



Better Government, Happier Residents? Quality of Government and Life Satisfaction in China

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Abstract

How quality of government affects residents' life satisfaction is a seldom discussed subject, especially in a non-democratic context. This research aims to address that gap by focusing on the case of China. It investigates the relation between different aspects of quality of government and Chinese residents' happiness. Our data was provided by telephone interviews of 5015 residents in Shandong Province. The findings indicate that the majority of China's citizens consider their lives offer them a high level of satisfaction. Positively and significantly contributing to their life satisfaction are the government's trustworthiness and responsiveness, and its performance in public service delivery. This result implies that the quality of government has a positive and important impact on Chinese citizens' happiness, both technically in terms of its ability to deliver public services efficiently, and politically in terms of the extent of democracy involved. But of these, it seems that the former is the more significant. The reasons for this lie in the country's level of economic development, in China's political culture, and in the policing mechanisms of the regime.

Keywords Quality of government · Life satisfaction · China

1 Introduction

The study of life satisfaction gained popularity in the 1960s, along with the emergence of post-material values in advanced capitalist societies (Veenhoven 1996). Substantive attention has been given to measuring the influence of socio-economic factors on individuals' cognitive judgements upon life, focusing, *inter alia*, on income, employment, educational attainments, marital status and health (Böhnke 2008; Li and Raine 2014; Lucas 2007; Abbott et al. 2016). Adding to this popular tendency, an emerging group of studies focuses on the relation between quality of government and life satisfaction (see for example, Bjørnskov et al. 2007; Bok 2011; Pacek et al. 2018). They explore how expenditure,

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responsiveness, trustworthiness and other aspects of government performance affect people's evaluation of life (Radcliff 2001; Helliwell and Huang 2008; Mueller 2009; Whiteley et al. 2010).

Existing work exploring the role of government in citizens' life satisfaction is particularly interested in advanced democratic societies. It seeks to address broader political issues, such as the responsibility of the democratic state for engendering happiness (see for example, Frey and Stutzer 2005; Egan 2017). Scarce attention has been given to investigating whether, and in what ways, good governance in developing and non-democratic countries enhances citizens' happiness. This research will address that knowledge gap by focusing on a Chinese context. Beginning in 1978 with the initiation of market reforms and the open door policy, a process of significant social and political transformation has taken place in China. While Chinese residents used to be indifferent to government performance and obedient to authority, they are becoming increasingly more critical of government accountability, efficiency and openness (Wang and You 2016).

This research explores whether high quality of government contributes to residents' happiness in China's context. Specifically, our research questions are: Do people's perceptions of the quality of government influence their life satisfaction? Which aspects of government quality signify as important contributors to Chinese citizens' happiness? How can administrative reforms shape happier residents?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework of the research. It elaborates why quality of government should be taken into account by life satisfaction studies and justifies the selection of factors for this research. Section 3 introduces the research hypotheses. In the next section, we display the survey data, our measurement of the variables and the semi-structured model we use. This is followed by Sect. 5 which explains the data analysis and the empirical results. Section 6 summarizes primary findings and reflects on their implications.

2 Theoretical Framework: Quality of Government and Life Satisfaction

2.1 The Trajectory of Life Satisfaction in Different Countries

How the state can maximize residents' well-being and happiness has long been a central debate in democratic theory since the era of philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1747–1832) (Whiteley et al. 2010). Empirical studies of life satisfaction in the 1970s and 1980s primarily focused on advanced democratic societies, including America, Australia and Nordic countries. They showed that levels of residents' happiness in these places were steady across time, with a slight increase accompanying social and economic development (Campbell et al. 1976; Chin-Hon-Foei 1989; Easterlin 1974; Saad 2004; Blanchflower and Oswald 2004). Since the 1990s, more attention has been given to life quality and happiness in less developed societies (Frijters et al. 2004; Clark et al. 2008; Gruen and Klasen 2012; Djankov et al. 2016). It is claimed that life satisfaction in transitional countries is comparatively lower than in developed societies and fluctuates over time (Easterlin 2009; Gruen and Klasen 2012; Djankov et al. 2016).

The famous Easterlin Paradox which confronted China in the early 1990s raised interest in studying Chinese happiness (Appleton and Song 2008; Brockmann et al. 2009; Li and Raine 2014). Easterlin et al. (2012) claim that China's life satisfaction fell into a "U-shaped swing and a nail or declining trend" from 1990 to 2010, which is not dissimilar to other

transitional societies. The lowest point in the U-shape was from 2000 to 2005 when unemployment, inflation, widening social inequality and welfare reforms in China significantly decreased perceived life quality (Knight and Gunatilaka 2011; Asadullah et al. 2018; Jiang 2014). Appleton and Song (2008) argue that life satisfaction in China around 2002 was lower than in France and Japan, but not exceptionally so. The primary reason for that was that rapid economic development and political reforms positively contribute to people's happiness.

