Reporting and Narrating Happiness: A Mixed-Method Study Examining Self-Reported Happiness of the Chinese Urban Middle Class

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Yuan Dang

School of Social Science

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Abstract

This study aims to paint a timely and holistic picture of how the Chinese urban middle-class understand, and narrate, happiness in the context of a rapidly developing economy. The study is sociological in approach and addresses the following research questions: What are the trends and patterns in happiness among the urban middle class? What does happiness mean for Chinese middle-class individuals, and to what extent does its meaning inform the conceptualisation of happiness? Do the middle class – as defined by socioeconomic status - subjectively identify themselves as 'middle class'? And, how do the experiences, as well as narration, of happiness differ in accordance with individuals' socio-demographic attributes (i.e. class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parental status)?

In answering these research questions, this study integrates the merits of a quantitative approach, which offers the possibility of deriving general patterns of happiness among the middle class, and a qualitative approach, which allow us to understand and reconstruct happiness through insight into people's perceptions and experiences of happiness. The quantitative data draws upon all available Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) data sets (2003-2015) while the qualitative data consists of 51 semi-structured interviews conducted by the author in Guangzhou, China. This qualitatively-driven mixed-method research not only uniquely contributes to the field of happiness research in China, which is currently dominated by large-scale survey research, but helps inform the sociological understanding of happiness through the study of the lived experience of happiness.

The analysis of survey data undertaken for this study demonstrates that happiness among the urban middle class increased over the period 2003 to 2015, albeit with fluctuations. Individual interview narratives, however, suggest that this is not explained by national-level developments or 'moods'. The study also identified significant variation in reported happiness within the Chinese urban middle class according to individual socio-demographic characteristics. Specifically, happiness among the middle class was found to be associated with individuals' position within the middle class, their age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status. Using the interview data I gathered, some of the reasons underlying this variation could be illuminated. This data also suggest that those who occupationally fit the definition of 'middle class' do not always identify subjectively as such. Multiple group identification, the rigid and hierarchical inter- as well as intra- classification of work-unit organisations (particularly in education and the healthcare system), and the influence of stereotypical, usually Westernised, images of the middle class in the media might serve to explain this inconsistency between middle class by occupation and middle class by subjective identification. Finally, the interviews allowed for individual reflection by research participants on what constitutes 'happiness' for them. The findings support Hsu's (2019a) argument that happiness, in contemporary China, is constructed as a morally good life. Most of my respondents tended to associate happiness ('*xingfu*') with life evaluations in terms of whether (aspects of) their life were considered happy. They equated happiness with satisfaction in both family and work domains, or to use Hsu's (2019b) expression, they wished to 'have it all'. The analysis of this data suggests that Veenhoven's (1984) framework for conceptualising happiness as comprising cognitive and affective dimensions can be applied broadly to the Chinese context. However, when evaluating their own happiness (*xingfu*), respondents

appeared to prioritise its cognitive component. In so doing, they distinguished it from '*kuaile'*, which was perceived as an automatically triggered feeling with no cognitive association. Thus, in this study, *kuaile* does not appear to be transformed into *xingfu* through a cumulative process, as suggested in Madsen's (2019a) taxonomy of the concept of happiness.

Declaration

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Why study happiness? Why study the Chinese middle class?

Throughout my PhD study, the question I have most commonly encountered is 'What made you decide to research the happiness of the Chinese middle class?' This seemingly straightforward question in fact subsumes two distinct sub-questions: why study happiness?; and why study the Chinese middle class? My answer to the question of why study happiness is twofold. On the one hand it is an eternal question; from ancient times happiness has been understood as the highest good that humans pursue (Aristotle, 2004). On the other hand, happiness, as a socially constructed phenomenon, and one of the determinants of social behaviour (Barbalet, 1998), is, or should be, at the heart of the sociological endeavour to understand society, its institutions and actors.

On the question of why study the Chinese middle class, the answer is that the middle class plays a more important role in governance and prosperity than any other social group in China (Li and McElveen, 2013). The dramatic growth of the middle class, who were born out of, and have benefited from, China's economic boom, plays a large role not only in shaping both domestic and global economies but in every aspect of Chinese society. The Chinese middle class are 'the vanguard of consumption and the rearguard of politics', and they function as a 'social stabiliser' buffering the tensions between the upper class and the working class and supporting conservative ideologies (Li, 2006; Li, 2013; Li and Qin, 2016; Zhou and Chen, 2010). Since the middle class are the biggest winners of China's economic boom, whether members of the middle class feel happy or not may reveal some of the largely hidden experiences behind the socioeconomic transition in China.

Given this, it is surprising that, at least among the recent literature exploring the characteristics and habits of the contemporary middle class in China, little has been written on how the Chinese middle class themselves understand and report happiness. This study aims to paint a timely and holistic picture of how the Chinese middle class understand, and

narrate happiness in the context of a rapidly developing economy. The study is sociological in approach and addresses the following research questions: What are the trends or patterns in happiness among the urban[1] middle class? What does happiness mean for Chinese urban middle-class individuals, and to what extent does its meaning inform the conceptualisation of happiness? Do members of the middle class – as defined by socioeconomic status – subjectively identify themselves as 'middle class'? And, how do the experiences, as well as narration, of happiness differ in accordance with individuals' socio-demographic[2] attributes (i.e. class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status)? In answering these research questions, this study integrates the merits of a quantitative approach, which offers the possibility of deriving general patterns of happiness among the middle class, and a qualitative approach, which allows us to understand and reconstruct happiness through insight into people's perceptions and experiences of happiness. The quantitative data draws upon all available Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) data sets (2003-2015) while the qualitative data consists of 51 semi-structured interviews conducted by the author in Guangzhou, China. Through lay perspectives on the concept of happiness, this qualitatively-driven mixed-method research not only uniquely contributes to the field of happiness research in China, which is currently dominated by large-scale survey research, but helps inform the sociological understanding of happiness through the study of the lived experience of happiness.

In the rest of this chapter, I contextualise the original research conducted for this thesis by setting out the significance of happiness and the emerging urban middle class in contemporary China. Section 1.2 provides a brief overview of the history of *xingfu* (widely employed as the Chinese equivalent to 'happiness') and how it is mobilised in today's China. The emergence of the middle class and its role in China's all-around societal development is explained in Section 1.3. Section 1.4 reflects on the choice of the 'middle class' as the object of study in this thesis by situating the debate over 'middle class (*zhong chan jie ji*)' or 'middle

[1] This study used the Goldthorpe occupational categories to define class. In terms of the limitations of the income-based class classification, please see Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.1). The main reason why I only focused on the urban middle class is that the occupational composition in rural areas is highly related to the development of agriculture. Cities, on the contrary, have a much more complex economic structure, which allows a 'flourishing' of the middle class defined by occupations.

[2] In this thesis, I understand 'socio-demographic' to include a broad range of individual attributes, of which one is 'socioeconomic' status. I use 'socioeconomic status' and 'social class' interchangeably.

strata/stratum (*zhong chan jie ceng*)' in contemporary Chinese academic literature. Finally, an outline of the structure of this thesis is provided in Section 1.5.

1.2 Happiness (*xingfu*) in today's China

Although *xingfu* is widely accepted to be the Chinese word most closely corresponding to the Western concept of happiness (Chen, 2019; Hsu et al., 2017; Wielander, 2018), the term began appearing regularly in written and spoken Chinese just a century ago. The modern usage of *xingfu* was borrowed from Japan[3] and can be dated back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Zhou, 2010). Prior to the twentieth century, the phrase *xingfu* rarely conveyed positive connotations, being used mainly by cultural elites to describe the ignorant, short-sighted pursuit of '*fu*' (Chen, 2019). In the Confucian classic *Shangshu*, it is explained in the chapter *Hongfan*[4] that there are five means to the fulfilment of *fu*: these include longevity (*shou*), material abundance (*fu*[5]), physical and psychological well-being (*kangning*), cultivating virtues (*you haode*), and dying a natural death (*kao zhongming*). Although the cultivation of virtues had been listed as one of the five sources of the achievement of *fu*, it was not considered central to this. Therefore, cultural elites regarded people whose ultimate goal was the achievement of *fu* to be banal and amoral (Chen, 2019). In addition, according to the *Kangxi Dictionary*, the character '*xing*' means luck, implying the outcomes (be they successes or failures) are not dependent on people's abilities and actions. In this way, when *xing* and *fu* are assembled into one word – *xingfu* – it denotes the importance of luck in achieving *fu*.

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[3] The word *xingfu* was also new to Japan and not commonly used until after the Meiji Restoration (1603-1867). After the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895, *xingfu* was frequently used in *The Chinese Progress* (*shiwu bao*) (Zhou, 2010). *The Chinese Progress* was established by the reformist Liang Qichao and was the most influential reformist newspaper used to disseminate reformist ideas to the public during the Hundred Days' Reform (*bairi weixin*).

[4] For a brief English introduction to this: http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Classics/hongfan.html [Accessed in September 2020].

[5] The corresponding Chinese character here is 富, which means richness and differs from the previous *fu*, for which the associated character is 福. The mandarin pronunciations for these two *fu* are also different. 富 should be pronounced with the fourth tone (*fu*4), whereas 福 goes with the second tone (*fu*2).

The understanding of *xingfu* in ancient China is thus far from how it is captured or defined in today's China. The modern usage of *xingfu* often represents a combined experience of '*le*' and '*fu*' (Chen, 2019). *Le*, focusing on the inner joy and carrying a moral connotation, was identified as an alternative way of searching for happiness by the cultural elites, the meaning of which has been preserved in the modern word *kuaile* (Chen, 2019). The state of *fu* defines what a good or happy life should be, and is easily affected by external and unpredictable conditions. In contrast, *le* refers to a feeling of joy in the heart and is much more subjective and reliable. Despite the fact that *fu* and *le* are at two different ends of the happiness spectrum – external, material prosperity and inner joy respectively – it is not impossible that they can be combined (Chen, 2019). Indeed, achieving harmony or consistency between feeling good and the attainment of an ideal way of living might be captured in the contemporary expression of *xingfu*, which is not dissimilar from some of the mainstream definitions of happiness[6] in current scientific studies of well-being. For example, Dutch sociologist Ruut Veenhoven (1984) conceptualises happiness as an umbrella construct encompassing an affective component focusing on one's emotional experiences as well as a cognitive component, based on the individual's appraisal of how good a life they live. It is worth noting that although the operationalisation of the concept of happiness is comparable across nations, the standards constituting a 'good' life (which may be more related to the cognitive component of happiness) vary culturally. Moreover, people's understandings of happiness may also be individual-specific within each of the cultures[7].

The modern usage of *xingfu* was politicised from its very first introduction into China. The reformers and intellectuals in the closing years of the Qing Dynasty stressed the collectivist nature of happiness and proposed that individual pursuit of happiness should be premised on the interests of the collective and the country (Zhou, 2010). In other words, these political reformists believed that to seek or build a new and happy nation required dedicated effort by every Chinese individual. For example, Liang Qichao was averse to the absolute monarchy of the imperial Qing government, which had made happiness the preserve of the powerful and privileged. Liang was inspired by Jeremy Bentham's advocacy of the pursuit of 'the

[6] These definitions of happiness are reviewed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1).
[7] The socio-demographic differences in happiness will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4).

greatest happiness of the greatest number' and viewed happiness as developing in line with the evolution of civilisation; a more civilised society would allow a greater proportion of its people to enjoy happiness (Chen, 2019).

In China, the transformation of unhappiness into happiness at the national, collective level is inseparable from the same process experienced at the individual level (Wielander, 2018). After a new nation – the People's Republic of China – was established in 1949, the ruling communist party constantly engaged in attempts to teach Chinese people what *xingfu* really was and what could be done in order to become or feel happy. This 'correct' way of being or feeling happy is guided by the concept of 'spirit (*jingshen*)', the purpose of which is to position the inner self of the individual relative to the correct beliefs and values determined by those in power in society (Larson, 2009). Spirit, therefore, is the key to how the Chinese government mobilises happiness in contemporary China. In other words, happiness is not just a psychological state of the individual, but a social construct that can be learnt and managed by following and internalising the defined, ideal spirits. Since the promotion of happiness at the national, collective level is closely tied to individual efforts to achieve it, a happier nation requires a higher level of happiness reported and experienced by its members. In other words, the happiness of the Chinese people can be used as a measure for assessing the performance of the CCP.

1.3 The emergence of the Chinese middle class

China is a society in which the political apparatus has significant power to transform the emergent pattern of social distinctions. Occupational and organisational hierarchies under state socialism are constantly shifting due to the ever-changing context and scope of state policies (Zhou et al., 1996). Therefore, the criteria for designating an individual's socioeconomic status, and therefore the categories or groups into which they are placed, fluctuate according to political changes. As Wallerstein (1975, p.369) states, '…classes do not have some permanent reality. Rather, they are formed, they consolidate themselves, they disintegrate or disaggregate, and they are re-formed. It is a process of constant movement,

and the greatest barrier to understanding their action is reification'. Thus, it is not surprising that the understanding of the middle class has changed significantly between Mao's times (1949-1976) and the period following the introduction of the Open-Door (*gaige kaifang*) policy (1978 onwards).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Maoist leaders prioritised policies of industrialisation, emphasised the class struggle and sought to abolish class structure; this became the paramount task for establishing an ultimately egalitarian society. Mao gradually dismantled all forms of private corporations and adopted a planned economy model, which gave the state ultimate power to allocate goods and services. During that time, people were not legally allowed to own their own property, as society was declared to be at the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As a result, class stratification was no longer defined between the 'propertied' and the 'propertyless' (Li, 2018, p.310). Similar to the classification of the population under the Stalinist Soviet constitution, the class structure in Mao's period was represented by the so-called 'two social classes (workers and peasants) and one social stratum (intellectuals)' (Li, 2005, p.53). It was assumed that the power relationships within the social structure had been gradually eroded, and members of all these three groups were considered equal in rights.

This raises the question of whether the classless society, as envisaged by Maoist leaders, was ever achieved. In practice, differences in terms of the ownership of the means of production is only one aspect of the disparity between individuals. Status (*shenfen*) became a new criterion for replacing property ownership in mapping existing social differentiations (Li, 2018). One notable type of *shenfen*[8] is political status, determined by Communist Party membership. The major social cleavage in socialist societies, it has been argued, is that between Party elites and non-Party masses, with no additional intermediate groups or classes (Parkin, 1969). A minority of state bureaucrats also quietly enjoys enormous authority and economic privilege (Zhou and Suhomlinova, 2001). The socialist state redistributes resources

[8] In addition to party membership, the industrial/economic sector of employment, household registration (*hukou*) and work units (*danwei*), were all important types of *shenfen* reflecting people's unequal access to resources, opportunities, and life chances (See Lin and Bian, 1991; Xie et al., 2009; Walder, 1986; Wu and Teriman, 2004; Zhou and Suhomlinova, 2001).

and allocates welfare with respect to centrally defined political targets, which propagates 'conflicts' between immediate producers and redistributors (Zhou et al., 1996, p.760). The latter can be viewed as a 'new bureaucratic class' who possess much greater political power and a distinct and superior socioeconomic position than other social groups (ibid., p.761). In other words, in the context of the communist state, stratifying mechanisms are rooted in people's varying power relationship to the central state.

After Mao's death, in order to lift more people out of poverty and unemployment, Deng Xiaoping and his circle initiated China's reforms and opening up ('*gaige kaifang*') in 1978. This move towards capitalist restoration gave rise to the emergence of a Chinese middle class. From this point onwards all occupational groups became valued in relation to their importance in social and economic activities. Profession, rather than class struggle, became the foremost indicator for categorising social strata (Lu, 2010). This is particularly the case in socialist states entering the phase of modern industrialisation in which the class system is thoroughly correspondent to the class system of modern Western capitalism (Parkin, 1969). In order to throw off the shackles of Maoist restrictions on entrepreneurship, Deng instructed to 'Let some people get rich first'. In the wake of massive economic re-adjustments across the nation, a socioeconomic force from the past – the self-employed and private entrepreneurs – re-appeared in the transformative post-Mao China and disparities between people's pay and earnings began to grow (Li, 2008). In addition to these economic and income factors, urbanisation, the expansion of higher education and the growth in white-collar occupations contributed to the growth of the Chinese middle class (Li, 2010; 2011).

The growth of the middle class has always been a central development strategy since the beginning of economic reform. Building a 'moderately prosperous society (*xiaokang shehui*)' was Deng Xiaoping's declared aspiration for China's modernisation, and he expected that by the end of the twentieth century the living standards of Chinese people would reach the level of *xiaokang*, with a GDP per capita of $800 to $1,000 (equivalent to £620 to £775 at today's conversion rate)[9]. According to China's statistical indexes published by the National Bureau

[9] See People.cn, 'From "*xiaokang*" to "all-round *xiaokang*" – A discussion of the formation and development of Deng Xiaoping's theory of *xiaokang* society':
http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0714/c69113-25279758.html [Accessed in September 2020].

of Statistics in November 2000, Chinese people overall (*zongti*) have achieved the *xiaokang* living standards[10]. These indexes, however, are national averages, which do not capture the huge discrepancy between developed and less developed regions, urban and rural areas, officials and ordinary people, men and women, as well as among age groups (Lu, 2010). Therefore, in order to make every Chinese benefit from the fruit of *xiaokang* society, Deng's successor Jiang Zemin revised the developmental goal, setting the new aim for China to become an 'all-round moderately prosperous society (*quanmian xiaokang shehui*)' by 2020. It should be noted here that 'all-round' does not just mean the reach of economic benefits across the population, but comprehensive in the sense of including economic, political, social, cultural, and ecological development[11].

One important characteristic of the all-round *xiaokang* society is to ensure a rising proportion of society in the middle-level income group/stratum (*zhongdeng shouru qunti/jieceng*)[12]. Many domestic scholars (e.g. Li, 2006; Li, 2013; Li, 2017) argue that the middle-level income group refers to the 'middle class' measured in economic terms[13], despite the fact that political leaders prefer not to use the term 'middle class' but use 'strata/stratum' instead in official speeches or documents. One possible explanation for this is the desire on the part of political leaders to avoid the word 'class' which retains a negative and antagonistic connotation (Li, 2006). This will be explained in the next section.

1.4 Middle class versus middle strata/stratum

The investigation of China's burgeoning middle class has been receiving increased interest among domestic and Western scholars over the last decade. In the academic literature that has emerged in Chinese, two concepts have been employed to conceptualise the

[10] See above.
[11] See the full text of Jiang Zemin's speech in the 16th National Party Congress in November 2002: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/t10855.shtml [Accessed in July 2020].
[12] See CPCNews, 'Striving to improve the ratio of middle-income group': http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0920/c40531-30304180.html [Accessed in September 2020].
[13] Using income is the most parsimonious way to categorise social class. In terms of the limitations of the economic measurement of class and how sociologists define the middle class, please see Chapter 2.3.1 and Chapter 2.3.1 respectively.

socioeconomically ‘middle’ level of the social structure: ‘middle class (*zhong chan jie ji*)’; and ‘middle strata/stratum (*zhong chan jie ceng*)’.

Under the former socialist redistributive economy, class defined by market capabilities barely existed due to the absence of a market (Lin and Wu, 2009). Maoist leaders repeatedly stressed the devastating level of class exploitation in pre-revolutionary China and persuaded ordinary citizens that they should ‘not forget the class struggle’ on a daily basis. In striking opposition to Maoist ideology of putting the class struggle at the centre of Chinese politics, Deng Xiaoping, whose priority was economic rejuvenation, depoliticised the definition of class and declared that there should be ‘no arguing about that’ (Lin, 2015, p.44). In this sense, Chinese sociologists were given the green light to introduce terminology that complicated the notion of class based on a person’s relationship to the means of production. From the 1980s, the apolitical rhetoric of ‘strata/stratum’ started appearing in the work of some Chinese sociologists (e.g. Li Chunling, 2005; Lu Xueyi, 2002; Sun Liping, 2004).

These scholars suggest that the narrative of class implies an antagonism between the rulers and the ruled over access to resources and opportunities, which goes against the formation of the harmonious society promoted by government developmental policies (Anagnost, 2008; Li, 2008; Lin, 2015; Nathan, 2016). In contrast, the notion of strata allows them to acknowledge gradations of social stratification (without trapping them in an endless dialectic of class struggle) while capturing the hope of ‘common prosperity’ and reaffirming the collectivist social values over the self-interested pursuit of wealth (Anagnost, 2008, pp.503-504). As Li (2008) indicates, ‘class (*jieji*)’ denotes conflicts of interest between two groups and encourages a fight for their own interests; while ‘strata/stratum (*jieceng*)’, as an alternative expression to delineate social stratification and differentiation in life chances, assumes cooperation and compromise between groups, instead of conflicting relations. This, Li suggests, is why political leaders prefer the term ‘stratum’ to the term ‘class’ (Li, 2010, p.142).

