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), especially the Red Guard movements (1966–1968), the Shanghai January Storm (1967) and the Wuhan incident (1967); the Tiananmen “4.5” Incident (1976); the student protests in 1986 and 1989; and so on.

3. Due to concerns of policy risks and research ethics, some provinces and regions are not included in the CGSS project's sampling frame. For some waves, Xinjiang, Tibet and Ningxia were not included; for all waves, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan were not included in the CGSS project.

4. CGSS data show high response rates on most variables used in this analysis. Variables like location, gender, and ethnic identity are complete. Variables like age, marital status, and Communist Party membership are only with less than 0.6 percent missing responses. Religion (19.5 percent said “don’t know/inapplicable/refuse to answer”) and self-reported income (8 percent missing) have more but tolerable missings.

5. *R* package “Amelia II” employs EMB (expectation maximization with bootstrapping) methods in estimation. We reported the descriptive and regression results based on the pooled, complete data with 83,957 observations, which means 99.95 percent of the original data were retained in the analysis.

6. Some argue for a nuanced difference in the words, with one measuring a long-term mindset of satisfaction (*Xing Fu*) and the other tapping into a short-term and more dynamic emotional status (*Kuai Le*). Diener et al. (1999) give a more detailed analysis of the multi-faceted nature of subjective wellbeing. Ryan and Deci (2001) adopt the terms of “hedonic” and “eudaimonic” happiness to distinguish the two notions. Yet in SWB studies so far, these concepts are often used interchangeably (Diener and Ng 2010; Kahneman and Krueger 2006; Wu and Li 2017), and we opted for this practice.

7. We tried to construct the cohort variable in the following ways: (1) decades: 1910–1939, 1940–1949, 1950–1959, 1960–1969, 1970–1979, and 1980–; (2) decades with mid-decade cut-offs: 1910–1945, 1946–1955, 1956–1965, 1966–1975, 1976–1985, and 1985–; (3) five-year intervals.

8. Codes and results are available upon request.

9. Codes and results are available upon request.

10. The statistics of model selection yield an inconsistent pattern; the log-likelihood and AIC values support Model 5 while the BIC values favor Model 3. However, we decide to choose Model 5 as our final model to be interpreted. First, it is of theoretical interest, showing significant interactions between political status, cohort, and location of residence. Second, as we know, adding variables to models will lead to some penalization in model selection statistics. For BIC values, adding k additional variables penalizes the model for $\ln(n)^*k$, where n equals the total number of observations. In our case, the number of observations is 83957, and $\ln(83957) = 11.34$. If we compare the BIC values of Model 5 with Model 3, we find that Model 5 has 16 more variables and therefore is penalized by $16 * 11.34 = 181.44$. Yet the actual difference between their BIC values is 105.94, smaller than the penalization score. Given these considerations, we chose Model 5 as the final model and plot Figure 1 based on findings from it.

11. The interaction effects are generated and visualized with *R* package “effects” (Fox and Weisberg 2018).

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper has been presented at the 2018 International Chinese Sociological Association (ICSA) Asian Conference in Hong Kong on December 20, 2018. The authors thank Yang Cao, Yucheng Liang, Yuying Tong, and Wei Zhao for comments on earlier versions of this paper. We sincerely appreciate the constructive reviews made by the chief editor, Xiaogang Wu, and the anonymous reviewers.

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