2.2 Why Does Quality of Government Matter?

Predominantly, work on life satisfaction has been conducted from a socio-economic perspective. There is an influential debate within it about whether economic development leads to an increase in citizens' happiness. While Veenhoven and Hagerty (2006) claim this to be the case, Easterlin (2005) and Easterlin et al. (2010) has claimed that there is no necessary relationship (see also, Clark et al. 2008; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Frey and Stutzer 2010). The latter is supported by many other researchers, including Brockmann et al. (2009), who argue that economic growth can depress the level of happiness, because of the widening income gap and resulting relative deprivation (see also, Liu and Shang 2012). Another branch of the work follows a bottom-up approach by examining how different aspects of life contribute to overall life satisfaction. The factors examined include job satisfaction, material life, education, mental and physical health, leisure life, house ownership, physical location, etc. (see for example, Pavot and Diener 2008; Graham et al. 2015).

In the last 10 years, increasingly more attention has been given to discussing the relation between life satisfaction and good governance activities, or 'quality of government' (see for example, Bjørnskov et al. 2007; Pacek et al. 2018; Bache et al. 2016; Knoll and Pitlik 2016). Bok's well known book, *The Politics of Happiness* (2011), recognizes several aspects in government quality which significantly contribute to a higher level of life satisfaction among residents. These include the efficiency and responsiveness of a government and the trustworthiness of its public officials and institution, as well as the overall inclusiveness of its political agenda and public policy.

Other researchers go further towards identifying the inherent characteristics of different indicators of good governance, and also discern the inter-relations among them. Helliwell and Huang distinguish factors which are seen as "dealing with the efficiency and trustworthiness of the design and delivery of government" from those "dealing primarily with the electoral process ... [such as] voice and accountability, and political stability" (2008: 618). These, according to Ott (2011), could be described as either the technical qualities of a government (government effectiveness, regulatory quality, the rule of law and control of corruption), or its democratic qualities (political stability, residents' voice and government accountability) (see also, Whiteley et al. 2010; Woo 2018). Helliwell and Huang (2008) also indicate a hierarchy of preferences within people's views of quality of government in different societies. By comparing data collected from 75 countries, their findings show that while the technical quality of government is significant for life satisfaction in both developing and comparatively poor countries, happiness in advanced democratic societies is more dependent upon the quality of the democratic process, or 'procedural utility' as it is termed by Frey (2008). This argument is evidenced by other empirical research, such as that conducted by Sujarwoto and Tampubolon (2015), which indicates that in Indonesia, residents' perceptions of happiness are more sensitive to the government's delivery efficiency rather

than civic participation and engagement (see also, Frey and Stutzer 2000, 2005; Ngoo et al. 2015).

Existing work on China's life satisfaction primarily focuses on micro-level, individual-related factors such as how education, age, income, homeownership, political membership and cultural identity influence perceptions of a satisfied life (see for example, Chan and Lee 2006; Knight and Gunatilaka 2010; Steele and Lynch 2013; Lam and Liu 2014). Only a limited quantity of research engages in exploring how governance activities and government performance affect Chinese residents' subjective well-being. Among these is Wu and Zhu (2016), which suggests that if citizens believe that, broadly speaking, corruption is endemic to the political system, they may be less sensitive to individual experiences of corrupt practices, and the effect on their life satisfaction may be lessened. Gao et al. give proof of the positive role of public sector financial decentralization in life satisfaction in China, especially in "[the] underdeveloped western region, and among the private sector employees and homeowners" (2014: 1177). In addition, Cheung and Leung (2007) argue that government accountability, inclusiveness and democratic progress significantly enhance the life satisfaction of more impoverished and powerless Chinese residents.

2.3 Government Trustworthiness, Responsiveness and Performance in Public Service Delivery: Key Indicators of Government Quality in the Chinese Context

Commencing in the 1980s, marketization and economic reforms have remodeled China's citizenship in the subsequent decades. Along with the dismantling of a planned economy, China's citizens have been released from the work-unit system and a collectivist culture. In their place has arisen an interest in self-expression, and consequently in activism and participation (Wang and You 2016). As a result, their requirements of public institutions and public officials have also changed, and a new view of the meaning of good quality government has developed.

To start with, the trustworthiness of government and its officials signifies one of the most important aspects of the quality of government in China. It closely relates to Chinese residents' sense of political safety, and contributes to their cooperative attitudes and to their less resistant attitude to the effects of government policy than citizens in other societies (see for example, Gao and Zhai 2013; Liu 2015). While the feeling of government trustworthiness used to be based upon socialism's egalitarian policy, now its degree of efficiency is a more influential factor in shaping people's trust in it (Liu and Raine 2016). In addition, these days China's citizens make greater demands for responsiveness from the government. To accompany economic development and political reforms, they expect a new kind of government-citizen relationship, characterized by an open government, free expression for citizens and a well functioning feedback mechanism (Dittmer and Liu 2006; Alpermann 2011). But it is worth noticing that China's citizens have not yet developed more radical requirements than merely to expect a responsive administrative system, such as a desire for empowerment or proactive civic participation (Swider 2015). Last but not least, China's citizens are especially critical of government performance in terms of public service delivery (Wang and You 2016). This seems to show that despite increasing activism, citizens remain pragmatic, and are still predominantly concerned with daily life-related public agendas and their own welfare entitlement.