The concept of social strata/stratum is consequently viewed as more suited to the contemporary socio-ideological milieu defined as that of a ‘harmonious’ society. In contrast, the term class remains criticised for its antagonistic overtones that calls attention to the social cleavage and inequality created by the economic reform. Reviewing domestic Chinese

literatures, two patterns emerge in terms of the adoption of one or other of the terms by Chinese scholars. Firstly, in recent sociological studies exploring the Chinese middle class, numerous sociologists (e.g. Li and Qin, 2016; Zhu, 2017) have argued for the synonymity between the concept of 'class (*jieji*)' and 'strata (*jieceng*)'; in other words, these two terms can be used interchangeably. Thus, it makes sense that the same author may use different terms in different works. For example, in Li and Qin's (2016) book '*An Analysis of the Class Structure in Contemporary China'*, which is a selection of the authors' previously published articles (in Chinese), Chapters 7 to 10 consider the middle class. However, while the title and the content of Chapter 7 employs the term 'middle class', later chapters use, rather, the notion of 'middle strata'. Indeed, Li and Qin (2016) state that the terms 'middle class' and 'middle strata' are employed interchangeably in a footnote at the beginning of Chapter 8. Secondly, the decision on wording may depend on the geographic location of the author (whether they are based in China or writing from outside China) or on where the author expects to publish their academic paper (e.g. in an English or Chinese language journal). When an article is published outside of China and in English, the author will embrace the Western concept of 'middle class', although they may state their preference for the term 'stratum (*jieceng*)' over 'class (*jieji*)' in a Chinese language journal. Since social class and social strata/stratum are operationalised in the same way, it seems that the two terms are used interchangeably and that the choice of one over the other is down to authors' political conscience, country of residence and personal preference.

Although the investigation of the Chinese middle class has received increased interest among domestic and Western scholars of late, there are still limited works offering a comprehensive study of how China's burgeoning middle class report and experience happiness. The small number of related studies focus either on the puzzling relationship between the improving economic situation of the middle class and the changes in their sense of happiness (e.g. Bartolini and Sarracino, 2013; Li and McElveen, 2013) or are based on national survey data alone, without exploring possible explanations for the correlation between the outcome variable – happiness – and its pre-selected determinants (e.g. Zhang, 2018). The study presented in this thesis, in contrast, not only contributes to the general academic literature on happiness by exploring the lived experience of happiness among the urban middle class in China from a sociological perspective, but provides a richer and more comprehensive review

of how the middle class in China reports and narrates happiness by adopting a mixed-method approach – integrating secondary analysis of quantitative survey data with analysis of new qualitative interview data.

1.5 Thesis outline

The main aim of the thesis is to explore how urban middle-class citizens in China report and evaluate their sense of happiness. Following this general introduction, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the themes of 'happiness', 'the middle class' and socio-demographic variation in reported happiness. The chapter critically considers key debates in contemporary theories of happiness in order to move towards a meaningful theoretical framework appropriate for the study of happiness in contemporary China. A key objective of the chapter is to shape a distinctively sociological approach to the study of happiness, which has been researched predominantly as a psychological construct. To this end, emphasis is placed on reviewing sociological contributions to happiness research. The second section of the chapter interrogates what constitutes the middle class in today's Chinese social context. This discussion sets the groundwork for elucidating the classificatory framework employed to determine the middle-class population samples used in the secondary survey data analysis and the primary interview data collection. The final section considers evidence to date on the relationship between people's happiness and their socio-demographic characteristics (class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status). This section of the chapter aims to understand if, and how, happiness might be expected to vary within the Chinese middle class in relation to these key characteristics.

Chapter 3, the methodology chapter, explains why a mixed-method research design – combining secondary quantitative survey data analysis and primary qualitative research (semi-structured interviews) – was selected for the study. The quantitative data analysed comes from the CGSS and the objective of its analysis was to determine the trends in self-reported happiness of the Chinese urban middle class as well as to understand the patterns of relationships between levels of happiness and socio-demographic attributes. The

qualitative data was collected by the author and consists of 51 semi-structured interviews conducted in Guangzhou in 2018. Of the range of rationales for the employment of a mixed-method research design, five are relevant to this study: development, complementarity, expansion, triangulation and initiation. The qualitative interview schedule was consciously guided by the findings from the initial survey data analysis in order to pursue emergent findings (development). The aim of the qualitative research was to illuminate the survey findings (complementarity) and provide the opportunity to explore the issues left 'untouched' by the CGSS (expansion). In addition, the convergence of the findings by combining a quantitative method and a qualitative method enhances the validity of the research (triangulation). A fifth rationale for mixed methods research – initiation – is identified in the suggestions for further research, since the inconsistencies in the survey measurement identified through the qualitative research conducted for this study suggests future research might usefully investigate the potential reframing of the CGSS survey question on happiness (initiation). While the quantitative findings from this study 'describe' the statistical patterns and relationships under investigation, the qualitative data analysis allows the exploration of personal experiences in order to identify and discuss possible explanations for the survey results and facilitates a deeper and richer understanding of happiness among the Chinese urban middle class.

Chapters 4-7 present the findings of the study. Chapter 4 examines trends in the self-reported happiness of the Chinese urban middle class. The analysed survey data are used to demonstrate the peaks and troughs in the Chinese middle class's level of happiness over the past decade while the collected interview data are drawn on to lend insight into how and why societal-level happiness has shifted over the past decade. The survey data are then employed to generate the 'big picture' in terms of how self-reported happiness differs within the Chinese middle class, looking specifically at intra-class position, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status.

Chapter 5 draws on the primary qualitative data to explore and narrate the meaning of happiness. Drawing on individual understandings of what constitutes 'happiness', it reveals how happiness is conceived among the middle class in today's China. In this chapter, the importance of the inconsistency of the wording of questions concerning happiness in the

CGSS time series is interrogated. Drawing on the responses of interviewees, this part of the chapter seeks to establish whether changes in wording may, in part, explain differences in reported happiness levels, especially when there was a significant increase, and corresponding decrease, in response categories after the happiness question wording changed in the CGSS in 2008.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 consider variation in reported happiness within the Chinese middle class according to individual socio-demographic characteristics. Chapter 6, first, takes an in-depth look at intra-class differentiation. The Chinese middle class considered in this thesis is a broad and emergent category consisting of three sub-classes – the service class, the self-employed and small employer, and the routine non-manual worker (the marginal middle class).[14] Thus, in the first instance, this chapter draws on the qualitative interview data to explore the extent to which the objectively determined middle class feels itself, subjectively, to be 'middle class'. Establishing this is particularly important given that studies to date on the relationship between class and happiness suggest that subjective class may have more explanatory power in relation to differences in reported levels of happiness than objective measures of class. Therefore, this chapter uses data from qualitative interviews, firstly to show how the Chinese middle class position themselves in the class structure, and then, to undertake a detailed exploration of intra-class differences in reported happiness and suggest potential explanations for the correlations identified in the survey data analysis. In Chapter 7, the other five socio-demographic attributes – age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status – and how they relate to impacts on the experiences of happiness on the part of the middle class in China are explored. Through an exploration and understanding of happiness from the perspectives of the individuals being studied – the Chinese urban middle class – this chapter aims to address the limitations of quantitative survey data used in Chapter 4 by teasing out possible explanations for why the experience of happiness differs for those with different socio-demographic characteristics. The chapter also draws on relevant

[14] The class classification schema in this thesis is based on Li Chunling's (2010;2011) class model, which revises Goldthorpe's occupational class categories in order to adapt to contemporary Chinese social structure. According to Li (2010; 2011), the middle class in China is a broad category including the service class, the self-employed/small employer, and the routine non-manual (which could be also referred to as the marginal middle class, since their socioeconomic positions are in-between the working class and the middle class). The classification of these different sub-classes of the middle class is discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3).

literature related to the sociology of emotion to explore how one's feeling, and reporting, of happiness is socially constructed.

The concluding chapter returns to the research aims proposed in the introductory chapter and outlines how these research questions have been addressed. It reflects also on the limitations as well as contributions of this study and puts forward suggestions for future research in the field.

Chapter 2 What do we know about 'happiness'? Reviewing the Literature

This thesis is an empirical study examining how urban middle-class citizens in China report and evaluate their sense of happiness. This review of the literature relevant to the study is structured in four parts. Firstly, I review contemporary theories of happiness and draw on this to develop a theoretical approach which can help in the study of happiness in contemporary China. Secondly, I focus on sociological approaches to happiness, and use findings from the literature to elaborate the approach of this study, which seeks to capture both the culturally and individually specific dimensions of the experience of happiness. Thirdly, I consider the process of the emergence of a middle class in China, its key characteristics and its representation in academic literature on Chinese political and public discourse. Finally, I consider whether and how people's level of happiness is influenced first and foremost by their socioeconomic status (class), but also by other individual characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status.

2.1 The anatomy of happiness – towards the scientific study of happiness

Aristotle argued, in (2004) *Nicomachean Ethics*, that happiness is the highest good that humans pursue, even though the understanding of happiness differs from individual to individual. The status of happiness as the supreme goal of humankind explains why it is such an important subject. However, classical philosophers interpreted happiness rather differently from how we understand it today. These classical philosophers conceptualised happiness, in objective terms, as 'eudaimonia', something which can be achieved by leading a life that conforms to the most valued virtues, and is thus not determined by the individual (Kesebir and Diener, 2009). In order to develop one's full potential and achieve happiness, one had to behave and think in virtuous ways, as defined by philosophers, and to suppress desires that were contrary to these moral values.

The concept of subjective well-being (hereinafter SWB) has been developed as a way of resolving the issue of how to define happiness by allowing the individual to define what happiness is for themselves and, on the basis of this definition, to ask how that individual evaluates their life[15]. SWB is viewed by its proponents as a scientifically proven approach to measuring happiness (Diener, 2009). Ed Diener – a highly influential psychologist in the field of happiness, who coined the term SWB – views SWB and happiness as synonyms and uses the two concepts interchangeably in most of his work (e.g. Diener et al., 1999; Diener, 2009; Diener el al., 2009). He prefers the concept of SWB over 'happiness' primarily because, due to its popularity in public discourse, 'happiness' has taken on a wide range of meanings (Diener et al., 2009).

The sociologist Ruut Veenhoven (1984) also recognises the different ways in which the concept of happiness is deployed. Arguing that happiness may be over-researched within the framework of comparative sociology and social indicators research, and that there has been little attempt to develop a systematic theoretical framework for its study (Veenhoven, 2008), his contribution to the sociology of happiness has focused on tightening up the definition of happiness in order to shape a systematic conceptual scheme for its study. Veenhoven's approach to happiness is viewed as the most appropriate for this thesis, for two reasons: firstly, Veenhoven's sociologically based perspective is more fitting in a disciplinary sense; secondly, the concept of happiness (or rather its Chinese equivalent, '*xingfu*'), rather than the technical, analytic term SWB, is more readily comprehensible to interviewees. I will explain this in more detail at the end of this section.

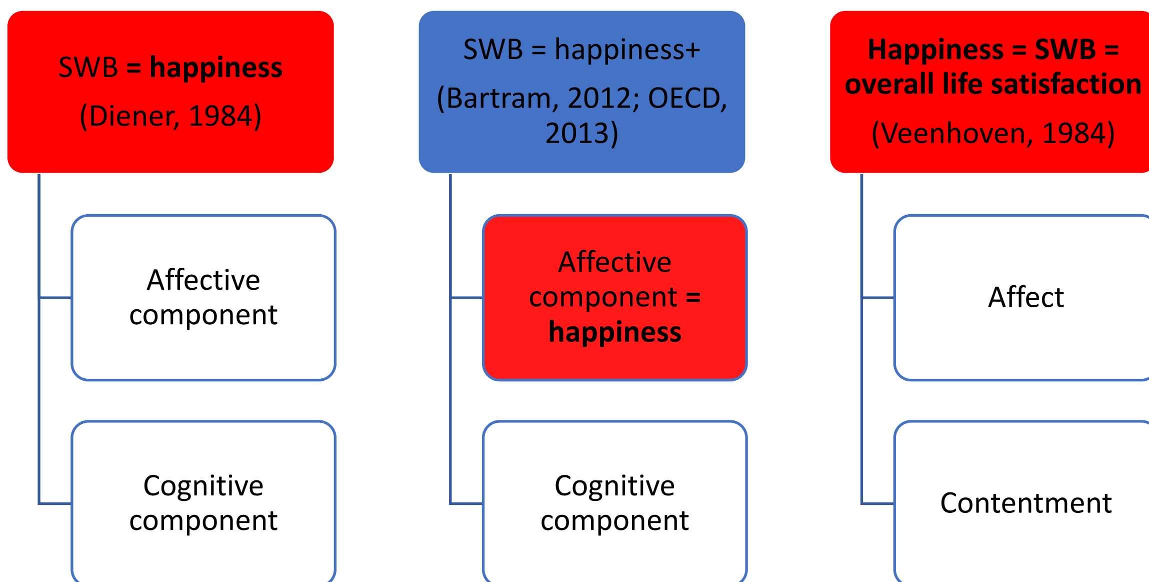
According to Diener and his associates (Diener, 1984; Diener, 2009; Diener et al., 1999), SWB is an umbrella term operationally defined by emotional responses (including positive affect and negative affect[16]), domain satisfaction, and an overall judgement of satisfaction with life,

[15] In practice, leaving out a precise definition might be helpful when conducting survey analysis of different countries (Bartram, 2012). However, this also creates confusion for researchers. It is hard to ascertain if they are comparing the same or a completely different concept, given that happiness is a socio-cultural construct.

[16] SWB scholars tend to assert the independence of positive affect and negative affect. The former includes arousing and pleasant emotions such as being 'active, alert, and excited', while the latter is concerned with unpleasant feelings such as being 'anxious, angry and fearful' (Diener, Scollon and Lucas, 2009, p.73). Diener and Emmons (1984) found that positive and negative affect are inversely correlated to each other in a short period of time, while over short-term spans, the relationship between these two becomes independent. Unlike Diener, Veenhoven does not examine negative affect specifically. To Veenhoven (1984), the affective component of

as shown in Figure 2.1. The main difference between affective and cognitive components of SWB is captured by Andrews and McKennell (1980, p.127): ‘cognition refers to the rational, “from-the-head”, aspect of a person’s response, while affect refers to the emotional, “from-the-heart” (or “from-the-gut”) components.’ In terms of the relationship between these two components, Diener (2009) argues that cognitive appraisals can shape people’s emotional reactions to events, although he also acknowledges that some simple emotions (e.g. fear) can occur unconsciously and be immediately experienced by the individual. It should be noted that Diener (2009) considers that although the components of SWB are moderately related to each other, they contribute individually to the framework of SWB.

Figure 2.1 – Comparison between the concept of SWB and happiness



While Diener argues for the equivalence between happiness and SWB, to some other SWB scholars, the study of SWB is more than ‘happiology’ (OECD, 2013, PP.28-29). For example, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, Bartram (2012) argues that the concept of happiness might be thought of, broadly speaking, as the affective component of SWB. According to this

happiness measures the degree to which positive experiences dominate over negative experiences. In this way, negative affect – for example, depression – is a ‘lower hedonic level over longer periods’ (Veenhoven, 1984, p.35)

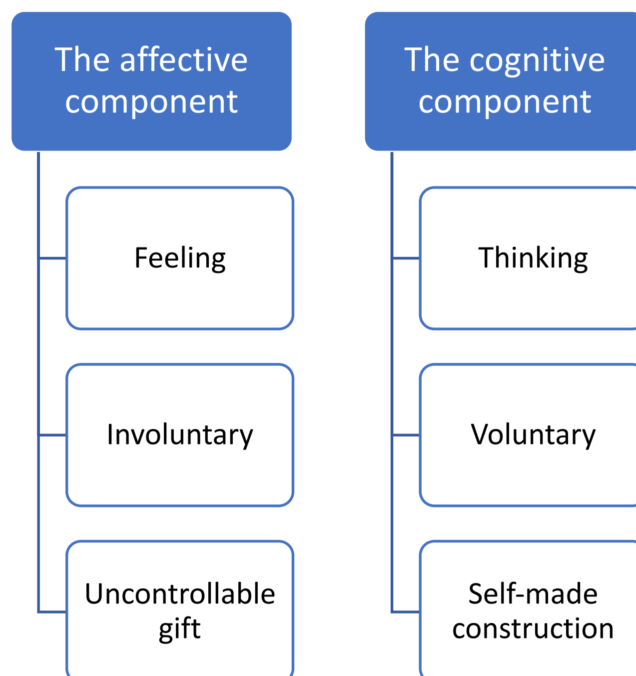
understanding, happiness is only one part of what constitutes SWB and it would be wrong to presume that an increase in an individual's happiness leads to an improvement in their SWB and vice versa (Boskovic and Jengic, 2008). For these scholars, moreover, the hedonic component of SWB (the fleeting and episodic 'feeling happy') captures only part of what constitutes happiness (see: Benditt, 1974; Shin and Johnson, 1978; Simpson, 1975; Thomas, 1968). In addition to pleasure, which refers to a short-term feeling stressing the presence of pleasure and absence of pain (i.e. the hedonic aspect of happiness), Shin and Johnson (1978, pp.478-479) suggest that the term happiness can be used in two other ways as well: as a description of satisfaction with a specific life experience (i.e. welfare aspect of happiness); and as an assessment of overall life quality taking account of various aspects of life and determining whether they have constituted a harmonious whole (i.e. overall happiness). These uses suggest that the conceptualisation of happiness should reflect its cognitive (as well as affective) nature.

Like Diener (1984; 2009), Veenhoven (1984) suggests that overall happiness might be operationalised as an umbrella term consisting of two parts: the hedonic level of affect, and contentment (see Figure 2.1). However, in his article 'HAPPINESS: Also known as "life-satisfaction" and "subjective well-being"', Veenhoven (2012) sets out the case for considering both the concept of SWB and that of (overall) life satisfaction to be synonyms for happiness. This appears to deviate from Diener's approach (2009), in which life satisfaction (both specific and global) is not equivalent to, but one component of, SWB. This distinction arises from the fact that Veenhoven (1984) has a broader and more complex conceptualisation of life satisfaction than Diener. According to Veenhoven (1984, p.35), life satisfaction carries three possible meanings: i) 'a pleasurable affective experience' (i.e. affect); ii) 'the discrepancy between a wanted condition and perceived reality' (i.e. contentment); or iii) broader meaning than simply 'enjoying something' (i.e. satisfaction with aspect(s) of life or life-as-a-whole). Veenhoven (1984; 2008) adopts this third understanding of life satisfaction, seeing it as indicating that a person is satisfied with their specific life-domain (e.g. work, marriage) or with overall life. This leads him to consider overall satisfaction with life as equivalent to the concept

of overall happiness[17]. Diener (1984), in contrast, argues that the level of life satisfaction depends on a person's standard of what a good life is. For Diener, a higher level of life satisfaction indicates the achievement by the individual of their goals and aspirations towards a good life, which is close to the 'contentment' component in Veenhoven's (1984) theory of happiness. Thus, although embracing Diener's (1984) structure of SWB, Veenhoven (2008) disagrees with Diener's (1984) idea that life satisfaction is merely a cognitive appraisement, instead suggesting that overall life satisfaction should be a synonym of SWB.

Veenhoven (1984, pp.27-28) clarifies three points of difference between the affective and cognitive component, as shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 – The distinction between the affective and the cognitive component in Veenhoven's (1984) definition of happiness



As evident from Figure 2.2, Veenhoven understands the affective component of happiness as largely 'automatic' (i.e. spontaneous, not requiring any real thinking activity) while the

[17] Note that according to Veenhoven (1984, p.35), only when the term 'life satisfaction' refers to global satisfaction with life-as-a-whole, does it denote overall happiness; in all other cases (i.e. referring to satisfaction with aspect(s) of life), it considers only aspect-satisfaction(s).

cognitive component involves self-reflection (an assessment of the extent to which one's aspirations have been met). It also suggests that the affective component may operate separately from consciousness; we can experience affect whether we want to or not. The cognitive component, on the other hand, is deliberate and requires intellectual engagement, since experiencing contentment requires the prior setting of aspirations and an assessment of whether or not they have been realised. Finally, it is difficult to know exactly how the affective component operates, or to regulate it. In contrast, the cognitive component is more comprehensible since it is constructed in relation to standards we set ourselves and can be managed by adjusting those standards.

The different underlying processes involved mean that different mechanisms are also relied on in assessing affective and cognitive happiness[18]. Positive emotions – 'feeling good' – can be achieved from the simple feeling that one's needs (such as hunger, love, and zest) are sufficiently met (Rojas and Veenhoven, 2013, p.420). In contrast, the cognitive component is assessed in relation to whether or not we live a good life or how good our life is. For this, individuals have conceptual referents (i.e. standards) for what a good life is, according to which their evaluations of life shift; this is what the conceptual referent theory of happiness recognises (Rojas, 2005). These standards are developed based on collective expectations of the good life which draw upon a shared socio-historic and socio-cultural background (Rojas and Veenhoven, 2013).

It is worth noting that Diener and Veenhoven tend to use 'affect' and 'emotion' interchangeably. However, scholars concerned with capturing the 'affective' dimension of social phenomena (e.g. Massumi, 1995; Wetherell, 2012) have been concerned with distinguishing between affect and emotion. Massumi (1995) suggests that affect

[18] These two components are different, but also interrelated. In Rojas and Veenhoven 's (2013) research, drawing on the Gallup World Poll survey datasets of 127 nations to examine the relationship between affect and contentment, they found that the combination of low affect and high contentment does not exist in any of those nations, while high affect and low contentment can co-exist in some nations. Hence, Rojas and Veenhoven (2013) conclude that the two components of happiness are intercorrelated in the way that affective experience dominates cognitive appraisal; or a primacy of affect over cognition. The absence of the co-existence of low affect and high contentment implies that a minimum level of affect is required prior to making a cognitive judgement of life (Brulé and Veenhoven, 2015; Rojas and Veenhoven, 2013). However, in these studies, Veenhoven does not provide a sufficient account of how affect and contentment are interrelated when the bottom line of affect – having one's wants fulfilled – is met.

indicates the intensity (i.e. strength and short duration) of an expression, which is usually out of mind and manifested on the surface of the body. In contrast, emotion is qualified through conscious awareness, leading to an intersubjective meaningful experience. Despite the difference between affect and emotion suggested by these literatures, we should be aware that these two constructs are also conceptually related. Panksepp (2005) argues that emotion can be used as an umbrella term encompassing affect, and that there are two types of affect: bodily states (e.g. homeostatic drives such as hunger and thirst); and external stimuli (e.g. taste, touch, smell). Similarly, Jarymowicz and Imbir (2015, pp.184-186) propose a taxonomy of human emotions in terms of their origins, including affective-based, spontaneous emotions originating from homeostatic and hedonistic mechanisms and intellect-based reflective emotions dependent on 'self-standards' and axiological standards (i.e. 'beyond-self standards') of good and evil. These important debates about the distinction between affect and emotion are acknowledged, but given the interrelationship between them, the two terms are used interchangeably in this thesis. Thus, happiness is considered as a state of feeling – the 'affective component' – as well as a state of being – the 'cognitive component'; and, following Veenhoven's (1984) definition of happiness, the affective component of happiness is understood to be not entirely constituted by affect (as might be assumed by its denotation as 'affective'), but rather as comprising a mixture of affect and emotion, including sensory and bodily feelings as well as conscious awareness of feeling either happy or unhappy.