We will explore how government trustworthiness, responsiveness and performance in public service delivery affect Chinese residents' happiness. We realize that other important indicators of quality of government may also exist, but our purpose is to conduct an

explorative study of the relation between quality of government and residents' life satisfaction. Limiting ourselves to these three indicators therefore best fits our research aims.

3 Development of Relevant Hypotheses

Figure 1 displays our hypotheses, showing a map of the assumed relations between three independent variables and people's life satisfaction, which is the dependent variable. Trust in government directly contributes to residents' perceptions of happiness (H1). Our second group of hypotheses address relations between government's performance in public service delivery and residents' life satisfaction. We assume that the former both directly (H2a) and indirectly (H2b) affects the latter. Lastly, government's responsiveness will enhance its performance in public service delivery (H3b) and its trustworthiness (H3a), which will, in turn, contribute to people's satisfaction with life. In other words, we assume that the factor of government responsiveness has only an indirect relation to life satisfaction. We will elaborate the hypotheses in the remnant part of this section.

3.1 Trust in Government and Life Satisfaction

The relation between trust in government and life satisfaction has received scanty attention in the literature. Liu defines trust in government as “a subjective and psychological evaluation and perception of whether government institutions and incumbent officials perform well enough to accomplish the public's reasonable expectations” (2015: 29). Government trustworthiness is built upon its good performance in a wide range of life-related agendas, such as welfare provision, social conflict mediation and environmental protection (Chang and Chu 2006; Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001). A trusting attitude towards government implies citizens' acknowledgment of its good will and of its capacity for governance—which will, in turn, enhance their sense of belonging to

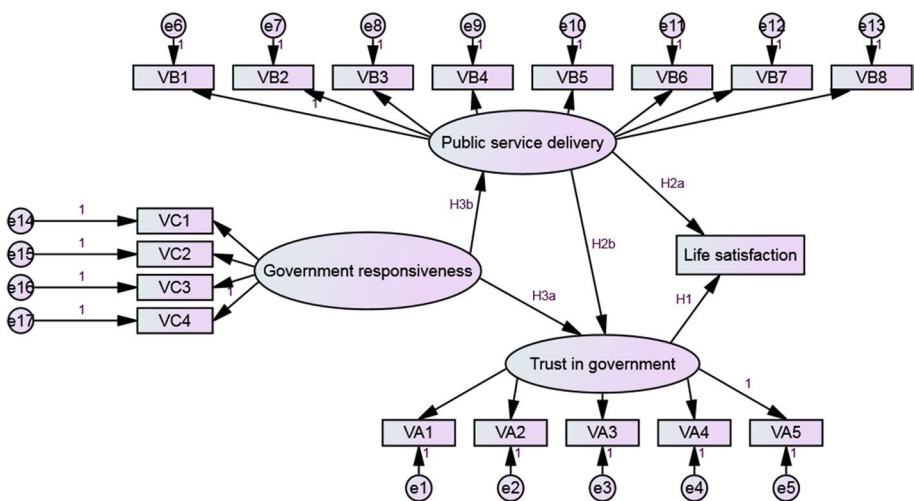


Fig. 1 Structure map of hypotheses. Source: Authors' own diagram based on theoretical context

communities, a feeling of safety in the social environment, and a perception of happiness and satisfaction with life. Mueller's (2009) empirical research in both East and West Europe has evidenced that a high level of trust in government institutions signifies lesser chances of confronting the abuse of state power, and that trust in officials has a spillover effect on trust in fellow citizens. All these positive feelings enhance people's happiness. In the work of Ekici and Koydemir (2014), both general social trust and trust in government are also seen as key indicators of the social capital which significantly affects residents' well-being. Therefore, our first hypothesis was presented as:

Hypothesis 1 The more citizens trust in government, the higher level of life satisfaction they will have.

3.2 Government Performance in Public Service Delivery and Life Satisfaction

A good volume of work has proved that good performance by the government in public service delivery has a positive and significant influence on life satisfaction (see for example, Ji et al. 2002; Giordano et al. 2011; Sujarwoto and Tampubolon 2015). Mafini and Meyer's (2016) empirical study in South Africa evidenced that high-quality public services will mitigate social conflict and enhance citizens' satisfaction with government performance and with their own life. They also suggest that anti-corruption measures and efficient local government are indispensable for satisfactory public service provision and residents' positive evaluations of life. Appleton and Song's (2008) research shows that for Chinese citizens, housing and economic security in old age are the most significant factors in the judgment of life quality. For Zhou et al. (2015), in China the well-educated, high income citizens have higher expectations of the quality of public services than the less well-off, which has contributed to their lower level of satisfaction with public services, and their concomitant lower life satisfaction. Zhou also proposed that for a more balanced and equitable method development, China's government should prioritize enhancing poorer citizens' appreciation of public services and hence their life satisfaction (see also, Helliwell and Huang 2008). Based upon these studies, we suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2a Good performance by government in public service delivery is positively related to citizens' satisfaction with life.

Regardless of a tendency towards marketization and privatization, delivering public services still remains one of the most important responsibilities of the public sector. Good performance in public service provision will give rise to a perception of an efficient, responsive, and public-interest oriented government (Rose and Pettersen 2000; Kampen et al. 2003; Van de Walle et al. 2005). In addition, those citizens who enjoy high quality public services will develop a feeling that they and their rights are respected (Liu 2015). This is crucial in shaping a trusting attitude towards the government, which will, in turn, contribute to a positive evaluation of the quality of life (see Hypothesis 1). The resulting hypothesis should read as follows:

Hypothesis 2b Good public service delivery not only increases citizens' trust in government, but consequently leads to high individual life satisfaction.

3.3 Government Responsiveness and Life Satisfaction

Government displays its responsiveness when public institutions react appropriately to citizens' demands and needs (Thomas and Palfrey 1996). Liu (2015) argued that responsiveness is a prominent factor in public trust in government, and this view has been echoed by other researchers (see for example, Chi 1999; Denhardt 2002). Mishler and Rose's (1997) study found that institutional reforms, such as enhancing government openness and responsiveness, are the most important determinants of popular trust in post-communist societies. For Lu (2009), the responsiveness of the public sector will facilitate a benign and communicative relationship between a government and its citizens, and through these, popular trust in administrative institutions and officials will be enhanced. Given that trust in government may have a positive relation to life satisfaction (see Hypothesis 1), we assume that government responsiveness will have an indirect influence on life satisfaction with trust in government as the mediating factor. The hypothesis reads:

Hypothesis 3a A high level of satisfaction with government responsiveness increases citizens' trust in government, and consequently leads to high life satisfaction.

In both developing and developed societies, one tendency of reform in public service delivery is to enhance government's responsiveness (Chen and Yue 2001; Liu 2015). This requires the public sector to be open to citizens' suggestions and participation, and a transition towards a less bureaucratic, more efficient and more service-oriented genre in public service delivery. A responsive government will result in greater potential for residents' satisfaction with its performance in delivering public services (Lu 2009). If the assumed positive relation between public service delivery and residents' life satisfaction (see hypothesis 2a) is also taken into consideration, we can propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3b The satisfaction with government responsiveness among citizens will positively affect their satisfaction with public service delivery, and consequently positively affect residents' satisfaction with life.

4 Data and Methods

4.1 Data

The data for this research was obtained from a telephone questionnaire survey which was conducted in 2017 by the Center of Urban Development and Public Policy in Shandong University. The primary purpose of this survey was to investigate citizens' satisfaction with life. It involved residents (older than 18) from all 17 cities in Shandong Province. To start with, mobile phone numbers of all residents from these cities were collected from communication corporations in China. In each city, calls were made to mobile phone numbers randomly selected by computers. The target was to collect approximately 300 valid questionnaires in each city. In all, 85,000 citizens were phoned, and 5045 agreed to participate in the survey. Answered calls provided 5015 valid questionnaires, and 30 incomplete forms, which were discounted.

4.2 Measurement of Variables

4.2.1 Dependent Variable

The variable of life satisfaction was regarded as the dependent variable in this research. This term was understood as the degree to which an individual assesses the overall quality of his/her life as a whole (Diener et al. 1985). There are two well-established approaches in measuring life satisfaction. One of them is based upon a single question (see for example, Inglehart 1990; Appleton and Song 2008; Easterlin et al. 2012; Abbott et al. 2016), while the other involves using multiple questions to evaluate satisfaction of life (see for example, Diener et al. 1985; Wang et al. 2000). Much research follows the first approach, including that of Easterlin et al. (2012) on relations between China's economic development and happiness, as well as Appleton and Song's 2008 investigation of components of Chinese urban residents' life satisfaction. For Cheung and Lucas (2014), the single-item life satisfaction measure does not yield substantially different results from those which ask multiple questions. In this research, we adopt the single question method. Specifically, in order to measure residents' judgment of overall life, we require them to answer the question: *How satisfied are you with the life as a whole these days, after considering all specific aspects?* The answers were chosen from five options based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly dissatisfied*, *somewhat dissatisfied*, *neither dissatisfied nor satisfied*, *somewhat satisfied* to *strongly satisfied*, and were scored as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Higher scores indicate a higher level of life satisfaction among citizens.

4.2.2 Independent Variables

The first independent variable was trust in government. A scoring method was broadly employed as the measurement in assessing government trust or political trust (Kim 2010; Liu 2015). Some scholars use five items to measure people's trust in government and its staff (Hetherington 1998; Liang 2016). These comprise: (1) *Do you think that the government does what is wrong?* (VA1) (2) *Do you think that the government is regulated by a few big interests to look out for themselves?* (VA2) (3) *Do you think that people in the government waste considerable tax money?* (VA3) (4) *Do you think that most government officials are incapable of performing their duties?* (VA4) (5) *Do you think that many government officials are dishonest?* (VA5) We also employed these five questions in our research. A five-point Likert scale was adopted for answers, ranging from *strongly agree*, *somewhat agree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *somewhat disagree* to *strongly disagree*, which were scored as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. The higher the score, the more trust respondents invested in government.