There are two reasons why I chose to use the term 'happiness' to denote the primary object of study in this thesis, despite the consensus between Diener and Veenhoven that 'happiness' and SWB can be used interchangeably. The first, and most important, is that the notion of 'happiness' has a long history and a popular, everyday usage which makes it meaningful to people. While 'subjective well-being' appears to be the term used most consistently in the social scientific literature[19], especially in the field of psychology, it is not a term that lay people are likely to use and reflect on naturally. Since this thesis seeks to understand the experiences and evaluations of happiness of a specific social group from a specific culture, as well as how

[19] SWB is being increasingly used in applied social research and practice. Cross-nationally representative survey design prefers the term SWB; for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has a guideline on measuring SWB (See https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being_9789264191655-en [Accessed in May 2020]).

people themselves understand 'happiness', it is essential to adopt language and expressions with which people are familiar and can readily make sense of.

The second reason for my decision to focus on happiness in this thesis is that the corresponding Chinese word for happiness is *xingfu* (e.g. Chen, 2019; Hsu, 2017; Wielander, 2018). The modern usage of the phase *xingfu* often represents the combined experience of '*le*' and '*fu*' (Chen, 2019). According to Chen (2019), *le* (or its modern expression '*kuaile*') means inner joy and requires only minimum external conditions, whereas *fu* is used to describe the condition of having achieved external (usually material) prosperity. Thus, the structure of *xingfu* is comparable to that of happiness as understood in Veenhoven's framework in that it consists of two components, affect and contentment. Thus, employing the term '*xingfu*' – understood as a dual component structure, as per Veenhoven (1984) – allows a single concept to be used consistently in this study for gathering and analysing data, rather than using a 'popular term' (i.e. happiness or *xingfu*) in interviews with respondents and then employing a different analytical term (i.e. SWB[20]) for data analysis. It also allows for the use of the same original language term in both quantitative and qualitative parts of the research. Since the survey data set I analyse mainly uses '*xingfu*' in the questionnaire (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3 for a list of all questions being asked about happiness by the CGSS between 2003 and 2015), this everyday term could also be used in the interview schedule.

Even though linguistically the operationalisation of *xingfu* is equivalent to the western concept of happiness, cross-cultural research on happiness (e.g. Christopher, 1999; Diener and Diener, 2009; Oishi et al., 1999; Oishi et al., 2009; Veenhoven, 2010) demonstrates that the ways in which people understand happiness and evaluate life are 'culturally relative'. The cognitive component of happiness, as conceptualised by Veenhoven (1984), is ascertained from the distance between one's perceived life-as-it-is and what-life-should-be (as constructed in the cultural context of the individual); the smaller the gap, the more contented the individual is. What we feel internally is a result of our interactions with the standards we reference, and these standards are socially appropriate. Therefore, the study of happiness

[20] The Chinese term for SWB is '主观幸福感(*zhuguan xingfugan*)' but is only used in academic papers and would not be a term that interviewees were comfortable with.

cannot be separated from its social context; as Hochschild (1979, p.551) puts it, 'if we reconsider the nature of emotion and the nature of our capacity to try shaping it, we are struck by the imperial scope of social rule.'

To sum up, in this study, I will adopt Veenhoven's (1984) definition of happiness, which is operationalised as an umbrella concept composed of an affective component and a cognitive component. The affective component refers to people's emotional experiences, while the cognitive component assesses whether or not the life we are living is considered 'good'. The standards for what a good life is are culturally relative, indicating that the meaning of happiness is socially varied. Therefore, the study of happiness must interrogate also its social context, and this makes a sociological perspective on happiness particularly appropriate.

2.2 The sociology of emotions: the origins of a social understanding of happiness

While the sociology of emotions has been a niche, albeit expanding, subfield of sociology from the 1970s, the study of happiness has not developed into a key research area in the discipline. Veenhoven (2008, p.44) suggests several reasons for this. These include reasons of a pragmatic nature (i.e. sociologists' main task is to address social behaviour in a collective sense rather than individual-level emotions), but also of an ideological (i.e. sociologists study objective well-being which is measured by, for instance, social equality) and theoretical nature (i.e. happiness has been assumed to be 'a whimsical state of mind' by sociologists). Classical sociological thinkers tended to focus on the macro-level; even George Herbert Mead, who was concerned with the dynamics of social realities at the micro-level, failed to provide a conceptualisation of emotions (Turner, 2009). Nonetheless, key sociological thinkers have suggested the importance of emotions in their attempts to theorise both macro- and micro-level social processes. In particular, Emile Durkheim's (1979) examination of the correlation between social integration and suicide rates, which reflects an acute level of unhappiness, is a striking example here. In fact, emotion should be accorded a central position in sociology for two reasons. Firstly, sociology studies social phenomena, of which emotion is one; and

secondly, emotion is one of the determinants of social behaviour, and is significant in the construction of social relationships, institutions, and processes (Barbalet, 1998). Happiness, for example, as one emotion at the individual level, can provide valuable information about the quality of the social system as well as having a significant impact upon social functioning (Veenhoven; 2008). Hence, happiness should be placed at the heart of sociology.

2.2.1 Sociological approaches to emotions revisited

Happiness is considered to be one of the four primary human emotions[21], along with anger, fear, and sadness (Turner, 2007). Turner (2009, p.341) sees emotion as a multifaceted phenomenon including biological and neurological, behavioural, cultural, structural, and situational aspects whose definition thus depends upon 'which aspects of emotions are relevant to a researcher'. The development of the sociology of emotional life – starting from the second half of the 1970s (Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Kemper, 1981, 1987) – reflects this range of interests and concerns and might be broadly divided into those taking a social constructivist approach and those adopting a positivist approach[22]. Kemper, who works from this positivist position, argues for the biophysiological determinism of emotions. Reviewing relevant psychological studies on emotions, Kemper (1981) concludes that 'the empirical data do not support the constructivist theory that radically detaches emotions from physiological underpinnings' (p.358). Kemper (1981) thus attempts to bring a more balanced conceptualisation of emotions, which could be achieved through an integration of social constructivist and positivist perspectives. As he puts it, 'there is an open door here for ideas and research to pass in both directions, ultimately to build a sociophysiology' (p.359). In his search for a synthesis of culture and biology, Kemper (1987) argues for the cross-cultural universality of four primary emotions – fear, anger, depression, and satisfaction (happiness)

[21] Here my intention is to build a bridge between emotion and happiness. I argue that as a newly-emerging theme in the field of sociology, the study of happiness needs to be able to draw on a theoretical basis in order to engage with sociological perspectives which the sociology of emotions can provide. However, it should be noted that Turner (2007) views happiness, which is one of the primary emotions, only from its affective component, focusing on the assessment of 'feeling happy'. According to my proposed definition of happiness, emotional experiences partly reveal what happiness is.

[22] Crudely speaking, social constructivists view emotions as disconnected from biology and are interested in how they are produced and shaped through cultural and social norms, while positivist theorists affirm the importance of biological and physiological sources of emotions, and focus on studying how social structure, particularly people's power and status relations, determine emotions (Kemper, 1981).

– that has nothing to do with culture. Apart from these automatic primary emotions, there are also meaningful secondary emotions that are acquired through 'linking the autonomic arousal of a primary emotion with the process of social construction' (Kemper, 1987, p.276).

Along with most sociologists in this field, I am sceptical about approaches that reduce emotions to innate, culturally universal phenomena. Kemper's (1981; 1987) emphasis on the biological roots of emotions has been questioned by constructionists advocating socio-cultural approaches to the conceptualisation of emotions and calling for a distinctive, sociological approach to the interpretation of emotions as social phenomena rather than borrowing findings from psychology and physiology (McCarthy, 1989, p.53). This critique also extends to more recent research findings (e.g. Kringelbach and Berridge, 2010; Sato et al., 2015) from neuroscience on the human mind, which suggest that our experiences of happiness are not enigmatic or hidden but can be measured through scientific and quantitative methods (e.g. heartrate, MRI, self-reported psychological inventory). This, it is suggested, risks reducing the complexities of emotional experiences to a single, objectively measurable and quantified entity (White, 2018) and, as Davies (2015, p.72) points out, it is problematic to assume that 'the ambiguity and plurality of human culture might be overcome through knowledge of a single quantifiable entity'. In fact, happiness is specific to the individual – since individuals are all different and made happy by different things – and thus happiness varies both between cultures as well as within any culture (Ahmed, 2010, p.27). For Ahmed, those things we see as having the ability to bring happiness might be referred to as 'happy objects', which 'already circulate as social goods' ahead of our encounter with them (Ahmed, 2010, p.28). A detailed account of how 'happy objects' or the experiences of happiness differ in relation to the Chinese cultural context is provided in Section 2.2.3, and the interplay between happiness and individuals' socio-demographic characteristics is discussed in Section 2.4. In this sense, I would argue that the definitions of what happiness really is, or the judgements of what a good life should be, are not universal but are instead 'made' differently in different societies and among different social groups.

A second concern about physiological approaches relates to the determination of fixed, basic emotions. In fact, historical studies of emotions (e.g. Stearns and Stearns, 1985) demonstrate that emotions, including basic ones, shift over time and hence could be part of wider

sociohistorical changes. In the same vein, anthropologists (e.g. Luz and White, 1986) suggest that emotional experience should be reformulated as a cultural and social construction since 'emotions emerge as socially shaped and socially shaping in important ways' (Luz and White, 1986, p.417). Thus, happiness, which Kemper (1987) considers a culturally universal emotion, in fact displays historical and cultural variability. In the West, people have developed a very clear-cut boundary between the 'self' and the 'other', and their feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are understood to be formed predominately and autonomously by reference to their distinctive dispositions and abilities (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Hence for those in the West, knowledge of happiness rests on Western individualistic moral visions – possessive individualism – underlining the individual's right to possess or own his or her meaning of happiness (Christopher, 1999). However, this way of understanding happiness may not be appropriate in non-Western cultures or non-contemporary time periods. For example, Lu and Gilmour (2004) argue that for Euro-Americans[23], their view of the self is autonomous and free from ambient relations, so their conceptions of happiness are individually oriented and appear to assert individual agency against social restrictions, while in Asian societies, the self is constructed as an interdependent entity, which leads to a socially oriented view of happiness which is itself highly influenced by social expectations.

However, even if we accept the prevalence in Chinese society of such a socially-oriented view of the self, it does not mean that others, or social relations, are always integral to this view of the self. In the book *From the Soil*, Fei (2006) systematically analyses how traditional Chinese social structure directs the evaluation of morality underpinning the social behaviours of the Chinese and proposes we understand this as a process of 'the differential mode of associations' (*chaxu geju*). Yang et al. (2010) summarise two main features of this concept: 1) other people are ordered through 'concentric circles' where the individual is located in the most central of them and determines 'who can be one of us (*zijiren*)' (Figure 2.2); 2) the boundary between the self and the other is permeable. The boundary-permeated self, according to Yang et al. (2010, p.110), 'could expand or contract depending on the context (e.g. social influence), and the individual's motivation'.

[23] This term is used by the authors to refer to the white Caucasian Americans in their sample of undergraduate students, see: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10902-004-8789-5 [Accessed in June 2017].

Variability also exists historically in the way people understand and pursue happiness. Taking Chinese society as an example, the 'correct spirit (*zhengque de jingshen*)[24]' during the reconstruction period in the 1950s is defined as the sacrifice of individual happiness for the sake of others' happiness. In the contemporary period, and in line with the current developmental goals of contemporary China, to this selfless spiritual model have been added new values of happiness deriving from religion and various worldviews among the population (Wielander, 2018, p.35). Happiness, in this sense, is a 'malleable concept' (Chen, 2019, p.34) that has been 'manipulated, shaped, or stretched by powers in different contexts for different purposes' (*ibid.*). This is not to deny the psychobiological aspects of emotions, but to recognise that our subjective emotional experiences are socially constructed and acquired through the processes of socialisation. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis, I adopt a theoretical position in between positivist and social constructionist approaches by drawing on a third model of emotion prevailing in social science literature – the interactionist approach.

This approach follows George Herbert Mead's (1934) theory of the self, which understands the self and the mind as arising out of the context of social experience. However, as Blumer (1969) suggests, Mead tends to neglect the importance of the reflexive process in yielding and constituting the self. With self-reflexivity, the individual 'acts toward his world, interpreting what confronts him and organizing his action on the basis of the interpretation' (Blumer, 1969, p.63). In this sense, the individual, as an active agent, defines the possibilities of handling a situation they face and organises action based on their understanding of the situation, rather than passively and unconsciously responding to the outside or/and the inside. This symbolic interactionist perspective makes a significant contribution to sociological studies of emotion by offering an interactive account of emotion that explores how people use their agency to manage their emotion expressions as well as their inner feelings according to the social expectations placed on them (Field et al., 2006).

[24] According to Larson (2009, p.79), 'proper spirit' means that one appropriately positions oneself in relation to power and thus provides a link between the individual and the social.

In contrast to a purely social constructionist approach to emotion, in which 'all the ingredients are social' (Hochschild, 1990, p.120) and our feelings are entirely social products, the interactionist approach regards psychobiological factors as 'ingredients' that are socially shaped (*ibid.*). This fits neatly into the study of happiness. Everyone – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and language – can experience happiness (or its opposite – unhappiness). While it is a commonly experienced phenomenon, however, its meaning (what happiness is), its situational causes (what makes us happy), and the management of its display (how we express our happiness) are subject to cultural and group norms. It is worth noting that, as clarified in the previous section, the assessment of overall happiness embraces both the emotional and rational experiences of the individual. An interactionist approach to studying happiness also helps to shed some light on the interplay between feeling (the affective component) and thinking (the cognitive component). These two components are interrelated, in that 'feeling happy' is not merely an innate, unconscious, and uncontrollable activity but is largely conditioned by our cognitions, which are framed in socially and culturally built-in rules for how to make sense of, to evaluate, to display, and to adjust happiness.

2.2.2 How are emotions managed and expressed?

Hochschild (1979, 2012), a leading proponent of the interactionist perspective on understanding human emotional experience, examines how we use our thoughts to carry out 'emotion work' when responding to the cultural norms concerning how we are supposed to feel in certain circumstances. According to Hochschild (1990, p.122), there are two different types of strategy guided by cultural norms in managing emotions: 'expression rules' and 'feeling rules'. These two rules are useful to distinguish the outer and inner layers of emotion.

Expression rules guide us towards appearing to feel appropriately on the surface level in any given social setting. This borrows Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory about presenting and masking outward impressions in everyday social interaction. The concept of expression rules or 'surface acting' illuminates our understandings of how and why different social roles or self-identities result in different behaviour patterns of emotional expressiveness. For example, we may have observed that males and females respond to and

express their happiness differently; that females are expected to be more expressive than their male peers (Brody, 1997; Eagly, 1987; Lopata, 2006). However, there is a clear connection between emotions and actions; how we act externally is a reflection of how we feel internally. Why, for example, are people happy at weddings but sad at funerals? The answer Hochschild (1979: 552) proposes is that they adhere to 'feeling rules', which are a set of socially shared guidelines establishing what people 'ought' to feel in such situations.

Emotion management is not only about the 'surface acting' which controls outward appearance, as carried out by Goffman's actors in terms of bodily movement and expressive gestures. It also relates to 'deep acting' – that is, how social actors actively manage what they actually feel (Hochschild, 1979, p.558). Hochschild's (1979; 2012) emotion-management perspective focuses on the deeper sense of emotion management, that is, examining how social actors try to feel, actually and consciously. For Hochschild (1979, p.561), the act of trying to change an emotion or feeling in degree or quality is referred to as 'emotion work', which includes two general strategies: generating a desired feeling that is not present initially (evocation); and suppressing undesired feelings that initially arise (suppression). We work on our emotions so that our feelings conform to 'feeling rules', i.e., socially shared expectations of what we ought to feel in any given situation (Hochschild, 1979, p.564).

It is worth noting that the individual has to perceive and define the meaning of a given situation prior to managing or controlling their emotions. This process is informed by 'framing rules', which focus on the situation and constitute 'the rules according to which we ascribe definitions or meanings to situations' (Hochschild, 1979, p.566). For example, a wife is able to define a situation in which her husband fails to engage in household chores as either another instance of the socially normative gendered division of labour, or another instance of an irresponsible partner and confirmation of a poor marital relationship. Feeling rules emphasise the feeling and are 'guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation' (Hochschild, 1979, p.566). For example, different feeling rules provide rationales for why that woman perceives the situation as fair and feels happy with the gender gap in housework, or as unfair and feels unhappy with her husband who does not help with housework.

Emotion work thus manages the disjuncture between our feelings ('what I do feel and think') and socially determined feeling rules ('what I should feel and think') (Hochschild, 2012, p.60). Awareness of the feeling rules and the timely application of emotion work to manage feelings is important if individuals are to avoid emotional deviance – 'the outcome of unsuccessful emotion management attempts' (Thoits, 1985, p.222) – resulting in feelings of discomfort or receiving 'rule reminders' from others (Hochschild, 2012, pp.57-58). The 'work' part of emotions links the individuals to their societies, suggesting that the experience of happiness is socially constructed. In the next section, we turn to the Chinese context to examine how people's feelings of happiness might be shaped by culturally desirable moral strands in contemporary China.

2.2.3 How is happiness felt and experienced by Chinese middle-class individuals?

Comparative research on self-reported happiness suggests that the East-Asian notion of a good life contrasts with the Western conceptualisation of happiness in that the former places emphasis on social relationships whilst the latter is rooted in the tenets of individualism (Christopher, 1999; Lu and Gilmour, 2004). Hsu and Madsen's (2019) book '*The Chinese Pursuit of Happiness: Anxieties, Hopes, and Moral Tensions in Everyday Life*' provides a holistic review of whether, and how, Chinese people evaluate their lives in accordance with their relationships with others. Of significance for this thesis is that this edited volume pays particular attention to the common, quotidian moments and activities, which reveal how the urban middle class narrate and pursue what they understand to be a 'good life'. The volume combines an overarching conceptual reflection on the meaning of x*ingfu* with articles drawing on five empirical studies exploring what 'a good life' looks like for the Chinese middle class through a sociological lens. It thus establishes the state of the art in terms of what we know about the happiness of the middle class in China to date.

According to the three main classical Chinese philosophical teachings (i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), happiness is considered the fruit of morality (Guo, 2013). A happy person is one who acts on those moral obligations saturated with culturally specific characteristics. *Xingfu* is the popularly applied translation of the English word happiness, as

discussed in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2), the meaning of which has shifted from an original emphasis on *xing* – passively experienced good luck due to a submission to fate – towards a state that can be achieved through personal application and effort, expressed in the incorporation of a combination of *fu* (material satisfaction) and *le* (emotional satisfaction) into the concept (Chen, 2019). In order to capture how Chinese people themselves make sense of *xingfu* today, it is essential to acknowledge that Chinese society is a pluralistic one, constituted by a mixture of groups of individuals embedded in different institutional contexts, leading everyone to experience the world differently, and thus, to have different visions of a good life. Our notions about the good or ideal way of living are taught and developed during socialisation, which makes happiness not a morally neutral concept but imbued with social meanings (Hsu, 2019a). The five empirically based studies in this volume (Chen, 2019; Davis, Farrer, 2019; Hsu, 2019b; Madsen, 2019a) reveal three moral strands that shape Chinese people's experiences of happiness: 'the happy and prosperous family', 'the greater good' and 'individual fulfilment'. These studies also suggest that people's visions of a morally good life are not entirely a product of the ideologies promoted by propaganda strategies. They have developed either from deeply valued philosophical beliefs (e.g. Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) that have shaped not only the macro-level social order but the micro-level individual day-to-day lives in traditional China, or from the knowledge and experiences they have gained (e.g. from their professional experiences or daily interactions with others that have inspired them). In this section, I draw on the findings presented in this volume to show how people creatively weave these three strands together in constructing their versions of happiness or a good life.