With respect to government performance in public service delivery, eight questions were asked to measure urban respondents' attitudes: *To what extent are you satisfied with the following types of public service provided by government in your area?* (1) *social security (e.g. medical insurance, endowment insurance)* (VB1); (2) *public safety (e.g. risk of robbery)* (VB2); (3) *public health (e.g. medical institutions and staff)* (VB3); (4) *environmental protection* (VB4); (5) *public education* (VB5); (6) *public transport* (VB6); (7) *public utilities (e.g. water, gas and electricity)* (VB7); and (8) *leisure service (e.g. sports, parks and cultural activities)* (VB8). The answers were fitted onto a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*), through 2 (*quite dissatisfied*), 3 (*neither satisfied nor*

dissatisfied), and 4 (*fairly satisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*). The higher the score, the higher the level of satisfaction with government performance in delivering public services.

The third variable was government responsiveness. It was measured by means of the following graded statements: (1) *Generally speaking, government respects residents' suggestions and opinions (VC1)*; (2) *Residents' suggestions and complains about government performance in public service delivery will receive proper feedback (VC2)*; (3) *Government welcomes residents' participation in public service delivery (VC3)*; (4) *Government will make reforms according to residents' advice (VC4)*. Five choices were presented as answers, from *strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree* to *strongly agree* and were scored as 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively. The higher the score, the more satisfied respondents were with government responsiveness in public service delivery.

4.3 Structural Equation Model and Its Diagnostic Checking

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) is a multivariate data tool to explore the relationship between observed variables and latent variables. It includes two basic models, the measured model and the structured model, which are employed to describe how the latent variables are operationalized or measured by the observed items or indicators, and to test the relationships among the variables in the model respectively. The widely used two-step process of SEM is proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), which includes confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and a structured equation.

In this study, trust in government, government responsiveness and government performance in public service delivery were latent variables, and life satisfaction was the only manifest variable. In order to examine the validity and reliability of this measurement tool, we used the AMOS statistical package to process CFA. The maximum likelihood method was employed, and the values of composite reliability and average variance extracted were used to evaluate the reliability of the data. Several indicators were adopted to test the overall fitting goodness of the model, including the Chi square test (χ^2), the degree of freedom (DF), the ratio of the Chi square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/DF), the goodness of fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), the normed fit index (NFI), root mean square residual (RMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

5 Research Findings

5.1 Descriptive Analysis

Among our 5015 respondents, there were more male citizens (58.9%) than female (41.1%). As Table 1 shows, the majority of our sample was aged between 24 and 45 (64.5%); the younger group (18–23 years old) represents 14.5%, and the older group (46–60 years old) accounts for 12.6%. Respondents who were aged more than 60 or who claimed age as *inconvenient to inform* represented only 4.6% and 3% respectively. In terms of marital status, 70.9% were married, as compared to 27.6% unmarried respondents, and 1.6% who belonged to *inconvenient to inform*. Respondents' educational attainment was categorized into three main levels: 39% had lower level educational attainment (primary school, junior middle school and high school), 21.4% had middle level educational attainment (junior

Table 1 Socio-demographic statistics for samples. *Source:* Authors' calculations

Socio-demographic characteristic	Total samples (n = 5015)	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	2061	41.1
Male	2954	58.9
<i>Educational attainment</i>		
Lower level (primary school, junior middle school)	867	17.2
Middle level (high school, junior college)	3033	43.2
Higher level (undergraduate and above)	1788	35.5
Inconvenient to inform	204	4.1
<i>Age</i>		
18–23	725	14.5
24–45	3276	65.3
46–60	633	12.6
Over 61	232	4.6
Inconvenient to inform	149	3.0
<i>Marriage</i>		
Married	3553	70.9
None married	1386	27.6
Inconvenient to inform	76	1.5

college), while 35.5% had an undergraduate or higher level degree. In this category 4.1% of respondents replied with *inconvenient to inform*.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of various variables of the study. The mean value of satisfaction level for different aspects of life among citizens was relatively high (Mean = 3.744). Nearly 70% of respondents showed a satisfactory attitude to life (including *somewhat satisfied* 54.4% and *strongly satisfied* 14.8), while only 7.3% expressed dissatisfaction towards their life. As for *government performance in public service delivery*, the mean value was the highest among all of the three independent variables (Mean = 3.745). It indicated a high possibility for citizens showing a satisfied attitude towards quality of delivery in various areas of public service (e.g. public transport, public safety, medical care, environmental protection). The mean value of *trust in government* was 3.644, which implied a relatively high trust level in government. More than 60% of respondents showed a trusting attitude in government, including 47.9% claiming *somewhat trust* and 14.2 holding *strongly trust* attitudes. Only a small portion of respondents (7.3%) presented a distrust tendency in government. Compared with the other two independent variables, *government*

Table 2 Descriptive analysis of variables in the SEM. *Source:* Authors' calculations

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Life satisfaction	5015	3.744	0.846	1	5
Government responsiveness	5015	3.105	0.736	1	5
Trust in government	5015	3.644	0.865	1	5
Government performance in public service delivery	5015	3.745	0.652	1	5

responsiveness had the lowest mean value (3.105). This signified that respondents' satisfaction level with government responsiveness in public service delivery was comparatively low.

5.2 Factors Affecting Life Satisfaction: Analysis of Direct and Indirect Effects

The confirmatory factor analysis results indicated the reasonable reliability and validity of the measurement model used in this study (Table 3). Specifically, all standardized factor loadings of each variable are significant ($p < 0.001$) and greater than 0.6, which suggested that all survey items effectively measure their corresponding variables. In addition, the values of composite reliability and average variance extracted in this model were 0.90 and 0.67 (trust in government), 0.86 and 0.54 (public service delivery), and 0.84 and 0.57 (government responsiveness), which were all above the minimum standard (0.70 and 0.50 respectively) (Bagozzi and Yi 2012).

Because of the reasonable level of reliability of the measurement of the data, it was possible to conduct SEM analysis to identify the relationships between the three independent variables and the dependent variable. Bootstrapping was used in the estimation by AMOS. Specifically, the bootstrapping maximum likelihood method was estimated in SEM analysis, and the number of bootstrap samples was 1000 as following Cheung and

Table 3 Measurement of model estimates

Latent variables	Indicators	Standardized factor loading	Individual item reliability	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Trust in government	VA1	0.802	0.688	0.90	0.67
	VA2	0.811	0.654		
	VA3	0.804	0.675		
	VA4	0.817	0.608		
	VA5	0.822	0.740		
Government performance in public service delivery	VB1	0.659	0.434	0.86	0.54
	VB2	0.587	0.345		
	VB3	0.631	0.398		
	VB4	0.691	0.478		
	VB5	0.657	0.432		
	VB6	0.599	0.359		
	VB7	0.708	0.501		
	VB8	0.730	0.533		
Government responsiveness	VC1	0.659	0.434	0.84	0.57
	VC2	0.587	0.345		
	VC3	0.721	0.607		
	VC4	0.746	0.545		
		0.785	0.574		
		0.810	0.518		

VA1, VA2, VA3, VA4 and VA5 are five indicators of the independent variable 'trust in government'; VB1, VB2, VB3, VB4, VB5, VB6, VB7 and VB8 are eight indicators of the independent variable 'government performance in public service delivery'; VC1, VC2, VC3 and VC4 are four indicators of the independent variable 'government responsiveness'

Lau’s (2008) suggestions. In addition, some indices assessing goodness of fit of the model were obtained. These were outlined in Table 4. As it shows, the value of χ^2 was 51.15 and the value of df was 23. The ratio of the Chi square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) was 2.22, which was below the recommended cut-off point of 3.0, as suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (1988).

Since the value of χ^2 is sensitive to sample size, and is almost always significant in large samples (Kline 2005), the other indices of the model should be considered to measure the fit goodness. Specifically, the values of other indices, such as GFI=0.998, AGFI=0.995, CFI=0.998, IFI=0.998 and NFI=0.997, were all above 0.90. These proved the good fitting of the model. The table also presented other two indices, RMR (0.006) and RMSEA (0.016), which were less than the suggested standard 0.05 and 0.08 respectively. The upper and lower RMSEA value at the 90% confidence interval was 0.010 and 0.021 respectively.

According to Nigel and Anna (2014), a measurement invariance analysis should be conducted on identical constructs with a similarly structured questionnaire across different socio-demographic groups. Following the process proposed by Van de Schoot et al. (2012), we analyzed measurement invariance across different age and gender groups by means of a multi-group CFA. See Table 5 for the fit indices. Four models, comprising the configural model, the metric model, the scalar model and the residual model, were analyzed. As shown in Table 5, the values of χ^2/df were all less than 3.0 ($p < 0.05$). Since the value of χ^2 is sensitive to large sample size, other indices should be considered when interpreting the results. Specifically, the values of GFI, NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI and CFI were all above 0.90. The values of RMSEA across different groups were smaller than 0.080. Moreover, as the value of p is highly sensitive to sample size, the changes of CFI (ΔCFI) among different models in age and gender groups were compared (Wu 2007; Putnick and Bornstein 2016). The changes in the CFI values between different models were less than 0.01. The value changes of other indices such as NFI (ΔNFI), RFI (ΔRFI), IFI (ΔIFI), TLI (ΔTLI) were smaller than 0.05 compared with other different nested models. As shown in Table 5, the value of ECVI for residual model for both gender and age is smaller than other three models, which shows that the residual model is better than other models (Little 1997). Considering the values of ΔCFI and other indices mentioned above, it indicates that the analysis supports the measurement invariance among different age and gender groups. Therefore, our model was reasonably suitable for the data.

Figure 2 presents the standardized path coefficients and significance testing of three independent variables associated with life satisfaction. These three variables explained altogether 20% of the variance of life satisfaction (the value of R-square=0.20) and each variable made significant and positive influence on urban respondents’ life satisfaction level. All the hypotheses mentioned above have therefore been proved.