Chinese people's stories of happiness are narrated through the prism of family togetherness (Hsu, 2019b). Ideally, the parent-child relationship in China is based on the principle of reciprocity in which the children, who, once they have become grown-ups, are expected to repay the enormous care and emotional debt they owe to their parents. The care burden sometimes requires the children to make self-sacrifices in order to attend to the needs of their aged and frail parents, or more generally, for the happiness and harmony of the family. This creates challenges for young adults in today's China who are committed to their career aspirations and seek better opportunities in China's first-tier cities or even abroad. Hsu's (2019b) research focuses on the narrativisation of happiness by the young Chinese, and sheds

light on the process of *moral weighting* that shapes their subjective feelings. Maintaining family togetherness is considered the primary moral reference point in relation to people's assessment of happiness; among Hsu's (2019b) interviewees, it is this which distinguishes the happy from the unhappy. The happy people are those who are able to meet their family obligations, and to make their parents satisfied. At the same time, they also benefit from the mutual exchange of care and support of their parents. For example, geographical proximity allows the elderly to look after their grandchildren. Many ambitious young people yearn to 'have it all', that is, to pursue personal fulfilment whilst remaining geographically and/or emotionally close to their parents and managing all family obligations. However, the distressing reality is that they usually find themselves struggling to balance the expectations or pressure from their families (e.g. getting married at an appropriate age rather than concentrating on personal success) and their propitious career development, resulting in them experiencing emotional distress. Therefore, to these aspiring young individuals, the kind of happiness they seek is, in fact, as Hsu (2019b, p.63) puts it, a relief from pressures, mostly deriving from their responsibilities of ensuring their parents' well-being.

Hsu's (2019b) research vividly demonstrates that the family-centric perspective towards individual happiness remains prevalent in Chinese society, apparently untouched by the vicissitudes of political and economic transition over the past decades. The central role of family relationships in recounting and evaluating happiness is confirmed by Davis' (2019) exploration of the performance of happiness in wedding celebrations. According to Davis (2019), the wedding in China is not purely instrumental – announcing and celebrating the new kinship relations brought by marriage and filled with highly ritualised details – but, and more importantly, it is scripted for expressing filial devotion and strengthening reciprocal family relationships. When asked about the relationship between marriage and the wedding, most respondents in Davis' (2019) study differentiated marriage as a lifelong love, respect, and commitment between two individuals from the wedding, which was performed in order to please their parents. The wedding was thus fraught with the potential for anxiety and fear in case it did not go smoothly and they let their parents down or lost face in front of friends and relatives (Davis, 2019). Although the long formalised process of the celebration might have led to fatigue, exhaustion and even a feeling of obligation for the young couple, what they

remembered was rather the joy and pride felt on that day, since they had satisfactorily presented scenes of happy and harmonious family relations to their guests.

In addition to the importance of bringing happiness to the family, making society happier is also a constituent of a good life. The moral virtue of striving for the greater good is deeply rooted in Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist thought, which have uniquely and jointly constructed the moral fabric of Chinese society. The foundational tenet driving Confucian ethics is *ren* (benevolence), pertaining to the virtue of helping the other and contributing to the common good. According to Confucius in the Analects, a person of *ren* will help others and enable them flourish once s/he has mastered the ability to achieve success (‘*ji yu li er li ren, ji yu da er da ren*’[25]). Confucianism believes that the country is owned by the public (‘*tian xia wei gong*’[26]), where every social member especially the virtuous and the able should be morally responsible for the promotion of a prosperous and more liveable society – the society of *datong*[27] (the Great Unity). People are expected to constantly cultivate themselves through learning and internalising social norms. This, results, first, in bringing order to their families and, consequentially, effecting group cohesiveness and harmony in society as a whole (‘*xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tian xia*’[28]). Although the core religious belief and political philosophy upheld in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism differ from one another, they all prioritise the interests of the collective over oneself and agree on the importance of serving the other in finding a fulfilled life or ultimate happiness. Similarly to Confucian thought, Buddhists also consider the relationship between self-cultivation and the greater good and they argue that once a person has been enlightened by the Buddha and successfully sought out Buddhahood, s/he must go out to benefit others (‘*shang qiu fo dao, xia hua zhong sheng*’[29]). Furthermore,

[25] The original text and translation: http://www.camcc.org/_media/reading-group/lunyu/lunyu-en.pdf [Page 3, 2-4, accessed in December 2019].

[26] This expression is derived from Confucius’s ‘*Li Ji*’ (from the Chapter ‘*The Operation of Etiquette*’). The original text and translation can be accessed on: http://tsoidug.org/Literary/Etiquette_Great_Together_Simp.pdf [Page 2, accessed in March 2021].

[27] See above, on page 4.

[28] This is derived from the beginning chapter of Confucian classics ‘*Da Xue* (Great Learning)’.

[29] This moral thought is taken from the reflection piece ‘*An Inspiration to Give Rise to the Bodhi Mind*’, written by Master Xing’an (1686-1734). An English version can be accessed on: https://foguangpedia.org/bodhi-mind/ [Page 9, accessed in March 2021].

according to *Tao Te Ching* (Verse 7[30]), the key book of Daoism, the Dao advocates that fulfilment can be attained through selflessness and desirelessness, which requires individuals to put themselves last and serve the needs of others first.

One striking consequence of the Chinese transition path towards a market economy is the ubiquity of self-interest behaviours, which, apparently, runs in tension with conventional social values. A great number of food safety (e.g. the milk powder scandal in 2008) and substandard vaccine (e.g. the Changsheng vaccine scandal in 2018) incidents have been reported in the last 30 years, the main cause of which, could be attributed to the priority of economic centralism and profit maximisation over righteousness and social duty within the current national ideology of China (Jim and Liu, 2020). The erosion of the social and moral order not only directly renders damage to people's quality of life, but creates obstacles on their way to the pursuit of a predefined 'good life' where social welfare plays a certain role.

Farrer's (2019) research exploring the relationship between culinary practice and happiness provides an insight into how people's unhappiness derives from their anxieties over the undermining of moral order. As indicated by Farrer (2019, p.85), 'bad eating' practice or an unhappy meal can be seen as the by-product of the obsession with market profit that has been overriding traditional goals of a better society. Farrer (2019) further identifies two forms of culinary unhappiness. The first is where meals taken together are done so for material or pragmatic reasons (e.g. socialising with political leaders), making people feel compelled to attend and reflect or reproduce social hierarchies. The second is expressed through people's concerns and fears over adulterated, chemicalised food (e.g. dishes made using 'gutter oil' – the reuse of cooking oil that has already been fried before) by greedy, unscrupulous vendors. In contrast, pleasant culinary experiences are less associated with what people have eaten but with whom they eat. Eating out with friends, the focus of which is to show conviviality as well as to celebrate and maintain friendships, is a typical illustration of a happy meal. It is interesting that although family is considered an unparalleled source of happiness in China, everyday eating with family members at home does not generate as much joy and fun as

[30] The original text and translation: https://sourceoflightmonastery.tripod.com/webonmediacontents/1935012.pdf [Page 8, accessed in March 2021].

occasional friends' gatherings. Because friends are chosen on an equal basis, their ways of taking over meals are free and easy, compared to family meals where the young may face pressure from the older generations. A happy meal with friends does not heighten people's momentary positive emotions, but serves as a means by which a friendship is renewed and prolonged, and thus, adds meaningfulness to life.

It follows that one way to overcome unhappiness deriving from this erosion of morality is to act oneself in a way that upholds the principles of serving society and building a good social order based on the moral principles of benevolence and selflessness. Madsen's (2019a) research, drawing on the study of a group of social workers, and Chen's (2019) research, focusing on the lives of activists under China's authoritarian political system, help us to understand the dynamics between the fulfilment of a virtuous life and happiness.

Social workers fulfil their lives through their enthusiastic engagement in healing family relationships and their striving towards a more harmonious society. In fact, the notion of 'serving the people' has been mobilised as the ideal spirit for China's societal development since the 1950s, and it is still utilised in contemporary Chinese society. Socialist thought reforms are widely carried out in order to instil the correct spirit in every individual, that is, to make them believe this is the ultimate path towards a better life and a brighter future (Wielander, 2018). One example is the emulation of socialist role models (Shambaugh, 2007). Lei Feng, who was a solider in the People's Liberation Army and willing to just be 'a small screw in the greater locomotive of the revolution'[31], was promoted and held up as one representative role model crucial to disseminate the spirits of faith, warm-heartedness, selflessness, and progressiveness[32], which are instrumental to collective happiness. Although the social workers interviewed by Madsen (2019a) expressed admiration for the spirit of Lei Feng, nonetheless, most of them affirmed that their approach to 'serving' was different.

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[31] The expression about being 'a small screw in the great locomotive of the revolution' is found in selections from the diary of Lei Feng on April 17, 1962: https://cpcchina.chinadaily.com.cn/special/leifeng/2012-04/02/content_14888713.htm [Accessed in May 2020].

[32] During the 'Two Sessions (or the National *Lianghui*)' in 2013, President Xi Jinping asserted that Lei Feng, Guo Mingyi, and Luo Yang were 'the backbone of the nation (*minzu jiliang*)', and their spirit – symbolising firm faith, warm-heartedness, selflessness, progressiveness – is crucial to the realisation of the 'Chinese Dream'. See People's Daily: http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0308/c1003-20716504.html [Accessed in May 2020].

These social workers were keen to address the chaos associated with major socio-political and socio-economic transitions, and to return social order, especially the traditional family virtue of filial piety. However, they realised that it was unrealistic to eradicate the social problems of broken families, fractured communities, alienated youth and the isolation of the elderly and to quickly turn an anxious society into a happy one (Madsen, 2019a). However, the approach they used was different from that of the government, which was to impose the correct values on those individuals in need. Their approach, rather, as Madsen (2019a) summarises, was to perceive each individual as an autonomous subject within an egalitarian society where individuals could be open and honest with each other as well as help one another in a non-judgmental way. The clashes between what the authoritarian government demanded and how they believed they should operate, however, was a cause of 'grief' to them (ibid., p.118). The unhappiness these social workers experienced also sheds light on how individual happiness is tied closely with the social system in contemporary Chinese society. They, therefore, had to make compromises and adaptations, for example, to cultivate personal connections (*guanxi*) with patrons inside the system (ibid., p.125), in order to fulfil their sense of mission (*shiming*) – to make people happy – that constituted their professional happiness.

Some of these social workers faced incomprehension and disappointment from their parents regarding their lower paid, lower prestige profession compared to those in the lucrative business sectors. They found themselves inescapably stuck amid the moral tensions between collective good and wanting to please parents, as well as between being obedient and successful children and pursuing personal development. Similar, but more acute, misery was experienced by activists, who fought for the rights and interests of the disadvantaged (e.g. factory workers) and an equal and free society, whilst jeopardising their own safety as well as that of their families. Despite the fact that their notion of a good public life was incompatible with prevailing political values, as well as with family values, and with material achievement, they unwaveringly gave priority to the pursuit of these ideals, and they felt happy and fulfilled if they noticed a small sign of change in the bigger picture (Chen, 2019).

Through these stories in Hsu and Madsen's (2019) book, we gain a comprehensive view of how each moral strand intersects with one another in people's narrativisation of happiness

or a good life in contemporary China. A prosperous and harmonious family, the greater good, and individual fulfilment are not inherently different concepts, rather, they are like 'three strands in a length of rope' (Hsu, 2019a, p.15). People may put too much weight on the fulfilment of one strand or another at a certain time or within a certain context – especially in the face of challenges or threats. Indeed, it is, arguably, inevitable that tensions and frustrations emerge between these individual strands, resulting in a state of happiness mixed with anxiety. However, sometimes these three strands may twist together in a way that the fulfilment of one aspect of life can help with the satisfaction of other aspects, thereby allowing people to 'have it all' (Hsu, 2019a, p.10) and to experience a balanced and complete life.

In addition to the different versions of a morally good life, Madsen (2019a) also notes two kinds of happiness with reference to the stories people told. One is momentary, immediate pleasure felt during meaningful interactions with others (e.g. family, friends, or people they served), the other is evaluative reflection on whether the activities to which they commit lead to their visions of a good life in the long run. Madsen (2019a, pp.110-111) calls the first kind 'day-to-day happiness', which he says can be conveyed precisely by the Chinese terms *kuaile* or its synonym *kaixin*, while the second kind could be referred to as 'ultimate happiness' or *xingfu*. The sources of day-to-day happiness come from reciprocal relationships with family and friends as well as from hard work or doing good deeds, which are tied closely to the three moral strands of importance to ultimate happiness. This implies a relationship between day-to-day happiness and ultimate happiness where the latter operates at a higher level and can shape the former. In this sense, the accumulation of day-to-day happiness (*kuaile*) will be conducive to ultimate happiness (*xingfu*), which explains why hosting a wedding or having a happy meal with friends - that seems to be associated with momentary enjoyment - contributes to lifelong satisfaction.

Although Madsen (2019a) does not develop a robust model for measuring and analysing happiness in Chinese society, his concept of ultimate happiness is comparable to Veenhoven's (1984) framework of overall happiness, which, refers to the assessment of an individual's life-as-a-whole. As clarified in Section 2.1, Veenhoven (1984) operationalises overall happiness as a dual structure composed of affective and cognitive components. The construct of day-to-

day happiness, focusing on momentary, easy come-and-go pleasure, is similar to affective happiness as one constituent of Veenhoven's (1984) framework of overall happiness. However, affective happiness is broader than Madsen's (2019a) definition of day-to-day happiness. The latter, in fact, shares the same sources with ultimate happiness (or simply, overall happiness), and therefore, implies a hint of cognition. However, in Veenhoven's (1984) model, the causes of positive affect are not confined to the happy moments or transient contentment within the family, friendship groups, professional organisations, and activist networks. An activity with no, or limited, cognition can trigger affect, which, as clarified in Figure 2.2, is predominately instinctual and automatic. Moreover, since Madsen's (2019a) research does not aim to develop a systematic and integrated measure of happiness that allows domestic and international researchers to conduct comparative analysis, how he envisages the structural relationships between the construct of ultimate happiness and day-to-day happiness remain unclear. In the absence of a clear understanding in Madsen's (ibid.) work of the hierarchical relationship between these different dimensions of happiness – i.e. whether one embraces the other or both work on the same level, different but interconnected – in this thesis, I use Veenhoven's (1984) framework of happiness as the analytical basis for understanding and distinguishing the different aspects of happiness.

Finally, the 'moral strands' identified in the empirical studies discussed in this section play an important role in directing people's feelings of happiness in a process of alignment that has been discussed above through the notion of emotion work. These moral strands function as 'framing rules' providing people with knowledge of what happiness or a good life should be and with which they engage as an evaluation framework to make sense of as well as respond to a given situation. As everyone weighs the importance of each moral ideology in a distinctive way, diverse understandings or definitions of happiness are developed. These versions of a good life (*framing rules*) imply and provide guidelines of how people ought to feel, that is, whether they should feel happy or unhappy or neither happy nor unhappy (*feeling rules*) in a given situation. People are cognitively engaged with their emotions, as they continuously assess whether they have the appropriate feelings for the situation they are experiencing. Frustration or tension appears if there is a disjuncture between their actual emotional feelings and socially constructed, norm-driven feeling rules. They, therefore, have to devise strategies (*emotion work*) to harmonise the inconsistency. This explains why there are people who

spend more energy and time on the maintenance of harmonious family relationships, but there are also others who care more about making those who are disadvantaged and in need happy, and bearing the conflict this causes with regard to the needs of their own families. We can also see that, as Madsen (2019b, p.169) argues in the *Epilogue* of Hsu and Madsen's (2019) edited book, it is facile to seek to understand contemporary Chinese society through a 'homogenised "Sinicisation"', given the pluralism of moral values, happiness and hope. Even within a single country and a single social group – the Chinese middle class – definitions, feelings, and expressions of happiness vary significantly. By taking a sociological approach, these complexities can be teased out through identifying a range of socio-demographic characteristics that potentially mediate and shape different experiences of happiness among the Chinese middle class. Before moving to the discussion of how the attainment of happiness is related to such socio-demographic factors, we must first set out what we mean by middle class and who the middle class are in today's China.

2.3 Who are the middle class in today's China?

China's economic progress is inextricably entwined with the expansion of its middle class. As stated by Ravallion (2010), countries with a large middle class are more likely to take advantage of rapid developments to reduce poverty. The middle class plays a more important role in governance and prosperity than any other social group in China (Li and McElveen, 2013). The growing middle class not only has power in the economic sphere, but also has significant socio-political influence. The Chinese middle class is 'the vanguard of consumption and the rearguard of politics' and in this way, they function as a 'social stabiliser' acting as a buffer in relation to the tensions between the upper class and the working class and being supportive of conservative ideologies (Li, 2006; Li, 2013; Li and Qin, 2016; Zhou and Chen, 2010). The behaviour of this emerging group impacts on every aspect of Chinese society. Given the important role the Chinese middle class holds in political, economic, and social spheres, it is imperative to consider the happiness level of the Chinese middle class. Firstly, however, we need to determine who are considered to be middle class in today's China.

2.3.1 The limitations of using income to define the middle class

So, how can we best understand, and describe, the Chinese middle class today, and its position within the wider social structure? Sociological theorists have advanced various schemas to identify the Chinese middle class using a range of measures including income, educational qualifications, occupational prestige, consumption behaviour and subjective measures (Li and Wang, 2017; Liu, 2006). Income is arguably the most common single indicator referred to in the literature when seeking to determine the size of the middle class. So how much income does a Chinese person need in order to cross the threshold into the middle class?

There is no definitive answer to this question. In 2005, annual household earnings between 60,000 and 500,000 yuan (equivalent to £6,800 - £56,800) were operationalised as the threshold for designating the middle class by the National Statistics Bureau. At that point in time, 5% of the Chinese population was categorised as middle class in 2005 and the proportion of the population designated as middle-class was expected to reach 45% by 2020[33]. Yuan et al. (2011), however, consider the middle class to be those whose per capita daily income falls between $2 and $20 (equivalent to £1.5 - £15). This results in them calculating that the size of the Chinese middle class has increased from 39.3% in 1988, to 55.6% in 1995, 71.3% in 2002, and almost 90% in 2007. Globally, according to the Pew Research Centre, the middle class is defined as persons living on between $10 and $50 (equivalent to £8 - £40) daily (Kochhar, 2015). By this definition, the middle class constituted only 4% of the Chinese population in 2002. A decade later, using this same definition, more than 420 million people had become middle class, making up 31% of China's population (China Power Team, 2017). Thus, different classifications for the middle-class income range generate substantial disparity in the estimation of the size of the Chinese middle class.

Income is not a reliable measure of the Chinese middle class for a number of reasons. First, income inequality varies between different regions. This has led to a call for the 'middle

[33] See China Daily, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-01/20/content_410777.htm [Accessed in June 2017].

income' group to be aligned with average income – those whose annual income falls in the range between the average income and 2.5 times the average income (Li and Zhang, 2008). However, extra caution is needed when statistically computing the numerical threshold for indicating a certain social class. In 2001, the Chinese Academy of Social Science Sociology Institute carried out a national scale primary survey on the changing social structure in contemporary China, with a total sample of 6,193 from 12 provinces and direct-controlled municipalities. Using these data, Li (2004) attempted to estimate the proportion of middle-class people. Her analysis shows that the distribution of personal monthly income significantly deviated from the normal distribution, which demonstrated a relatively high degree of dispersion; the standard deviation of monthly pay was far above the mean, while the mean was far above the median. Therefore, where there is high regional disparity in income, it is not helpful to use a mean figure to establish who is in the middle class. People who live in impoverished economic situations but come from first tier cities might be mistakenly incorporated into the high-income group while better-off people from less-developed areas might be classified as being 'low-income'. Also, as means are affected by a few large values, they are unreliable for any summary statistics that may have distributions affected by these values, as income does.

Second, income is highly sensitive to all factors associated with turbulence in the market. In explaining why income is not a stable measure identifying the middle class when used alone, Li and Zhang (2008) give the example of escorts whose income may be higher than some managerial personnel, but who hardly anyone considers to be part of the middle class. Although we might expect that the middle class is the group located in the very middle of income distribution, in practice being 'middle class' may mean more than just people's income level (Li, 2016). Li and Wang (2017, p.165) note that the application of income or wealth classification might result in a considerable number of people being assigned to 'middle-class' status who do not consider themselves part of any 'middle-class' identity (*bei zhong chan*). The rise of the middle class in China is not just an economic phenomenon; it implies a particular pattern in social relationships too (Li, 2016). It is important to note here that the fundamental idea of being 'middle-class' is deeply rooted in its relationality (e.g. in production relations, employment relations, exploitation relations and domination relations) towards other classes either within the labour market or inside an organisational unit (Li, 2016;

Zhu, 2011; Zhu, 2017). The inequality in income levels between classes is only one manifestation of such class relationships (Li, 2016; Liu, 2007). This is how sociologists operationalise and analyse class structure; they understand social class to be constructed as a social formation rather than, in a purely economic way, a set of statistical categories differentiated by income differences.

2.3.2 Sociological approaches to class structure: Erik Olin Wright versus John Goldthorpe

The conceptualisation of middle class in relation to other social classes (e.g. the working class) is well elaborated in neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian schools of thought. Neo-Marxist approaches confine the notion of class to relations of production and exploitation while neo-Weberian models concentrate on the market situation and employment relations. Erik Olin Wright and John Goldthorpe are two influential figures using neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian perspectives respectively.

Olin Wright (1997) operationalises the locations of each class in accordance with the exploitation of people as assets in the means of production, assets in organisation control and assets in education or skill credentials. In terms of the first criterion, the bourgeoisie (employing more than 10 people), small employers (employing 2 to 10 people) and the petty bourgeoisie (having one or less employees) are owners of the means of production. In contrast, wage-earners who sell their labour power in a labour market own no means of production. With respect to organisation assets, three job positions are distinguished: managers who have direct involvement in organisational decision-making and have real authority over subordinates; supervisors who can supervise and manage their subordinates but who are not involved in organisational coordination; and non-management positions, which do not have control of any organisation assets.