Table 4 The goodness of fit indices for SEM of life satisfaction. *Source:* Authors’ calculations

Fit measure	χ^2 (Sig.)	Absolute fitness indices				Incremental fitness indices			DF	χ^2/df
		RMR	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	NFI		
Reference value	($p > 0.05$)	<0.05	>0.90	>0.90	<0.05	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	1–3	
Model	51.15**	0.006	0.998	0.995	0.016	0.998	0.998	0.997	23	2.22

** $p < 0.01$

Table 5 Measurement invariance of multiple socio-demographic groups (measurement residuals model). *Source:* Authors' calculations

Sociodemographic groups	Models	χ^2 (df)	χ^2/df	GFI	NFI/Delta1 (Δ NFI)	RFI/Rho1 (Δ RFI)	IFI/Delta2 (Δ IFI)	TLI/Rho2 (Δ TLI)	CFI (Δ CFI)	ECVI	RMSEA	<i>p</i>
Gender	Configural model	211.49 (71)	2.98	0.993	0.987 (-)	0.980 (-)	0.991 (-)	0.986 (-)	0.991 (-)	0.094	0.03	0.001
	Metric model	211.49 (71)	2.98	0.993	0.987 (0.00)	0.980 (0.00)	0.991 (0.00)	0.986 (0.00)	0.991 (0.00)	0.085	0.04	0.001
	Scalar model	257.29 (88)	2.92	0.993	0.985 (-0.002)	0.976 (-0.004)	0.989 (-0.002)	0.982 (-0.004)	0.991 (0.00)	0.077	0.04	0.001
	Residual model	264.62 (90)	2.94	0.994	0.984 (-0.001)	0.976 (0.00)	0.988 (-0.001)	0.982 (0.00)	0.992 (0.01)	0.075	0.03	0.001
Age	Configural model	109.26 (68)	1.60	0.993	0.994 (-)	0.990 (-)	0.998 (-)	0.996 (-)	0.998 (-)	0.056	0.01	0.001
	Metric model	109.26 (68)	1.60	0.993	0.994 (0.00)	0.990 (0.00)	0.998 (0.00)	0.996 (0.00)	0.998 (0.00)	0.056	0.01	0.001
	Scalar model	109.49 (70)	1.56	0.994	0.994 (0.00)	0.990 (0.00)	0.998 (0.00)	0.996 (0.00)	0.998 (0.00)	0.055	0.01	0.002
	Residual model	109.93 (71)	1.55	0.994	0.993 (-0.001)	0.990 (0.00)	0.998 (0.00)	0.996 (0.00)	0.998 (0.00)	0.050	0.01	0.002

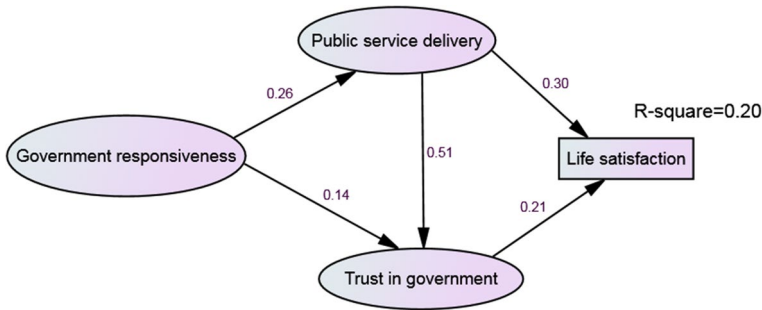


Fig. 2 The path diagram for hypothesized SEM of life satisfaction. *Source:* Authors' calculations. Notes $R^2=0.20$

In Table 6, SEM analysis showed that trust in government was associated with life satisfaction ($p < 0.001$). This observation would therefore explain in terms of a direct and positive effect why there was a variance in urban residents' life satisfaction, since that could be seen to grow if they held stronger trust attitudes towards government. Specifically, the coefficient was 0.209, which indicated that a single unit increase in the level of trust in government would lead to a 0.209 units growth in respondents' life satisfaction.

Government performance in public service delivery had the strongest positive effect on urban respondents' life satisfaction. The total effect was 0.408 ($0.302 + 0.509 \times 0.209 = 0.408$, $p < 0.001$). This implied that if respondents' satisfaction with *government performance in public service delivery* increased by one unit, their satisfaction with life would increase by 0.408 units. Specifically, the variable of *public service delivery* can have both a direct (0.302 , $p < 0.001$) and an indirect effect on life satisfaction (with *trust in government* as mediator) ($0.509 \times 0.209 = 0.106$, $p < 0.001$).

Government responsiveness played an indirect role in predicting the variance of life satisfaction among these respondents. It would exert a positive influence on life satisfaction through either *public service delivery* ($0.261 \times 0.302 = 0.079$, $p < 0.001$) or *trust in government* ($0.139 \times 0.209 = 0.029$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, government responsiveness had a more complicated relation with life satisfaction: respondents' satisfaction with government responsiveness would enhance their satisfaction in *government performance in public service delivery*, which would therefore increase their trust in government and further contribute to life satisfaction (0.509 , $p < 0.001$). The total effect was 0.136, suggesting that with a one unit increase in urban respondents' satisfaction towards government responsiveness, their evaluations of life satisfaction would improve by 0.136 units. By contrast, the regression coefficient was relatively lower than other two variables.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The primary aim of this research has been to discover Chinese citizens' level of life satisfaction and investigate how quality of government influences their happiness. The findings indicate that the majority of China's citizens have a high level of satisfaction with life. Positively and significantly contributing to their life satisfaction are government trustworthiness, its responsiveness and its performance in public service delivery. As an accompaniment to market reform, China's citizens are becoming more critical of government