Olin Wright (1997) notes that qualifications are cohort-specific, due to the rapid expansion of education and the changing educational requirements for accessing certain positions. Moreover, only when a credential satisfies the education or skill requirement of a job position,

can it explain the basis of an exploitation relationship. In order to comprehensively capture the dynamics in the type as well as the level of the credential assets an individual controls, Olin Wright (1997) adopts a combination of occupational titles, education credentials and job autonomy, and distinguishes three class locations: experts (e.g. all professionals as well as technicians and managers with college degrees); skilled employees (e.g. schoolteachers and craftworkers as well as managers and technicians whose credentials are below college level, and salespersons or clerical workers with college degrees and real job autonomy); and non-skilled (e.g. clerical and salespersons without the credentials required for skilled employees and job autonomy, as well as non-craft manual and service workers).

Olin Wright (1997, pp.86-87) defines two different kinds of intermediate class locations within his analytic framework: the 'traditional' or 'old' middle class, and the 'new' middle class. The old middle class represents the self-employed petty bourgeoisie, who are neither exploiters nor exploited within capitalist relations. The new middle class are in a contradictory position in that on one dimension of exploitation relations they are doing the exploiting, while on another, they are the exploited. For example, professionals lack the opportunity to exploit others over assets in capital, but they can still exploit by using their higher skill levels. Like the working class, the new middle class are also excluded from the ownership of the means of production; both of these two classes constitute wage-labourers. However, the middle class can be distinguished by their effective control of organisation assets and credential assets (Olin Wright, 1997).

Goldthorpe's latest class schema is based primarily on employer-employee dynamics and differentiates between employers, employees and self-employed. He has subsequently classified employees in relation to whether they are regulated by a labour contract or a service contract or an in-between contract (Breen, 2002; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2007). This helps to distinguish between the wage-earning working class and the professional and managerial service class. According to Goldthorpe (2000; 2007), employees on labour contracts – for example, manual and lower-grade nonmanual workers – are usually regulated by a relatively short-term and specific exchange of wages for amounts of labour. In contrast, the service contract entails the long-term and diffuse exchange of compensations including salaries for work done and well-defined prospective benefits (e.g. pension rights

and career promotion opportunities) for the service provided to organisations. Professionals and managerial staff in either public or private organisations take this type of contract. In addition, in between professional-managerial employees and the labour workforce, there are mixed forms of regulation of employment which are associated with higher grade routine nonmanual employees, lower grade technicians, and supervisors of manual workers (*ibid.*).

The 'service' relationship between employer and employee can be further divided into higher and lower service in light of graded specific knowledge and skills. This results in a seven-classed social stratification system (see Table 2.1 below). Goldthorpe's understanding of social class has been adopted as the main social classification – the National Statistics Social-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) – in use in British official statistics since 2001 (Goldthorpe, 2016).

Table 2.3 – Contract type in relation to the categories of Goldthorpe's class (2007)

Class	**Contract type**
I Professionals and managers, higher grade	Service contract
II Professionals and managers, lower grade; technicians, higher grade	Service contract
IIIa Routine nonmanual employees, higher grade	Mixed
IIIb Routine nonmanual employees, lower grade	Labour contract*
IVabc Small proprietors and employers and self-employed workers	No regulation of employment is involved (they neither buy the labour of others nor sell their own)
V Technicians, low-grade supervisors of manual workers	Mixed
VI Skilled manual workers	Labour contract
VIIa Nonskilled manual workers (other than in agriculture)	Labour contract
VIIb Agricultural workers	Labour contract

Source: Goldthorpe (2007, p.104)

Note: In the original conceptualisation of this class schema (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992, pp.35-47), people in class IIIb are on a mixed contract, and hence are classified as the intermediate class. Goldthorpe (2000; 2007) has modified the supposed form of contract in relation to class IIIb to labour contract. However, I will continue to use the 1992 class classification since the occupation coding schema (ISCO88) in the survey datasets I used for this study was based on Goldthorpe's 1992 study.

Undoubtedly, Olin Wright's neo-Marxist model and Goldthorpe's neo-Weberian model inspired Chinese sociologists to develop a schematic framework to define the middle-class from the mass of wage-earners[34]. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of the position of the middle class in the Chinese socialist market economy cannot be fully captured by these two models, which were designed in relation to employment in Western capitalist societies.

Olin Wright's theoretical framework, for instance, is concerned primarily with the analysis of social relations based on private ownership of capital assets in the process of production. Accordingly, it is difficult to precisely locate the vast number of elites in China who can possess public power over the non-productive sphere (Liu, 2007). Chen (2013) also questions the effectiveness of neo-Marxist schema – which were devised primarily to identify the confrontation between capitalists and the exploited in capitalist societies – for illuminating China's state-socialist situation, where state-owned enterprises play an important role in providing the livelihood for a large proportion of urban residents.

As China has moved to a market economy, market capabilities do have some explanatory power for class inequality in China. Zou (2015) conducted a Latent Class Analysis to test validity and reliability when applying Goldthorpe's class theory to the class dynamics in Chinese society. He found that not only can the class structure underpinning the socialist market economy be viewed in accordance with employee relations which are characteristic in industrial societies, but also that the Western assumption that the occupational composition of society can shape the way social class segregation is constituted is also valid in the case of China. All the same, Goldthorpe's class classification requires some revision to improve its applicability to social stratification in China.

In line with Goldthorpe's class model, Li Chunling (2010; 2011) re-frames a six-class model which is composed of private entrepreneurs/capitalists (hiring more than 20 employees), the new middle class (professionals, managers and government officials), the old middle class

[34] Goldthorpe's classification is based on occupation of the individual and therefore the unemployed or unwaged are not represented. A limitation of using an occupationally-based class scheme to define middle-class people is that it omits those who are not in salaried work and economically inactive but living in a middle-class family, for example, housewives.

(small employers/business owners with less than 20 employees or self-employed), the marginal middle class (low-wage white-collar and other non-manual commercial service workers), the working class (technicians, supervisors, skilled workers, semi-skilled and non-skilled workers), and farmers/farm labourers (See Table 2.2 below). The first four subclasses are considered to be China’s general middle class by most Chinese sociologists. The new middle class (i.e. professionals, managers, and government officials), who are mostly referred to as representatives of the modern middle class in fast-growing, less developed economies, are the decisive actors directing each momentous socio-political transition in China (Li, 2010).

Table 2.4 – Comparison between Goldthorpe's and Li's classification methods

Goldthorpe's Class Categories	Li Chunling's Chinese Class Categories
I Higher service (includes mostly higher-grade professionals, administrators and officials in large industrial establishments) II Lower service (includes mostly associate professionals, lower managers, higher sales)	1. Private entrepreneurs/Capitalists (hiring more than 20 employees) 2. New middle class (professionals, managers and government officials)
IVa Small employers (includes small entrepreneurs) IVb Independent (own account workers, no employees)	3. Old middle class (small employers/business owners with less than 20 employees or self-employed)
III Routine clerical/sales (includes routine clerical and sales workers)	4. Marginal middle class (low-wage white-collar and other non-manual commercial service workers)
V Manual foremen (manual workers with supervisory status) VI Skilled manual (mostly craft workers, some skilled service, and skilled machine operators) VIIa Semi-Unskilled manual (mostly machine operators, elementary labourers, elementary sales and services)	5. Working class (technicians, supervisors, skilled workers, semi-skilled and non-skilled workers)
IVc Farmers/Farm managers (self-employed and supervisory farm workers, irrespective of skill level) VIIb Farm Workers (employed farm workers, irrespective of skill level; also family farm workers)	6. Farmers/Farm labourers

Source: Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992); Ganzeboom and Teriman (1996); Li (2010; 2011)
Notes: The Goldthorpe class classification on the left side of this table was originally devised by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992, pp.35-47) in their collaborative book *The Constant Flux: Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Societies*. However, since the occupation variables in the CGSS were coded into ISCO88, I use a revised version of the Goldthorpe class schema by Ganzeboom and Teriman (1996), which aligns the ISCO88 categories with the Goldthorpe class schema. I also rearranged the ordering of the enhanced Goldthorpe's class model so as to be visually compatible with that of Li Chunling's.

Li (2010;2013) is careful to note that the composition of the Chinese middle class is heterogeneous, and so she is in favour of using the plural term 'middle classes' rather than the singular 'middle class'. While I choose to retain the singular term, I agree that it makes sense to divide the broad contemporary middle class into three sub-groups according to their

socioeconomic status, living standards, and socio-political attitudes[35]. Based on the China General Social Survey (CGSS) in 2006, Li (2010) estimates the proportion of the urban middle class, including the capitalist, the new middle class, the old middle class, and the marginal middle class, as comprising roughly 60% of the urban population[36].

The old and new middle class appear to be developing in parallel in post-reform China (Zhu, 2017; Li and Qin, 2016). This stands in stark contrast to C. Wright Mills (2002)'s argument, in his book *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, that the enlargement of a new middle class was accompanied by the decline and marginalisation of the old middle class in twentieth-century America. Zhang (2006) explores the variance in acquiring economic benefits among different social groups within the middle class under the mechanism of market-institutional power through a metaphorical use of 'chocolate cream colour cake'. The white cream is analogous to the economic resources shared under the market mechanism, whereas the dark chocolate cake resembles the economic resources obtained from the traditional planned system (Zhang, 2006). In this scenario, the so-called middle class are people with a similar size of cake, but the proportion of cream and chocolate in the cake varies within the middle class. Hence the emerging middle class in China is not a homogeneous group.

Unsurprisingly, the various Chinese middle classes have not formed consistent middle-class norms and values. Li (2006) concludes that private entrepreneurs, mid-level managers and the intelligentsia appear to have differing lifestyles, values, and political orientations. Based on the datasets of the Chinese Household Income Project in 2002, after controlling for middle-class people's demographic characteristics, employment status and income, Wang and Davis (2010) confirm the independent impact of occupational class on participants' perceived fairness of income distribution as well as their self-rated happiness. Divergent attitudes toward social reality and happiness can be found both between the lower and the upper, and

[35] For example, in terms of the differences between the new middle class and the marginal middle class, the new middle class, who occupy important positions in the social, political, and economic fields, are more conservative than the marginal middle class; while the marginal middle class are younger than the other three sub-classes of the middle class, they have developed more democratic consciousness and expressed a higher level of political liberalism than the new middle class (Li, 2010).

[36] This figure has excluded the elite class which occupies 5% of the urban population, according to Li (2010).

within the upper middle strata. For example, the upper managers and the cadres[37] who tend to maintain a strong link to the state are more likely to consider the national income distribution to be fair. The upper professionals, who are more likely to be in the private sector or to hold jobs in the state sector but rely on the market for allocation of resources, express a less supportive attitude towards current income equality. These findings again illuminate the centrality of occupational paths in predicting the varying attitudes and life conditions which correlate with class status, as described.

2.3.3 Do the middle class identify as middle class?

To arrive at a comprehensive view of class, we also need to consider the psychological perspectives – the subjective definition and interpretation – of social class along with the economic and sociological perspectives. In terms of the Chinese middle class, how they position themselves in the class structure is fundamental to their anticipated role in building a harmonious middle-class society. As Li et al. (2005) put it, a middle-class society does not only mean that the majority of the Chinese population are situated in the middle stratum of the social stratification but also that a higher proportion of this emerging class feel a sense of belonging to the middle class.

Given that class is socially constructed, the identification with a specific class has a significant effect on how one perceives the world and acts in it. Social class is then understood as a dual entity including class in itself, determined by the objective socioeconomic structure, as well as a class for itself, existing in concrete patterns of public consciousness and actions (Neilson, 2018). Kornhauser (1950) indicates three core meanings attached to social class: 1) an individual's economic position (e.g. income, occupation, education and consumption levels); 2) an individual's interpersonal relationships and his/her group identification from multiple

[37] The class schema in Wang and Davis's (2010) study is different from Li Chunling's classification in Table 2.2. Wang and Davis (2010) define *middle class* by occupation and education. Cadre refers to managers who are members of the communist party and work in government or state institutions in their study. The difference between lower and higher managers or professionals is based on college education attainment. Upper managers are non-cadre managers with a college education, and the lower managers are non-cadre managers without a college education. The same rule of classifying upper and lower applies to professionals.

associations (e.g. family, racial group, religion, nationality, and residence); and 3) a subjective feeling of unity with and belonging to, or separation from, certain classes. Theoretically, according to Kornhauser (1950), both people's social relationships and their psychological identification considerably overlap with their socioeconomic status. However, the relationship between the objective measure of one's social class (i.e. the occupational class) and an individual's subjective perception of his or her class position is not a straightforward mapping. Why do people's class identities not necessarily reflect their objective class positions?

Rosenberg (1953) argues that the economic (and political) institutional structure and the heterogeneity of other social group (e.g. family and racial group) identifications hinders people from identifying with their objective social milieus. According to Rosenberg (1953), people's subjective class can be easily confused by their perception of occupational or economic unity with people from different objective class locations but involving a common interest in the final product, or common work experiences, or common interpersonal experiences within the industrial or commercial framework. However, Jackman and Jackman (1983), in their empirical research on intergroup attitudes and group consciousness in the USA, indicate that having shared social contacts does not distort people's interpretations of class experience. Regarding the influence of people's family identification, they suggest that people's current attributes become more important than their family of origin after early adulthood, and that the married tend to derive images of their social-economic situations from their present families rather than their personal social standing.

Although Rosenberg's (1953) article is nearly 70 years old, it still serves to provide some theoretical explanations as to why individuals' subjective class is not consistent with their objective socioeconomic status in contemporary societies. Rosenberg (1953) stresses the family influence on subjective identification with class, which may be pertinent for Chinese society where the family has always been considered as a key component. A recent domestic study from Xu (2020) has corroborated that the subjective social statuses of Chinese people are not only a reflection of themselves but also of their parents and spouses, suggesting that the study of class identity in China should consider the influence of family. The finding that individuals continue to identify with the social class they grew up in appears also in studies

exploring self-perceived social stratifications in Western societies (e.g. Samuels, 2010). Taking a psychotherapeutic perspective, Samuels's (2010, p.81) study reveals that 'the present-day dynamics of the economic psyche are heavily inflected by money memories from the past'.

Savage et al.'s (2001) research has made a significant contribution to the study of contemporary class identities (Payne and Grew, 2005). They carried out 178 in-depth interviews in Manchester in the UK and found that the great majority of the sample were more comfortable talking about social class as a relevant social and political issue than in placing themselves in class terms. The authors identify three different ways in which people talked about class: reflexiveness, defensiveness/ambivalence, and ordinariness. Their interviewees with cultural capital[38] were confident in expressing their attitudes on class openly and reflexively, while interviewees lacking the cultural confidence felt more threatened by such social labels and displayed defensiveness about class. In addition, Savage et al. (2001, pp.887-8) demonstrate that people tend to describe themselves as being just 'ordinary' or 'normal' and use working and middle-class identities to claim their ordinariness or normalness.

Accordingly, to Savage et al. (2001), people's articulation of self is closely embedded in their access to cultural capital and resources, and this has resulted in class ambivalence or defensiveness. However, Payne and Grew (2005: p.900) argue that what Savage et al. (2001) interpret as people's defensive or ambivalent attitudes about class might be better understood as their 'uncertainty about class "out there"'. Based on their own empirical research using a non-urban sample in a different region of the UK, Payne and Grew (2005, p.902) find more or less distinct social differences between individuals on at least 14 dimensions of daily experience – including housing and lifestyle, deference and social mobility – without directly making reference to the 'c-word'. Furthermore, Payne and Grew (2005) conclude that people's emphasis on their normalness or ordinariness represents one way of establishing working or middle-class identities, rather than, as Savage et al. (2001) suggest, the other way round.

[38] By people with cultural capital, Savage et al. (2001) refer to people who graduate from University or work in professional occupations and have the knowledge to reflect on the ideas of class and to relate class labels to themselves.

In terms of middle-class identifiers, Savage et al. (2001) argue that participants in the study were trying to establish their ordinariness in relation to others, rather than genuinely feeling part of the middle-class community, which confirms their ambivalence about class. Payne and Grew (2005) disagree, maintaining that being normal or ordinary is an identity. According to them, a lay person's understanding of social class should not be treated differently from a sociologist's. To middle-class identifiers, 'normal' implies the comfort of associating with the mainstream instead of being snobbishly superior; and to working-class identifiers, 'ordinary' means that they are working for a living, and hence not different from everyone else. I agree with Payne and Grew in the way that interviewees' silence or reluctance to speak about a topic does not mean that the topic is not salient. Researchers in qualitative research should always bear in mind that 'the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it and not as the researcher views it' (Rossman and Rallis, 2017, p.155). However, it is never possible to achieve a perfect understanding of the experiences of others. It is possible that researchers 'over-estimate the degree of rapport and shared meaning with their informants' (Payne and Grew, 2005, p.907), leading them to potentially misinterpret the meaning of the responses.

Despite the disagreement between Savage et al. (2001) and Payne and Grew (2005) regarding the meaningfulness and significance of studying subjective class, these two studies have revealed one explanation as to why people are likely to accept or endorse middle-class identities. This is that they 'want to belong to a group of ordinary, average types, differentiating from a group above them and below them' (Savage, 2000, p.116). Being middling sort of people helps to articulate this identity. In fact, there is a tendency recorded in cross-national social surveys that most people, regardless of their objective socioeconomic situations, identify with the middle class (Evans et al., 1992; Kelley and Evans, 1995). Kelley and Evans (1995) attribute this phenomenon to the influence of people's reference group. The theory of reference group behaviour is developed upon the proposition that the formation of individuals' self-evaluations and social judgements are based on their selected frames of reference (Lockwood, 1966; Merton, 1968). Self-appraisals with reference to the group framework are useful in explaining the variances of individual behaviour, as

emphasised by Merton (1968, p.330): 'the very generality of the term [reference group] leads to the perception of similarities beneath apparent dissimilarities of behaviour'.

Reference group theory throws light on the (dis)formation of class awareness. We are interacting with people like us in everyday life and such social relations are developed based on cultural similarities (e.g. friendship and marriage). We perceive the social world within our own social circle, and this very limited range of references can easily lead us to underestimate the significance of social hierarchy and inequalities and deepen the self-perceptions of ordinariness (Bottero and Prandy, 2003; Bottero and Irwin, 2003; Bottero, 2005). However, people's objective position in the social structure still matters in their construction of class awareness. Thus, reference group theory only partly reveals the whole story found in Kelley and Evans's (1995) research. They also found that people's actual location in the social structure as defined by their educational attainment, as well as the economic prosperity and level of unemployment of the countries being researched, played an additional role in affecting people's perception of their socioeconomic situations. People with higher education degrees, people living in a richer society, or people from a country with a lower unemployment rate, tend to place themselves in a higher subjective social location. This 'reference group and reality blend' hypothesis still holds in Evans and Kelly's (2017) recent research exploring people's perceived inequality in 43 observed countries.

Academic interest in the subjective identification and consciousness of the Chinese middle class has been growing in recent years. Interestingly, in contrast to evidence that in the West most people identify as middle class (Evans et al., 1992; Kelley and Evans, 1995), research on China – whether conducted by scholars based in the West (e.g. Miao, 2017) or by domestic researchers (e.g. Du, 2012; Li and Zhang, 2008; Song, 2013) generally finds that members of the Chinese middle class tend not to refer to themselves as such. One explanation put forward for this finding is rooted in the theory of relative deprivation (Liu, 2001; 2002). This stems from reference group theory (Merton, 1968) and proposes that a feeling of deprivation arises as a result of comparing one's own situation with that of a chosen reference group (Walker and Smith, 2002). This offers a useful way of understanding why the subjective class identities of the Chinese middle class are lower than their objective positions. Miao (2017), for example, notes that half of her Chinese middle-class sample distinguished themselves

from the ‘true’ middle class by referring to themselves as the ‘salaried class (*gongxin jieji*)’. Miao (*ibid.*) explains this rejection of middle-class identity (among those identifying as ‘the salaried class’) as rooted in a sense of their relatively low level of material wealth, in particular their lack of any supplementary income over and above their salaries. They associated the ‘real’ middle-class with those who had achieved financial stability and were able to enjoy an anxiety-free lifestyle. Since their own personal situations did not live up to this image of how the middle-class live, this comparison confirmed their difference from rather than similarity to the middle class. As Miao (*ibid.*, p.29) argues, to these salaried-class identifiers, ‘subjective class identity is often determined through means of exclusion rather than inclusion – what they believe they are not rather than what they believed they are’. In contrast, those who do identify as middle-class emphasise cultural indicators of class and differentiate themselves from other classes through their distinctive cultural tastes. Although Miao (2017) does not discuss whether there are any objective, ostensibly economic, distinctions between those self-identifying as ‘salaried-class’ or as ‘middle class’, she finds that the middle-class identifiers are more able to pursue a cultured lifestyle and to spend money on non-essential things, while the salaried-class identifiers often find themselves constrained by limited disposable income. This finding that stratified intra-class economic situations lead to incoherent and heterogeneous class-associated identities appears to support the decision in this thesis to distinguish between sub-groups within the broad middle class.

Thus, empirical research into the identities and attitudes of the middle class in China to date reveals that the middle class has not yet developed a solid and distinct identity. One important reason for this is the heterogeneous composition of the Chinese middle class, which, as Li (2010; 2013) suggests, is composed of distinct sub-groups of the service class, the self-employed/small employers and the routine non-manuals (the marginal middle class). Most research studying subjective class in China is quantitatively based (Miao’s study is an exception) and has tended to find that a considerable proportion of the middle class ascribe to themselves a lower-class position (i.e. as lower-middle or working class) and proposes that this is explained by feelings of relative deprivation. However, from these studies, it remains unclear who the reference groups are with whom they compare their own situations and judge their relative social standing.

Given the absence to date of strong empirical evidence supporting relative deprivation as the reason for this mismatch between the subjective and objective socioeconomic positions of a substantial proportion of the Chinese middle-class, it is worth considering possible alternative explanations. One such possibility is that individuals feel a stronger identification with the social status of their family of birth, current family (i.e. spouse) or of those with whom they have frequent social contact, even if this is inconsistent with their own objective socioeconomic status (see, for example: Rosenberg, 1953; Jackman and Jackman, 1983). Given that in East Asian cultures, connectedness between individuals is emphasised and the self is constructed through its interdependence with others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), the idea that class identities may be shaped by the personal relationships individuals have appears a potentially promising line of enquiry. A second alternative explanation might be sought on the basis of Miao's (2017) finding that the subjective 'salaried class' excluded themselves from the middle class on the basis of their financial anxieties,[39] reporting, for example, lower standards of living (e.g. not living in middle-class neighbourhoods, feeling constrained in terms of non-essential and non-consumable consumption). As Miao (*ibid*., p.20) concludes, 'the literal interpretation of the term "salaried class" is as much an internalisation of their anxieties as an externalisation of their economic status'. This suggests the possibility that intra-class differences in terms of socioeconomic situations map onto subjective class identifications.

Both these possible alternatives to relative deprivation theory for explaining only partial subjective identification with middle-class status among the objectively defined middle class are explored further on the basis of the qualitative research conducted for this thesis in Chapter 6 (see Section 6.1.2). In Section 6.1.2, for example, I explore whether the marginal middle class in Li's model of class classification, which I used as the frame for selecting or approaching samples in my study, share similar identities and attitudes with the salaried class in Miao's (2017) study. The significance of positive identification with one's birth family/spouse/friend's social status, rather than one's own objective socioeconomic status,

[39] This does not mean that the salaried-class identifiers experienced financial insecurity and uncertainty as a precariat. In fact, they held the same kinds of conformable white-collar occupations and had similar steady incomes as their self-identified middle-class counterparts.

for individuals' subjective class identification is also explored in this section. Furthermore, in Section 6.3, I consider whether subjective class is a better predictor of happiness than objective class (Adler et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2008) by exploring whether those who identify subjectively as middle-class are more likely to report being happier than those who do not consider themselves to be 'real' middle class.

To sum up, in this thesis, I employ Li Chunling's (2010, 2011)'s class model, which is a Chinese version of Goldthorpe's (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992) occupational class categories, to distinguish the middle class in today's China. Based on employer-employee dynamics, the Chinese middle class can be further segmented into three sub-divisions: the service class; the self-employed/small employers; and the routine non-manual (i.e., the marginal middle class). However, an objectively determined member of the middle class – defined by their socioeconomic standing – may not necessarily develop a consistent subjective middle-class identity. Given the important role the middle class plays in every aspect of the Chines society, it is important to explore further whether or not the tendency for middle-class individuals in China to evaluate their current life circumstances as below the level of middle class is best explained by a sense of relative deprivation, or if there are alternative explanations for this. This is taken forward in the empirical part of this thesis (see Section 2.4). Before that, we consider the evidence to date on how social class (especially subjective class identification) affects individual levels of happiness and how this compares to the impact of other socio-demographic characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status.

2.4 Socio-demographic differences in experience of happiness

In this final substantive section of the chapter, we consider the evidence to date of the variation in the experience of happiness according to key socio-demographic variables – class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status. In reviewing this literature, emphasis is placed on the evidence to date from the study of happiness in China, although relevant comparisons are made to findings from other countries. It is important also to

recognise that the data on happiness is dependent on how individuals understand, anticipate, express and report happiness and that these may also vary according to occupational role, age, gender, and other socio-demographic attributes. The socialised dispositions or 'habitus' created by social structures guide how individuals perceive the social world and engage in social practices (Bourdieu, 2010). These, structurally rooted, dispositions shape, amongst other things, how people appraise happiness. Thus in interpreting the findings of the literature to date, attention is given to how socio-demographic variables shape both the experience of happiness and how people report the experience of happiness.

2.4.1 Class

In terms of socioeconomic situation, it is generally observed that reported happiness increases alongside wealth. Research in China broadly supports assumptions about the classed nature of happiness, but finds the relationship between higher social class and greater happiness to not be straightforward. Liu (2007) finds that the happiest social class in China is the upper middle class[40], the upper class is the second happiest, followed by the lower middle class. The lower class is the least happy group. However, Liu's survey-based research provides only a description of the correlations and does not interpret the results. Moreover, other research, such as that conducted by Xing and Huang's (2007) into the happiness of social groups in China, has yielded rather different results. Xing and Huang identify seven social groups in contemporary Chinese society: the working class; peasants; governmental officials; managers in state-owned enterprise; intellectuals; a newly-emerging group (composed of the self-employed, the owners of private business, managerial and professional personnel in private-owned enterprises or foreign-owned enterprises, and employees in intermediary

[40] In Liu's (2007) study, the upper class refers to people holding direct control power in political authorities, or government-owned economic enterprises, or privately owned enterprises; the lower class, or the subordinated class, consists of skilled workers, non-skilled workers, routine workers without administrative grades, and the self-employed. The upper middle class includes middle-level cadres in party and governmental organisations, middle-level managers in state-owned enterprises, small employers (who employ 2-9 employees), managers in privately owned enterprises, and senior professional and technical personnel. Lower middle class includes lower-level cadres in party and governmental organisations, lower-level professional and technical personnel, routine workers with administrative grades, line managers in state-owned enterprises, lower-level managers in privately owned enterprises, and managers in small-scale private business. It is important to note that Liu's model of social stratification in socialist China is based on individual differences in public power, control rights over assets (public and private) and human capital (professional assets), which is different from Goldthorpe's occupational class scheme used in the empirical part of this thesis.

organisations); and the urban poor. In assessing the happiness level of these social groups, Xing and Huang (*ibid*.) found that government officials reported being most satisfied with their lives. The newly emerging group and the intellectuals were second in terms of their reported happiness levels while managers in state-owned enterprise, the working class, and the peasants were third. The urban poor appeared to be the least satisfied. Xing and Huang's (2007) classification of social groups, however, does not rely on a systematic class scheme - the 'newly-emerging group', for example, seems to be an all-embracing social group incorporating people with varying socioeconomic situations and opportunities in life. The lack of a systematic analytical model of social class in their research makes it difficult to discern how their findings can indicate how social class affects people's level of happiness.

As discussed in Section 2.1, happiness can be measured by two distinct components; the affective component, which is used to assess the frequency and intensity of a specific everyday emotional experience, and the cognitive component, which assesses the discrepancy between perceived life and desired or ideal life (Veenhoven, 1984). Some studies suggest that the effect of social class is more sensitive in relation to one component of happiness than the other. For example, Kahneman and Deaton (2010) argue that cognitive happiness is sensitive to socioeconomic status, while high income or high education attainment may not simultaneously enhance one's affective happiness, which is closely related to the experiences per se that evoke positive and negative emotions.

Hence, we can see that there is not a straightforward relationship between happiness and objective class position. Partly this is because happiness alludes to individual experiences, and so does subjective class. We are in fact exploring how people perceive and experience their socioeconomic situations in order to comprehend how their sense of happiness varies with social class. Relative class differences vis-à-vis others serve to interpret the case of 'frustrated achievers' (Graham and Pettinato, 2002) in developing economies, which refers to a group of the objective middle class in terms of objective economic achievements, but who have developed a lower sense of happiness.

Objective social standing might help people to develop perceptions of their locations in the social hierarchy, but, as demonstrated in Section 2.3.3, the relationship between people's

objective and subjective socioeconomic situations is far from congruent. In recent years, more and more studies have suggested that self-rated class status could be a complementary, and potentially more meaningful, predictor of physiological and psychological well-being, in addition to objective social class (e.g., Adler et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2008; Islam et al., 2009). For example, Kraus et al.'s (2009) study adopts people's subjective perceptions about their material situations in assessing happiness, and found that those enjoying a higher perceived financial situation, or a higher perceived social class, have generally gained more resources, and thus, more sense of personal control over negative or unexpected life events. Zhao et al. (2019) examine how well the main findings from Kraus et al.'s (2009) study could be generalised to the Chinese social context, and find consistent results that subjective social class may be a better predictor of individual happiness than objective measures.

2.4.2 Age

Happiness varies with age. However, studies on the age-happiness pattern have yielded mixed and inconsistent results. The majority of studies in both the West (e.g. Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004; 2008) and China (e.g. Xing and Huang, 2014) suggests that happiness has reached its nadir in midlife, which suggests a U-bend curve between age and happiness. One reason for this is age role expectations. Life stages – childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age – are largely socially constructed towards 'compartmentalization of basic life activities according to age' (Rader, 1979, p.644). Different ages are expected to achieve different milestones.

Middle-aged adults, located in age-terms between their potentially physically frail parents and their dependent children, are often referred to as the 'sandwich generation' (Miller, 1981). It is a normative expectation that the sandwich generation are the 'major giver' (Miller, 1981, p.420) for their families, both financially and emotionally, while receiving disproportionately less support compared to that which they provide. In the Chinese context, the middle-aged are widely perceived as the 'nucleus of society' and the 'backbone of the family'. The dual responsibilities they bear may lead to significantly greater stress and associated emotional burdens than experienced by other age groups (Li, 2002; Song and Wu,

2010). By contrast, Easterlin (2006) found a somewhat 'inverted U-shaped pattern', suggesting that happiness grew gradually, alongside the uptrend in satisfaction with one's family life and work, throughout midlife. The explanation given by Easterlin (2006) for this is that the diminishing satisfaction people experience from midlife onwards, mostly evident in family life and work, can be offset by their increasing satisfaction with their financial situation. This further highlights the importance of age-related role expectation in explaining the happiness gap by age.

Why does people's level of happiness start to rise after their forties? Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) hypothesise that a process of adaptation to circumstances may take place with regard to work, as people tend to lower or forgo some of their aspirations, and to enjoy life more. The strategy of lowering aspiration continues to be adopted into the golden years. Recent psychological studies investigating the higher level of happiness in the elderly group have confirmed that the relatively high level of emotional well-being experienced and maintained by older adults is due to their engagement in emotion-regulation strategies[41] (Blanchard-Fields et al. 2004; Charles and Catstensen, 2014; Urry and Gross, 2010) in managing negative emotional experiences and adapting to changing situations. It is important to note that these studies employ a concept of 'emotional well-being' that is referred to as the affective component of overall happiness, while a high level of happiness depends not only on higher emotional well-being but also requires a higher satisfaction with life (i.e. cognitive happiness).

[41] Gross's process model of emotional regulation is broader than Hochschild's emotion work. Emotion regulation is defined by Gross (1998, p.275) as 'the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions'. Emotion work, however, only refers to a process of emotional management according to feeling rules. As Sheve (2012) clarifies, emotion work is situation-specific, whereas the emotion regulatory process takes a more universal approach that requires individuals to select or modify a situation prior to managing or regulating their emotions. The situation selection and situation modification strategies are guided by framing rules. After a situation is defined, individuals use feeling rules which provide guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation' (Hochschild, 1979, p.566) to manage or regulate their emotions. Feeling rules are not only situation-specific, but are also dependent on individuals' social roles and status positions and related social categories, which means feeling rules can explain the distinctive emotion regulatory behaviours across groups and categories of individuals (Sheve, 2012).

2.4.3 Gender

Existing happiness research based on large-scale, nationally representative samples has shown inconsistent difference between men and women in their levels of self-reported happiness or well-being. Some research findings indicate that men are more likely to report being happy than women (e.g. Okun et al., 1984). This might be partly attributed to gender inequality in national contexts (e.g. Audette et al., 2019; Bjørnskov et al., 2007[42]). Zweig's study (2014) however, points to evidence that in in almost all of the 73 countries surveyed[43] levels of happiness are either higher for women than for men or that there is no significant gender difference in reported happiness. Notably, after controlling for a range of different individual circumstances (e.g. income, education, marital status and health), the female-male difference in happiness actually increases. The fact that the unequal socio-economic status between men and women or the precent of seats held by women in national parliament does not have a significant impact on women's sense of happiness warrants further investigation. Why do women, with less income and fewer rights than men, feel as happy or happier than their male counterparts? One possible explanation could be the gendered emotional norms that shape how men and women report and narrate happiness.

A wide range of research (e.g. Grossman and Wood, 1993; Wood et al., 1989) on sex differences in well-being has pointed to the fact that women experience greater sensitivity to internal emotional events as well as higher levels of happiness or unhappiness, and attributes this to socially determined gender roles that are assigned to men and women. Historically, the political public sphere was a male preserve, and women were excluded from participation in it and bound to a life of domesticity, resulting in the construction of an apparent dichotomy between the male public sphere and the female private one[44] (Goodman, 1992; Wischermann

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[42] It is worth mentioning that both Audette et al. (2019) and Bjørnskov et al. (2007) have found that gender equality not only contributes to women's happiness but also promotes greater satisfaction with life among men.

[43] Zweig's (2014) research draws on worldwide data from the Gallup World Pool which includes 73 countries, containing 20 developed countries, 12 transitional countries, 41 less developed countries, 17 Latin American countries, and 8 African countries. For a full list of these countries, see Appendix I in Zweig's (2014) article.

[44]The distinction made between the public sphere and private sphere in sociological works is largely attributed to German sociologist Jürgen Habermas's (1989) book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The public/private distinction is, however, a product of patriarchal construction which consciously undervalues aspects of human life associated with the private or personal and compounds the oppression and subordination of women. Carole Pateman, in her book *The Disorder of Women* (1989) critically discusses the illogicality of the

and Mueller, 2004). The public-private distinction in Western societies has its counterpart in the inside-outside (*nei-wai*) division of labour according to sex under Confucian traditions (Lee, 1999). This two-sphere world reinforces the presentation of the ideal man and woman and influences how men and women are socialised into their respective social roles and gendered personalities. Women's role as family care-taker socialises them into persons who are skilful at dealing with interpersonal situations and they are praised for their empathy and emotional expressivity, whereas men's roles as primary provider and protector emphasise the importance of effectiveness, achievement and competition, which require them to be clear-headed, rational, and to display emotional self-control (Brody, 1997; Eagly, 1987). This may mean that women are more willing to report more extreme levels of happiness or unhappiness than men (Wood et al., 1989)[45]. However, we need to be careful not to assume emotional expression (*external)* is the same as actual emotion felt by individuals (*internal*). According to Fabes and Martin (1991), the prevailing belief that women are the more emotionally expressive sex is based on a 'deficit model of male expressiveness', that is, the impression that males are more reluctant to express the emotions they feel, which leads to the salience of women's emotion in relation to men's emotion[46].

For this thesis, of particular significance is not only that the *experience* of happiness is gendered but that the *expression* of happiness is also gendered. Here, Erving Goffman's (1959)

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liberal contrast between public and private. Women, she argues, have been excluded from the public world through their depiction as essentially sexualised beings and, as such, incapable of developing a sense of the political morality characterising their male counterparts; their inclusion thus endangers political order as well as the normality of public world (Pateman, 1989).

[45] It is worth noting here that Wood et al. (1989) define happiness only in terms of its affective nature and associate it with positive affect. This is different from Veenhoven's (1984) conceptualisation of happiness, which I have adopted in this study. Wood et al.'s (1989) research found that women reported a greater level of both affective (i.e. positive affect or happiness) and cognitive well-being (i.e. life satisfaction) than men. However, their research also reveals that men yielded higher average scores in general evaluation which is, according to them, a heterogenous measure assessing 'morale, general well-being, and other single-item scales that could not be classified into one of the other categories, along with a variety of multiple-item indices' (pp.253-255). This broad category is more complex than the concept of 'overall happiness'.

[46] Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux (1999) also question the stereotype of emotional women and unemotional men, and suggest that gendered stereotypes of emotions are context-specific in the way that women are expected to be more expressive of emotions in interpersonal context (i.e. the women's domain) and men in achievement setting (i.e. the men's domain). Relating Kelly and Hutson-Comeaux's (1999) study to happiness, their findings may lead us to consider whether the factors affecting happiness may be different for men and women; while women may be more likely to associate their happiness with interpersonal interactions men may emphasise personal achievement. In other words. men and women may report different levels of satisfaction in the domain of personal relationships or work. This might be an interesting proposition for further research.

work *The presentation of self in everyday life* offers an important framework for thinking about how people present their identities, and how this might be gendered. In everyday interactions, he argues, people, like actors on a theatre stage, adopt socially acceptable norms of behaviour and create a 'public self' which they present in the presence of others. However, there is also a portion of life 'where the suppressed facts make an appearance' (Goffman, 1959, p.114). This is when people are behind the stage and are allowed to take off their masks and social burdens and to enjoy the privacy of being just themselves. Goffman does not specifically consider gendered performances of self but his work has inspired others, such as Judith Butler, to further explore why and how gender identities are created and performed in the social world. Butler (1988) criticises Goffman for overemphasising individual agency, that is, suggesting the individual consciously chooses where, what, and how to make himself or herself presentable in accordance with norms[47]. In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993, p.234) suggests that it would be a mistake to assume that gender is a self-constituted performance or exteriority based on the 'performer's will or choice'; gender is performed and regulated by cultural logics. For Butler, gender is neither essential nor biologically determined but performatively constructed. She prefers the term 'performability' in order to reveal that there is no pre-existing gender identity; it comes into being through performative acts. The core of gender identity is, then, a fabricated reality which is displayed 'on the surface of the body' (Butler, 1999, p.173) in everyday discourse, as a result of public regulation and disciplinary practices.

The cultural norms that regulate gender performance are different for men and women; indeed, what it means to be a man or a woman are in this sense socially constructed. As West and Zimmerman (1987, p.137) argue, the differences between men and women are not only constructed by 'doing gender', but these socially regulated performances are then used to reinforce the natural or biological 'essentialness of gender'. For the study of happiness this is important because it suggests that we internalise these socially appropriate gender identities

[47] Butler moves to the opposite extreme from Goffman on the structure-agency continuum. While Goffman's dramaturgical model places the notion of self at the centre and supposes that everyone can fully modify or control the social situations in which their interactions are situated, Butler's theoretical position, in contrast, stands outside of the self to understand gender performance as 'subjectless productions of a discursive formation' and renders gender performance as passive, involuntary, and unconscious (Boucher, 2006, p.116).

when we carry out gendered acts. The different pattern of emotional expressiveness also reflects this gender performance. In other words, the presentation of emotions is a gendered act in itself.

It is also important to note that there are consequences if people fail to perform their gender 'correctly'. They will be stigmatised, marginalised, or even punished by mainstream culture. According to Butler, spontaneously-arising negative emotions (i.e. gender anxiety or fear of being a failed man or woman due to non-fulfilment of gender ideals), are due to the dissonance concerning the ways in which social structure produces, regulates, and controls gendered subjectivities. These negative emotions impel people to adopt the socially expected ways of expression or feeling, which is the essence of emotion work. As stated earlier, sets of expression and feeling rules for men and women differ as a result of this historically accumulated socialisation leading to distinct but shared expectations of what is desirable for each gender. Given that women are more socialised into being emotionally expressive as suggested by a substantial number of studies (e.g. Brody, 1997; Eagly, 1987; Lopata, 2006), they are thus more likely to report happiness (or unhappiness) than men. Although these studies have not focused on happiness specifically, they inspire us to think about how the presence or absence of gender difference in self-reported happiness may be a product of gendered expressivity.

2.4.4 Ethnicity

In the West, research shows that white ethnic groups generally feel more content than non-white groups (Argyle, 2001). Much of the ethnic majority-minority difference in happiness in the West can be explained by the associated disparities in income, occupational status and employment (Aldous and Ganey, 1999; Argyle, 2001). However, there is also some evidence that culture shapes the experience of satisfaction with life. Spiers and Walker (2009), for example, compared the role of recreation and leisure activities in pursuing happiness among Chinese-Canadians and British-Canadians and found that while British-Canadians associated leisure satisfaction with activities related to setting and achieving goals (e.g. active sports, fitness and outdoor activities), Chinese-Canadians found satisfaction in relatively inactive

activities involving promoting and maintaining personal relationships (for example, mah-jong with friends).

Happiness studies in China have found mixed and inconsistent results with regard to ethnicity. Although China is a multi-ethnic country, containing 56 ethnic groups, it has a single dominant ethnic group, the Han, who constitute 91.6% of the population[48] (Li and Liu, 2019). Studies thus tend to compare the happiness of the Han with that of all other non-Han ethnic groups. Findings have been mixed. Monk-Turner and Turner (2012), for example, find that Han people are less likely to report happiness than non-Han (although they provide no explanation for this). In contrast, Zhou (2013), drawing on the 2008 CGSS survey data, concludes that being Han has a positive effect on happiness. He attributes this to the fact that those of Han ethnicity constitute the advantaged majority and thus the lower level of happiness of non-Han Chinese is due to their less advantaged status in the social hierarchy.

With limited evidence to date, it is difficult to definitively explain such different findings. However, one possibility relates to the different contexts of the studies. Monk-Turner and Turner's (2012) research was based in Yunnan province which has an ethnically diverse population, while the survey data used by Zhou (2013) was designed to be nationally representative. The possibility that non-Han ethnic groups are more likely to report happiness when they live in ethnically diverse contexts is supported by the work of Knight et al. (2014), which seeks to understand the apparently higher prevalence of happiness among poorer ethnic minorities in rural China. Their analysis is based on The China Household Ethnic Survey of 2011 but focuses on seven provinces, all of which are ethnically diverse (and not representative of the whole Chinese population). They attribute the higher rate of happiness among non-Han groups to social, cultural or attitudinal reasons and, in particular, to the greater ability of the non-Han Chinese to derive happiness from personal relationships (*ibid*.).