Table 6 Path coefficients of SEM. *Source:* Authors' calculations

	Total effect	Direct effect (95% CI)	Indirect effect (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Life satisfaction ← Government performance in public service delivery	0.408	0.302 (0.274-0.331)	0.106 (0.150-0.201)	***
Life satisfaction ← Trust in government	0.209	0.209 (0.182-0.239)		***
Life satisfaction ← Government responsiveness	0.136		0.136 (0.142-0.171)	***
Government performance of public service delivery ← Government responsiveness	0.261	0.261 (0.237-0.283)		***
Trust in government ← Government performance in public service delivery	0.509	0.509 (0.486-0.531)		***
Trust in government ← Government responsiveness	0.272	0.139 (0.117-0.166)	0.133 (0.141-0.173)	***

****p* < 0.001

performance and displaying an active interest in policy agendas (Wang and You 2016). This transformation from an authoritarian-oriented one to a more critical one, therefore, reveals the importance of quality of government to overall life satisfaction. Hopefully this study will address the present knowledge gap regarding the relation between quality of government and happiness in a non-democratic context.

While existing work seldom addresses whether a trusting attitude in government contributes to residents' life satisfaction, this research has provided evidence both that the former exerts a positive and significant influence on the latter, and that this influence works through the spill-over effects of trust. A trusting attitude in government should incubate a series of positive feelings among citizens, such as a belief in government accountability, a greater conviction of the honesty and uprightness of civil servants, and a firmer sense of being empowered and respected. These feelings may result in stronger trusting attitudes towards neighbors, friends, communities and even the whole society, cultivating a sense of belongingness and altruism, which will further contribute to residents' psychological health as well as their satisfaction with life (Mueller 2009; Ekici and Koydemir 2014). A few recently conducted empirical studies conclude that public trust in government is indispensable for happiness and satisfactory life during abnormal periods (such as natural disaster or social conflicts) (Liang 2016). Adding to their argument, our research indicates that this is also the case in stable and normal times.

Of the three factors considered, government performance in public service delivery was observed to have the most significant influence on residents' life satisfaction. Our results indicate that government performance in producing satisfactory outcomes and shaping an inclusive process both have significant influence on residents' evaluation of life. This suggests that for China's residents, life satisfaction is not simply built upon sufficient and high quality public products and the concomitant material enjoyment, but also hinges on an open and responsive agenda intended to cultivate a sense of empowerment and a trusting and contented attitude towards government and society.

Although government responsiveness also positively contributes to people's happiness in China, its impact is lower than government performance in public service delivery. This specific finding partly confirms Helliwell and Huang's theory of "a hierarchy of preferences that depends on the level of development" (2008: 595). Our data aligns with their arguments that economic development will render government responsiveness and accountability increasingly more important for constructing residents' perceptions of happiness. They also seem to proclaim that for richer countries, democratic quality will surpass technical quality of government in importance for citizens' life satisfaction (though this judgment may be insufficiently rigorous as it does not consider cultural and political dimensions). In China's case, as our data shows, high income, rapid development and more affluent material life have not caused government responsiveness or an inclusive agenda to become more significant factors in achieving residents' happiness. The reason for this could be the lingering effects of an authoritarian political culture and a state regime whose policing stifles people's expectations and their desires for the democratization of government.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that in transitional countries such as China, government's performance in micro-level policy delivery (Whiteley et al. 2010) are instrumental in shaping residents' happiness at the present time. However, along with deeper transitions in society and in the political regime, democratic aspects of government quality will play an increasingly more important role in citizens' happiness. Therefore, in order to enhance residents' life satisfaction in the forthcoming decades, China's government should engage in political reforms and democratization. These reform initiatives should include, first of all, transformation in the genres of governance in public service delivery. In specific, in

order to enhance residents' life satisfaction, government should not only provide high quality public services, but also engage in shaping a less bureaucratic, more open, and more service-oriented public sector capable of providing sufficient and equally distributed public products that cater to the diverse needs of various social groups (Yan 2018). In addition, besides providing better material life conditions, China's government should also enhance residents' satisfaction with political life by empowering the community and opening up to participation.

At the same time, we also admit the following limitations. First of all, as an exploratory study into the subject, our research has been limited in its selection of factors. Although it answers our research questions by focusing on three factors (government's trustworthiness, responsiveness and performance in public service delivery), exploring other indicators in quality of government could lead to further important and intriguing findings. In addition, though our data has been proved to have good reliability, our study lacks a comparative view. It also does not consider the influence of geographical, political and cultural differences on people's perspectives, and therefore on their perceptions of quality of government. This angle could be of great consequent importance when investigating the relation between quality of government and happiness. Future research should consider comparative studies, for example between different regions in China, between democratic and non-democratic societies, and between differing social groups.

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