The inconclusive findings to date on the relationship between ethnicity and happiness suggest the need for research that directly compares the experiences of happiness among ethnic minorities in both Han-dominated and ethnically diverse geographical locations, as well as

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[48] This is according to the 6th national census data (2010).

looking at other potential variables that might interact with ethnicity to produce different happiness outcomes.

2.4.5 Marriage

The positive effect of matrimony on happiness[49] has been well documented in the mounting body of happiness studies (e.g. Joung et al., 1997; Mookherjee, 1997; Proulx et al., 2007; Stack and Eshleman, 1998). The usual explanation as to why marriage leads to a difference between married people and the unmarried in terms of self-reported happiness is its protective and supportive psychological function (Zimmermann and Easterlin, 2006). The marital relationship is one of the strongest and most intimate social connections, the depth and breadth of which is found to be a powerful predictor of life appreciation (Burke and Weir, 1977; Helliwell and Putman, 2004). A stable and attuned companionship, which the unmarried may lack, can provide sustained and trustworthy emotional support based upon interpersonal closeness in the face of the vicissitudes of everyday life (Coombs, 1991).

Research on marital happiness can be hard to disaggregate from the mediating function of gender roles. Gender ideologies can be viewed as 'happiness scripts' (Ahmed, 2010, p.59) instructing men and women about the right ways of doing thing in order to be happy in their marital lives. Hochschild (1989), in her book *The Second Shift*, explores how partners feel about the division of housework and childcare in dual career families by interviewing 50 married couples in which both husband and wife work and who have children under the age of six. On the basis of this study, she identifies three types of gender ideology[50] governing the division of labour adopted in these families: traditional, egalitarian, and transitional. The traditional woman bases her identity on the domestic sphere, as a wife and mother, and believes that her husband should focus on the workplace. The traditional man agrees with

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[49] Stack and Eshleman (1998) suggest the association between marriage and happiness can be explained by a combination of social causation theory, which shows the supportive function marriage provides (e.g. financial and emotional support, better physical health) and social selection theory, which attributes happiness not to the beneficial effects of marriage but to the fact that people who are happy find marriage partners more easily.
[50] Hochschild (1989, pp.16-17) argues that these ideologies have been developed by individuals through both 'unconsciously synthesising certain cultural ideas with feelings about their past' and consciously identifying with the ideology that makes sense of their circumstances and can speak for their self-identities.

this and assumes that housework is outside his range of responsibilities. The egalitarian man or woman expects to have a balanced amount of power in the marriage, and to split household chores equally. The transitional ideology means a mix between traditionalism and egalitarianism. The transitional woman maintains that a woman's identity should stem from work as well as home, but it is the wife's responsibility to undertake a larger proportion of housework. The transitional man is supportive of his wife's pursuit of a career, but also expects her to do the lion's share of domestic chores. The majority of the sample in Hochschild's study held such transitional beliefs.

These ideologies, Hochschild (*ibid*.) argues, shape people's determination of which sphere (domestic or work) they identify with the most, as well as how much power they want to possess in relation to their partner in the marriage. These gendered ideologies can also be thought of as 'framing rules', providing guidelines for how we ascribe definitions or meanings to a given situation (Hochschild, 1979, p.566). However, the gender ideologies adopted may not always be enacted in real-life scenarios. 'What people said they believed about their marital roles' may contradict 'how they seemed to feel about those roles' (Hochschild, 1989, p.15). For example, some interviewees in the study claimed to be egalitarian 'on top' but in practice were traditional 'underneath', or the other way round. These cases are described by Hochschild (*ibid*., p.14) as examples of 'shallow ideologies', where people's stated views run counter to their deeper feelings, in contrast to 'deep ideologies', which are further reinforced by consistent deeper feelings.

Finding no direct line between gender ideology or feeling rules and gendered divisions of household labour in daily practice, Hochschild (1989) revised her theory to include the intervening role of gender strategies between people's ideas about gender and their acts of emotion management. Gender strategy is a set of feelings and actions that seek to reconcile one's gender ideology with life unfolding in real time (Hochschild, 1989). One's gender strategy, Hochschild asserts (1989), is created in order to resolve the conflict between what people thought they ought to feel and what they did feel. In the same vein, 'family myths' (Hochschild, 1989, p.17) are proposed as way of understanding how dual-income couples address disjuncture between ideology and feeling. The mismatch between husbands and

wives in their gender ideology results in unbalanced power relationships and a disproportionate division of labour, creating considerable strains on their marital happiness. Shared family myths, Hochschild (*ibid*.) argues, help to ease or manage tensions between couples by arriving at an arrangement concerning, or compromise between, the amount of household chores each does, and the gender ideology of each partner.

These distinctive normative expectations between men and women provide one explanation for their different experience of marital happiness. Jessie Bernard's (1972) book '*The Future of Marriage'* points to another. She argues that husbands and wives perceive and experience marriage differently not only in relation to division of labour in household chores and decision-making power, but also with respect to sexual relations, companionship and emotional intimacy. These marked differences, she suggests, have introduced two kinds of marriage, his and hers. The separate experiences between men and women in married life, or the 'psychological realities' reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of the couples themselves, are acknowledged 'structural realties' resulting from the cultural and conventional context of marriage (*ibid*., p.9). In the chapter 'The Wife's Marriage', Bernard (*ibid*. pp.46-47) highlights a peculiar 'housewife syndrome', with housewives much more likely to suffer from mental disorder and emotional distress than married working women. Similarly, Gove (Gove, 1972; Gove and Tudor, 1973; Gove, 1978) identifies a noticeably higher prevalence of mental illness [51] among married women than married men in western industrialised societies and attributes this to gendered societal roles[52] that entrap married women into a less rewarding, lower prestige, and more frustrating and stressful position – being a housewife – than their husbands (*ibid.).* Even married women who actively participate in the labour market, it is argued, enjoy a less satisfactory position than married men due to the discrimination against women at work and the expectation that women will take on the lion's share of domestic duties (Gove, 1972; Gove and Tudor, 1973).

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[51] Gove and Tudor (1973) limit the definition of mental illness to disorders encompassing anxious and distressed feelings and/or disorganisation of thinking, speech, and behaviour. This means that neurotic disorders and functional psychoses fit their definition, while personality disorder (not entailing experiences of personal discomfort) and brain disorders (caused by physical conditions) are excluded.

[52] Biological reasons accounting for 'housewife syndrome' are ruled out since the more frequent occurrence of emotional problems in women is found only in the married group, whereas among the never married, the divorced, and the widowed, men are more inclined to be diagnosed with mental illness than women due to the higher levels of psychological stress men are exposed to (Gove and Tudor, 1973; Gove, 1978).

Traditional gender roles and duties within both the family and society persist in today's China (Attané, 2012; Liu et al., 2017). Husbands are more committed to the breadwinner or worker role and wives are left with the homemaker or parental role, which suggests that the husband's employment, and his contribution to the household income, are the two most important factors in his individual happiness (Lu, 2000; Qian and Qian, 2015). This also means that when individuals' lives do not conform to socially accepted gender role expectations, they are likely to experience heightened psychological distress, which in turn increases the feeling of unhappiness (Qian and Qian, 2015). Due to the 'dual burden[53]' of employment and household chores which falls on women, they are more likely to suffer from emotional problems and stress in marriage than men (Bernard, 1972; Gove and Tudor, 1973; Gurin et al., 1960). It would seem, then, that men reap greater benefits from marriage than women do (Coomb, 1991; Veenhoven, 1984).

Recent studies highlight the importance of the quality of marriage rather than marriage itself for individual happiness (Proulx et al., 2007; Williams, 1988); a troubled married life can cause emotional strains (Carr et al., 2014; Proulx et al., 2007; Williams, 1988). Williams (1988) contends that marital quality is more important for the happiness of women than of men due to the fact that women have a higher expectation of intimate interpersonal exchange. Women who report feeling emotionally supported by a spouse, also report higher satisfaction with life; those who do not experience sufficient support are more likely to experience emotional deprivation and dissatisfaction (Williams, 1988). This, it is suggested, is a result of gendered socialisation: for women, being social incorporates intimacy, attachment and greater emotional expressivity, while men are not socialised to support or supply others emotionally. The ensuing unbalanced emotional exchange means that women may experience a 'relational deficit' and find their husbands unable to fulfil their needs for emotional intimacy (Bernard, 1976, pp.230-232).

[53] In the domestic sphere, full-time employed wives with egalitarian beliefs toward marriage roles are more likely to experience lower marital quality and personal happiness if they experience an unfair division of housework with their husbands or are not satisfied by the support from their husbands (Piña and Bengtson, 1993). Also, women are likely to suffer from gender discrimination at work. They may then compare their salary and opportunities to those of their male colleagues and the blatant organisational injustice will lower their satisfaction in the work domain (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2009).

A wife's perception of her husband's involvement in the division of domestic tasks and child-rearing activities can result in positive effects on both his and his wife's marital quality (Galovan et al., 2014). In line with western research, Pimentel's (2000) study of marital relations between urban Chinese couples found a corresponding pattern; an egalitarian marriage characterised by sharing household responsibilities promotes both the husband's and the wife's happiness in marriage. However, the unequal division of housework may not necessarily create a sense of unfairness for women. Zuo and Bian (2001) found that in Chinese society, wives' feeling of unfairness is due to the failure to accumulate comparable gendered resources[54] in marriage. In such cases, it was only when the division of labour at home was viewed as inequitable by the wives that negative feelings associated with perceived unfairness emerged or were heightened.

However, feminist sociologists (e.g. Ahmed, 2010; Yang, 2018) criticise the popular representation of 'happy housewives' in women's magazines, TV programmes, or social media platforms. These feminist critiques challenge the compulsion for women to embrace happiness portrayed in this way. As Ahmed (2010, pp.53-55) points out, the ideas of happiness (not happiness *per se*) or the judgements of what counts as a good life are designed to maintain a gendered division of labour as well as social harmony, implying that any deviation from the gender role would lead to a deviation from happiness. The happiness of a woman is considered 'conditional upon' her husband and her family, or more precisely, she feels obligated to put others' happiness first, by pleasing them or satisfying their needs, and she, thereby, has to do what makes them happy; she cannot be happy if they are unhappy (Ahmed, 2010, pp.56).

The ideals of happiness promoted in China, which try to alleviate widespread dissatisfaction and grievance and to sustain social and political stabilisation in today's post-reform China,

[54] 'Gendered resources' are constructed by culturally prescribed gender ideology. For husbands, whose obligatory role is that of the main provider, their gendered resources are gained from their socioeconomic status, whereas for wives, who are expected to be family-oriented, valuable gendered resources may be accumulated by the demonstration of devotion to housekeeping (Zuo and Bian, 2001). Even for dual-earner couples, when a wife feels helpless in the absence of real opportunities for female employees in the labour market, she may preserve the traditional housekeeper role in order to increase the value of her resources (*ibid*.).

follow the binary, normative, male-dominated gender ideologies where women are encouraged to serve the family, and 'to be nurturing and flexible in their marriage' (Yang, 2018, p.138). Being a flexible housewife, according to Yang (2018), is not complaining about 'what is outside of their control' (e.g. being a housewife due to economic restructuring), but adapting to the external environment and being committed to fulfilling their socially expected roles (i.e. as mothers and wives). However, such an emotional strategy is fundamentally self-deceiving; it fakes happiness while the causes of frustration remain intact, regardless of whether people control or change the way they reflect on their problems, which, essentially, are social and structural ones (Yang, 2013). The images of 'happy housewives', thus, mask and justify gendered exploitation. Women who fail to find happiness as 'convened' through our notions of what brings happiness, thus risk not only being unhappy due to the unequal household division of labour they bear, but also because they are seen to contravene what is conventionally thought to make a woman happy (Ahmed, 2010, p.64).

2.4.6 Children

The arrival of children and the transition to parenthood has been theoretically discussed as a source of individual happiness; for example, in Hoffman et al. (1978)'s study on the value of children, they sum up nine advantages[55] that children may bring to their parents' lives, which in turn help to illuminate parents' childrearing decisions. However, surprisingly, the prevailing evidence from most Western-based empirical studies examining the effects of children on marital happiness (i.e. marital quality/husband-wife relationship) has demonstrated a negative or null correlation (Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; White et al., 1986). One reason could be that contemporary couples are less willing to adapt to, or tolerate, the traditional, gender-differentiated childrearing practices and household chores of previous generations, but have not found any effective resolution to the obvious gendered differences they contained, leading to more frequent disagreements and greater distance between them (Cowan and Cowan, 1986). Pimentel (2000) finds that the negative effect of children on their

[55] Based on Hoffman et al. (1978), these nine general values of having children are: 1) 'primary group ties and affection'; 2) 'stimulation and fun'; 3) 'expansion of the self'; 4) 'adult status and social identity'; 5) 'achievement and creativity'; 6) 'morality'; 7) 'economic utility'; 8) 'power and influence', and 9) 'social comparison'.

parents' marriage is also a common theme in Chinese society, despite the fact that childbearing is seen as an integral part of marriage.

Angeles (2010) notes that the contrasting results regarding the effects of children on their parents' well-being – that is, that they are either positive or negative – can be attributed to the way in which happiness is measured. When asked to capture their immediate feelings, it is likely that parents would experience a higher frequency of negative emotions because parenting has occupied lots of time and energy; but if using a measurement highlighting the cognitive aspect of individual happiness (e.g. life satisfaction), that requires them to take a long-term perspective and carefully review their lives, children would be considered one of the most important and rewarding achievements in their lives (*ibid*.).

The most recent happiness research focusing on China's infamous one-child policy investigates its influence on the impact of sibship structure (i.e. the number of siblings) on children's happiness (e.g. Deutsch, 2006; Wu, 2014), as well as on the quality of elderly care for parents (Gustafson and Huang, 2014; Song, 2014). These two foci of research are always linked because children are expected to bear the responsibility for taking care of their elderly parents. According to the Confucian doctrine of filiality, children owe their parents 'care-debt' (Knapp, 2005, p.129), and they have to repay the debt through filial behaviours – for example, by providing a comfortable life for their parents in their later years. As the Confucian saying puts it, 'the purpose of raising children is to assure life in old age ('*yang er fang lao*[56]')'. Despite drastic shifts in the social and cultural context of contemporary China, adult children are still expected to repay the enormous financial and emotional costs their parents have invested in raising them during childhood, and bear the burden of taking care of their elderly parents. Since 1996, the responsibility of children to meet the necessary emotional and physical needs of their elderly parents has been enshrined in *the Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly*[57].

[56] In the phrase '*yang er fang lao*', the meaning of '*er*' is controversial. In ancient China, especially in rural parts, '*er*' was restricted to 'sons'. As the gender preference for children has been diminishing in the contemporary context, the reference of '*er*' has been expanded to 'sons and daughters' (Wang, 2017).

[57] As identified in Article 13 of the revised 2018 law (the latest amendment of the original 1996 law), family members should take on most of the responsibility for elderly care, and adult children should perform the statutory duty to respect, care for, and look after their aged, frail and helpless parents. The implementation of

Shrinking family size, as a result of the one-child policy, has created challenges for only children to directly provide quality care for their aged parents at home. Current research regarding the relationship between different living arrangements and the happiness of the elderly in China have generated inconsistent findings. Drawing on the 1998 Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey (CLHLS), Chen and Short's (2008) study, focusing on people aged 80 and above, found that those who lived alone tended to report a much lower level of happiness than those co-residing with spouses and/or their children (the so-called 'immediate' family). In terms of living with others, Chen and Short (2008) note only a marginal difference in the level of happiness between older people living with a partner and those living with their children. The psychological benefits of living with others appears to be confirmed by Tan's (2018)[58] study which, based on the 2014 CLHLS, found that the elderly living with their family members and those living in a professional care centre both reported higher levels of happiness than those living on their own. However, there are other studies (e.g. Chyi and Mao, 2011; Xiong, 2018) that reject the happy and harmonious picture of two or three generations living under one roof. Rather than improving one's well-being, they suggest, intergenerational co-residence might be associated with an increase in depressive symptoms when compared to the situation of those living apart from their children. Xiong (2018) suggests that the optimal type of living arrangement for the well-being of aging parents was to remain living independently from their children within the same county or city.

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the science of happiness seeks to systematically and comprehensively study happiness as one of the most significant dimensions of human existence. After reviewing contemporary models of happiness, in this thesis, happiness (*xingfu*) will be understood, in

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such legal guarantees has protected the elderly from negative psychological effects (e.g. fear, loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem) as a result of negligence, mistreatment, and abandonment by their children.

[58]Tan's (2018) study did not limit the sample of his study to a specific age range, so the age range of all the samples in his study corresponded to the original structure of the survey, which required respondents to be 65 or above.

accordance with Veenhoven (1984), as an umbrella term including both affective and cognitive components. Madsen's (2019a) taxonomy of the concept of happiness based on Chinese individuals' narratives of happiness distinguishes 'day-to-day happiness' from 'ultimate happiness' and helps illuminate the specific contours of happiness in contemporary China. However, Madsen's focus on understanding how people narrate happiness, rather than constructing a comprehensive and integrated model of happiness, means the structural relations and divisions between these forms of happiness are not sufficiently clear to employ as the overarching conceptualisation of happiness for the purposes of this thesis. Thus, Veenhoven's (1984) definition of happiness is employed at the general theoretical level in the thesis while insights from Madsen's (2019a) conceptualisation are drawn on in the empirical chapters to enrich the analysis of findings.

Happiness, or rather an individual's view of happiness or a good life, is socially constructed and should be studied accordingly. As a social construct, people's expressions and feelings of happiness have social meanings. There are culturally embedded rules according to age, gender and other socio-demographic differences between individuals which guide us towards the appropriate ways of being. We are happy in a situation when it 'matches' our expectations of what it should be. The expected or ideal way of living in the context of Chinese society equates with the morally good life characterised by three key moral strands, including happy and harmonious relations with the family, individual fulfilment, and contribution to the greater good (Hsu, 2019a).

The Chinese middle class is defined by their occupations in this study, following Li's (2010;2013) reframing of Goldthorpe's occupational class schema. Domestic studies in China have suggested that the Chinese middle class is not a single category, because it has not yet developed a solid and distinct identity. I have hence suggested that the middle-class is treated as a broad category which contains three sub-groups – the service class, the self-employed/small employer, and the routine non-manual (the marginal middle class). It follows that, within this broad social group, different sub-classes would be expected to develop different perceptions of their socioeconomic situations, which may lead them to experience happiness differently.

The final section of this chapter systematically reviewed the empirical research on the role of socio-demographic factors in shaping individual happiness. It found that differences in self-reported happiness may be shaped by socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. social class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status). The empirical evidence suggests, firstly, that subjective class identification may better explain and predict self-reported happiness than objective social standing. Secondly, it established that happiness shifts across the life stage, that the relationship between age and happiness is U-shaped, and that this may be linked to shifting age role expectations. Thirdly, different gender roles shape how men and women develop and display their gender identities during social interactions, which leads to gender difference in emotional expressiveness. Women's role as family care-taker allows them to develop greater empathy and emotional expressivity than their male peers, and this leads them to report higher levels of happiness or unhappiness. We may expect that, correspondingly, women are likely to display a greater propensity to talk about their experiences of happiness in qualitative interviews than their male counterparts. The literature points, fourthly, to the impact of ethnicity on individual happiness in China. However, it is important to note that research findings show different results for ethnically diverse geographical locations and predominantly-Han areas. Fifthly, it was shown that marriage shapes individual happiness but that this relates to the quality of a particular marriage rather than marriage itself. It has been suggested that women and men understand and experience marriage differently, with women displaying greater emotional expressivity, with the result that they may have a higher expectation of emotional satisfaction than men. The sixth socio-demographic characteristic refers to the presence of children, which is considered to be a factor contributing to parents' individual happiness. Also, as Chinese society is deeply influenced by the Confucian doctrine of filiality, children's attitudes and participation in eldercare support may be particularly important to the happiness of the elderly in Chinese society. It is worth noting that due to the interrelation between getting married and having children in China, the positive effect of marriage on happiness may be partly mediated by the arrival of children. Lastly, it will be of value to explore how the overlapping of different socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. intersectionality) shapes individual experiences of happiness. While the quantitative data analysed in this thesis, drawing as it does on a large-scale survey, does not permit a nuanced understanding of the interactions of different identities in narrating and experiencing happiness, the qualitative

interviews I conducted provide insight into the complexity and richness of people's experiences of happiness. This is the key advantage of adopting a mixed methods research design for this study, and it is to this research design that we turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Methodology

China's burgeoning middle class has received increased interest from domestic and Western scholars in recent times. However, despite the growing literature exploring the characteristics and habitual patterns of the middle class in Chinese society, studies specifically and systematically drawing on its members' subjective experience of happiness are limited. This study aims to contribute a timely and holistic picture to the study of the Chinese middle class from a sociological perspective. Furthermore, the inclusion of personal reflections on the happiness and well-being of the middle class, a group which continues to grow rapidly alongside a fast-developing economy, will enhance existing research.

The principal research question driving this thesis is as follows: how do urban middle-class citizens in China report and narrate their sense of happiness? From this starting point I developed two main objectives. The first was to chart the trends over time in the self-reported happiness of the Chinese middle class. The second was to explore whether and how these trends differed in accordance with socio-demographic factors (i.e., class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status). My study employed a mixed methods research design, integrating survey analysis and qualitative semi-structured interviews. The source of data for the quantitative research was the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), which was published annually or biennial, allowing me to study the data over the course of several years.

I used it, firstly, to demonstrate recent trends in the self-reported happiness of the Chinese middle class, and secondly, to understand the relationship patterns between the level of happiness and socio-demographic attributes. The qualitative data I collected and analysed consists of 51 semi-structured interviews conducted in in Guangzhou in 2018. Whilst the quantitative findings set the broader context by 'describing' statistical patterns and relationships, the qualitative data analysis, delving into personal experiences, has the advantage of identifying and discussing possible explanations for the survey results at the time the interviews were conducted. Indeed, the two methods were used in conjunction with one another to inform the research.

3.1 Mixed methods research: Why? And how?

Mixed method research (MMR) may produce 'a superior product' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.17). Every method has its own inherent biases and limitations. Nonetheless, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the limitations of using either approach alone can be offset, and more robust and complete research findings can be achieved (Creswell and Clark, 2006; Greene, et al., 1989; Sieber, 1973). In the case of the research reported in this thesis, the use of the quantitative analysis of data sets based on large, nationally representative samples made it possible to discern general patterns in the Chinese middle class's happiness, which framed the research, whilst the qualitative research allowed me to understand people's perceptions and experience of happiness. By integrating quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interview analysis, I aimed to achieve a more comprehensive, as well as a deeper and more nuanced, understanding of self-reported happiness among the Chinese middle class.

Based on the principles of positivism (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.14), quantitative inquiry understands the social world from the standpoint of objectivity and has the potential to identify general patterns and correlates of happiness. Survey analysis can be helpful in enabling us to measure general patterns in a population. With well-designed survey questions, researchers can compare constructs like happiness between countries (for example, using national averages) and within countries (for example, breaking it down into socio-demographic attributes). However, one limitation of this sort of research is the problem of whether different people respond in the same way to the same question, and for this, qualitative analysis can be more illuminating. The question on happiness in the CGSS measures the levels of happiness people feel without providing explicit definitions of happiness. Thus, the survey findings tell us how many people feel 'happy' or 'not happy', but it is unclear how respondents understand those states of relative happiness. Although these data enable us to better understand any correlates that may give rise to increased happiness, as long as the core question of 'what is happiness?' is not addressed, we cannot get closer to understanding what lies at the heart of human happiness (Lu, 2001). Qualitative methods, in contrast, are able to provide further insight into what people mean when they complete

surveys and, in this case, what they mean when they report that they are 'happy' (or not). In this sense, a mixed research paradigm offers the possibility of exploring what the surveys do not and cannot tell us; it constitutes a human-centred research method that can capture the meanings and concepts of happiness as they are found in people's everyday experiences.

This study used MMR with the aim of enhancing the validity of its findings. There is more than one way to use different methods in a research design, and how the various methods are applied depends on the purpose of the research. Based on the systematic review of 57 MMR studies, Greene et al. (1989, p.259) identify five reasons for using a mixed-method research design. These are: 1) triangulation, which pursues convergence of the findings by combining a quantitative method and a qualitative method; 2) complementarity, which uses one method to elaborate, enhance, illustrate, and clarify the findings from another method; 3) development, which develops a research paradigm normally using one method through the findings from another method (this usually happens when defining the sampling or creating a measurement); 4) initiation, which aims to discover something fresh or contradictory from another method which can inspire or recast research questions; and 5) expansion, which aims to expand the breadth and depth of the research by using the most appropriate method for different research components. This conceptual framework helps us to evaluate the appropriateness of using mixed methods for a given study. Applying their framework to my research on the happiness of the Chinese urban middle class, it became evident that a mixed-methods design allowed greater insight into the results accruing from my research question. Drawing on Green et al. (1989), I outline below the rationale for designing the research as a mixed methods study.

Triangulation

Firstly, the use of qualitative interviews in addition to survey analysis will help me to elucidate what the quantitative analysis reveals and enable me to explore the question as to whether or not the findings converge. If the interview findings were found to be consistent with the happiness patterns found in the CGSS survey datasets, the credibility and robustness of the conclusions would be confirmed (Bryman, 2012; Lund, 2012; Pandey and Patnaik, 2014; Zohrabi, 2013). In the event that the survey data and interview data, despite both having been

rigorously collected and analysed, appeared to be inconsistent, reflection on the inconsistencies could generate new theoretical insights (Lund, 2012).

Complementarity and development

Secondly, I anticipated that conducting qualitative interviews would allow me to uncover and explore findings from the survey data analysis. In practice, my study adopted a two-stage design, in that I carried out a descriptive analysis based on the CGSS data from 2003 to 2015 prior to, and aimed at developing and informing, the collection and analysis of qualitative semi-structured interview data. The preliminary survey data analysis generated a number of specific statistical correlations between happiness and socio-demographic variables that did not concur with, or were not explained by, established theories. The interpretative approach underpinning qualitative data analysis allows a deeper understanding of a particular statistical relationship (complementarity). Due to the cross-sectional design of the CGSS, the survey data did not permit a nuanced understanding of the socio-demographic differences in happiness which it illuminated. In contrast, qualitative fieldwork, which involves a 'personal familiarity with a setting or a group' (Sieber, 1973, p.1342), helped me to identify how socio-demographic factors (sometimes in combination) translated into specific experiences that shaped the lives of those individuals studied.

As the work was completed sequentially, the qualitative interview schedule was also consciously guided by the secondary data analysis findings that needed to be further explored (development). Possible explanations for these patterns or correlations were then explored using a qualitative method that enabled interviewees to reflect on their own life experiences, and this made it possible to uncover the meaning they attributed to the survey questions.

Expansion and initiation

Thirdly, a limitation of the quantitative research was that the limited number of variables available in the survey data which were determinants of happiness could only partially unravel the subtlety of human happiness. Many of the factors influencing people's happiness are hard to capture and measure statistically due to human beings' complex psychological make-up. For example, a considerable number of studies (e.g. Grossman and Wood, 1993; Wood et al., 1989) suggest that men and women tend to have different levels of emotional

expressiveness, which explains why they experience and report happiness differently. However, while the CGSS survey design can capture and report levels of happiness, the survey questions will restrict how respondents can express their levels of happiness. It is unclear, for example, whether any gendered difference in emotional expressivity can be adequately captured in the survey questions (do the questions asked in the GCSS lend themselves to this?), and hence studying this through a qualitative approach provides an opportunity for participants to make sense of, and talk about, their experience of happiness, and for this to be explored (expansion and initiation).

The fourth reason for adopting mixed methods approach also relates to the capacity for expansion of the inquiry, in this case in order to understand the meaning attached to happiness. Although the CGSS does not define the term happiness in the survey questions, it actually refers to two kinds of happiness in the wording of the main questions, at two different time points (this is further unpacked in Chapter 5, Section 5.3). In 2008, it asked only about the presence or absence of the emotional state of happiness, i.e. 'feeling happy'. In contrast, in the other years included in this study, the questions require respondents to make a life-as-a-whole evaluation. As mentioned before, only a few studies on Chinese happiness (Lu and Shin, 1997; Lu, 1998; Lu, 2001) systematically look into the meaning of happiness using qualitative methods. Therefore, in addition to survey research, a complementary qualitative approach allowed me to uncover the components of happiness and thereby gain insight into what individuals themselves understand by the state of 'happiness' (expansion). According to their understanding of happiness, I found that different wordings used to measure happiness in the CGSS might lead to different responses. This could inform further study aimed at capturing the level of happiness using a survey approach, and might even prompt a change in the wording of questions used (initiation).

3.2 Sources of Quantitative Data

My key research question concerns how urban middle-class citizens in China evaluate and narrate their happiness. Quantitative survey data was used to investigate two research

objectives: first, to compare the trends in self-reported happiness of the Chinese middle class in the period from 2003 to 2015 (reflecting the availability of the survey data); and, second, to understand the relationships between the level of reported happiness and socio-demographic attributes which might be determinants of happiness. In line with these two research purposes, the survey data set selected was the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). All statistical analysis was performed using Stata MP/14 (64-bit Intel) for Mac. I carried out a descriptive analysis to show the trends in the distribution of self-reported happiness among the Chinese middle class as a whole as well as between the three subdivisions of middle class (i.e. service class, self-employed and small employer class, and marginal middle class, as discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2) between 2003 and 2015. I also illustrated the trends in happiness level by each socio-demographic variable included in the data, including the three subclasses of the middle class, age, gender, ethnicity, marital status and parenthood status (having children or not)[59].

3.2.1 Selection of Survey Data Sets

At the start of the research process, I compared all available nationwide surveys conducted in China that included questions on participants' happiness. The justifications for including or excluding these datasets in the research are explained below (Table 3.1).

[59] These six socio-demographic variables have been substantially researched in terms of their relationship to happiness, see Chapter 2 (Section 2.4) for how each socio-demographic characteristic explains individual differences in happiness.

Table 3.1 – A comparison of available social surveys

Name of the dataset	Accept/reject	Rationale for accept/reject
China Labour-force Dynamic Survey	Reject	This survey only has three available years: 2011, 2012 and 2014. These years cannot provide longer historical trends.
Chinese General Social Survey	Accept	This survey is appropriate for examining the trends and levels of self-reported happiness over time, as it is available for 9 of the 13 years (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2015). Nonetheless, the underlying processes affecting happiness by any explanatory variables are difficult to uncover with a cross-sectional study.
China Household Finance Survey	Reject	This survey only has two available years: 2011 and 2013, therefore too few data points.
Chinese Household Income Project	Reject	This survey only has four available years: 1988, 1995, 2002, and 2007. The last data was collected in 2007, which makes it too outdated for use in my study.
China Family Panel Studies	Reject	This survey starts only from 2010 and includes a four-year-data set. This means it could not provide data that allowed me to compare trends in happiness over a longer time period, although it could prove promising for future research.
Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity	Reject	This survey concentrates on people aged over 65.
China Health and Nutrition Survey	Reject	This survey is outdated, as it is available only for 1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004, and 2006.

Following this review of available datasets, the selected data set for analysis was the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). The CGSS, as a repeated cross-sectional survey, constitutes the 'digital chronicle' recording constant social changes and life quality and how they are connected in China from 2003. It is the earliest cross-sectional and nationally representative survey and is conducted by leading academic institutions[60] across mainland China and Hong

[60] Between 2003 and 2008, the CGSS project was jointly run by the National Survey Research Centre at Renmin University of China in collaboration with the School of Humanities and Social Science at Hong Kong University of

Kong. The current available datasets include 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2015, which provides the means to answer my first main research objective examining the trends and levels of happiness over a decade.

3.2.2 The sampling design of the CGSS

The CGSS survey data sets from 2003-2006 in 2008 and from 2010 onwards use different sampling frames[61]. The differences between them are detailed below.

2003-2006

Between 2003 and 2006, the CGSS refers to China's fifth census of 2000 and adopted a stratified multi-stage PPS ('proportionate to population size') design. It included 5,900 urban households and 4,100 rural households. The primary sampling units are county-level units (counties in rural areas, or city districts of cities in urban areas) selected from 22 provinces, 4 autonomous regions and 4 central municipalities.

Considering the regional and geo-administrative variations in China, the CGSS divides all regions into 5 geographical strata. One stratum is required to include at least 1,000 households (urban and rural separately) for being representative of the population. The first consists of urban districts of three municipalities[62]: Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. The second includes the urban districts of Chongqing and 26 provincial capital cities[63], excluding Lhasa. Note that the first and second strata only include urban households in the survey. The third,

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Science and Technology. From 2010 onwards, the CGSS data was collected by the National Survey Research Centre at Renmin University of China.

[61] These three different sampling designs are introduced on the CGSS website, see http://cgss.ruc.edu.cn/index.php?r=index/sample [Accessed in January 2017].

[62] Currently, there are 4 municipalities under the direct control of the central government: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. The reason for excluding Chongqing from this stratum was the inconsistency between Chonqing and the other three municipalities in many socioeconomic indicators, as stated by Bian and Li (2012) who initiated the survey.

[63] These 26 provincial capital cities are: 1) the east: Shenyang, Jinan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Fuzhou, and Guangzhou; 2) the middle: Harbin, Changchun, Shijiazhuang, Zhengzhou, Taiyuan, Hefei, Nanchang, Wuhan, Changsha, Haikou, and Nanning; and 3) the west: Hohhot, Urumchi, Yinchuan, Lanzhou, Xining, Kunming, Guiyang, Xi'an, Chengdu.

fourth, and fifth strata are made up of both city districts and counties in eastern[64], middle[65], and western[66] regions.

There were four stages of selecting sampling units. 1) a sum of 125 primary sampling units (PSU) were selected from the regions mentioned; 2) four second sampling units (SSU) consisting of townships, or city sub-districts were selected in each of these PSUs; 3) two third sampling units (TSU) including villagers' committees or neighbourhood committees were chosen in each selected SSU; 4) ten households were selected in each of these TSUs, and one member aged 18 or older from the selected households was screened as a potential survey respondent.

2008

The CGSS sampling frame was modified slightly after 2006 (due to the reconstruction taking place in rural and urban areas). The 2008 CGSS refers to the 2005 one percent national population survey data as the sampling frame, and cancels the second regional stratum – the provincial capital cities – when selecting primary sampling units. Hence, there are only four strata in 2008: the three municipalities (a single stratum) plus the east, middle, and west. The sample size in 2008 is only 6,000, since it serves as an experimental design.

2010 onwards

From 2010 onwards, the CGSS uses China's sixth census of 2009 as the sampling frame. It is still a stratified multi-stage PPS sampling design and the PSUs are still county-level units. In reference to a comprehensive ranking of 36 municipalities under the directed administration of the central government, provincial capital cities, and vice provincial cities by GDP, the total number of teachers (measuring *education level*), and FDI (foreign direct investment), the CGSS selects five cities as a self-representative stratum: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou,

[64] The eastern regions include a total of 611 city districts and counties in three municipalities and 6 provinces (incl. Liaoning, Shandong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian, and Guangdong), apart from the urban districts of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and of the six provincial capital cities.
[65] The middle regions include a total of 1,136 city districts and counties in 11 provinces (incl. Heilongjiang, Jilin, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Hainan, and Guangxi, apart from the urban districts of the 11 provincial capital cities.
[66] The west regions include a total of 835 city districts and counties in 10 provinces (incl. Inner Mongolia, Sinkiang, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, Guizhou, Shaanxi, Szechwan, and Chongqing), except urban district of the ten provincial capital cities.

Shenzhen, and Tianjin. Forty PSUs are selected in these Big-5 cities. It is worth mentioning that the respondents in this stratum are from urban districts, and thus, the final sampling units are urban households only. The other stratum consists of city districts and counties in the remaining cities. They are ranked by population density, urbanisation rate and GDP per capita, and then are classified into 50 strata. Within each stratum, two PSUs are selected. In each PSU, four SSUs based on community-level units are selected. Twenty-five households are selected in each SSU. As a result, a total sample of 2,000 households in the self-representative stratum and 10,000 households in the second stratum were collected.

3.2.3 The Outcome Variable from the CGSS

Although the CGSS was the most consistent and appropriate data set available, it presented challenges. Table 3.2 (below) shows how the outcome variables which ask respondents to rate their level of happiness are measured in each year's data set. From this it is evident that the questions indicating the outcome variable across each year are not identical. The wording for the happiness question has changed. One question asks about 'being happy (*xingfu*)' as a life-as-a-whole evaluation – 'On the whole, how do you feel about your life?' or 'On the whole, do you think you live a happy life?' (2003; 2005; 2006; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2015); the other asks about 'feeling happy (*kuaile*)', that is, whether or not the respondent experiences such positive emotions – 'On the whole, are you happy or not?' (2008).

Table 3.2 – The outcome variable from each available year's dataset

Year	How happiness is assessed (including response categories)	Component(s) of happiness being asked
2003-2006	On the whole, how do you feel about your life?[67] 1. Very unhappy 2. Unhappy 3. So-so 4. Happy 5. Very happy	Overall happiness (*xingfu*)
2008	On the whole, are you happy or not? 1. Very unhappy 2. Unhappy 3. So-so 4. Happy 5. Very happy	The affective component of happiness (*kuaile*)
2010	On the whole, do you think you live a happy life? 1. Very unhappy 2. Unhappy 3. Somewhere between unhappy and happy 4. Happy 5. Very happy	Overall happiness (*xingfu*)
2011-2015	On the whole, do you think you live a happy life? 1. Very unhappy 2. Unhappy 3. Neither happy nor unhappy 4. Happy 5. Very happy	Overall happiness (*xingfu*)

[67] The original Chinese version of the happiness questions in 2003, 2005, and 2006 are literally the same: '总体而言，您对自己所过的生活的感觉是怎么样的呢?'. 2003 and 2006 have an English version of the city questionnaire, but the translation made the happiness questions slightly different in each of these years. The English question in 2003 is: 'Generally speaking, how do you personally feel about your life?', and in 2006 is: 'On the whole, how do you feel about your life?'. Apparently, 2003 includes 'personally' while 2006 does not, which might have made respondents feel that the question in 2003 was asking about their happiness in personal terms, stressing the importance of personal achievement. Because respondents have filled in the questionnaire in their native language, I would think that the question in these two years (2003 and 2005) was consistent.

Studies which use the CGSS to explore topics associated with happiness hold different opinions on this wording issue. Liu et al. (2013) tend to assume a synonymy between '*kuaile*' and '*xingfu*', and thus they state that it is unnecessary to distinguish between these two terms. Wang and Zhou's (2018) study also notes the different happiness measure being adopted in 2006 (*xingfu*) and 2008 (*kuaile*). However, they conceptualise *kuaile* and *xingfu* as two sides of the same coin, whereby *xingfu* denotes the cognitive or evaluative measure and *kuaile* refers to the affective measure of happiness[68].

However, these two terms are not identical, and they may not represent different dimensions of how happiness is conceptualised. It has been suggested that *Xingfu* is corresponding to the Chinese word for happiness (Chen, 2019; Hsu, 2016; Wielander, 2018). As stated in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2), the modern usage of *xingfu* can be also understood as an all-embracing concept that has a dual component structure combining the experiences of '*le*' and '*fu*' (Chen, 2019, p.21). According to Chen (2019), *le* (or its modern expression '*kuaile*') means inner joy and requires only minimum external conditions, whereas *fu* is used to describe the condition of having achieved external (usually material) prosperity. In this way, *kuaile* can be operationalised as the affective component of *xingfu*. Colloquially, in China, *kuaile* denotes positive emotion. On the other hand, *xingfu* is associated with much more than just a good mood; it means one feels very good about one's life (Hsu et al., 2017). The meaning of *xingfu* is deeply embedded within the collectivist nature of Chinese culture; to experience *xingfu*, a person has to be content with his or her personal accomplishments as well as experience good feelings about his or her family ties and friendships (Hsu et al., 2017; Lu and Shin, 1997). Also, questions concerning *xingfu* ask about 'life' overall, while the *kuaile* question simply asks about 'state'. It thus seems that the concept of *xingfu* is used in the survey in line with Veenhoven's (1984;2012) conceptualisation of overall life satisfaction as a synonym for happiness.

Since the wording of happiness questions was not consistent across all available survey years (see Table 3.2, above), it would be reasonable to assume that at least part of the reason for

[68] Although Wang and Zhou (2018) actually compare *kuaile* and *xingfu* to the different components of subjective well-being, they appear to treat happiness and subjective well-being exactly the same, as they use these two concepts interchangeably.

changes in happiness ratings in 2008 is attributable to the different wording used between 2008 and other years. The differences between individual understandings of *kuaile* and *xingfu* will be explored in detail in Chapter 5.

The survey uses two quite different types of questions assessing *xingfu*. In 2003, 2005 and 2006, the survey asks respondents 'how do you feel about your life?' and offers response categories associated with feeling happy/unhappy. However, the questions from 2010 onwards directly ask if respondents 'live a happy life' with the same response categories. In this case, the interpretation of 'what constitutes a happy life' inevitably shapes their response selections. In contrast, from 2003 to 2006, the happiness questions do not introduce such preconceptions. It is important to consistently note these wording variations, since they may constitute part of the explanation for differences in reported happiness levels, especially where there was a noticeable increase/decrease after the happiness question wording changed. The employment of a qualitative method – specifically asking respondents how they felt these different questions might affect their responses – allowed me to explore the effect that a question wording change might have had on responses.

3.2.4 Measuring the urban Chinese middle class

Although the CGSS provides information for both urban and rural citizens, my study focuses on the urban population. I used Stata to exclude all rural residents according to their types of household registration – the '*hukou*'. I also removed people holding a *hukou* that categorised them as having 'military status' and those with 'other types of *hukou*'. This was because 'military status' does not allow us to know whether individuals previously came from urban or rural areas and the CGSS does not state what the 'other' types of *hukou* might be. For both these reasons it was better to exclude these cases.

In the CGSS, information on survey respondents' social class is based on their occupational class. The CGSS uses the international Standard Classification of Occupation 88 (ISCO88) to refer to a respondent's occupation title. Ganzeboom and Treiman (1996) illustrate how each ISCO88 is recoded into the ten Goldthorpe occupational class categories. The rationale for

adopting Goldthorpe's categories has been discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3). Goldthorpe's class typology was devised on the basis of the social context of England and Wales in the early 1970s and therefore needs adaptation to contemporary Chinese social structure. This thesis follows Li Chunling's (2010; 2011) Chinese version of the Goldthorpe's class classification. Referring back to Table 2.2, in Li's class model, the first four subclasses – capitalists, new middle class, old middle class, and marginal middle class – are considered to be China's general middle class by most Chinese sociologists. The term 'new middle class' and 'traditional or old middle class' are referred to by Olin Wright (1997, p.87). However, in contrast to twentieth-century America where, according to Mills (2002), the enlargement of the new middle class was accompanied by the decline and marginalisation of the old middle class, in China the old and new middle classes emerged concurrently in post-reform China (Zhu, 2017; Li and Qin, 2016). Therefore, in order to avoid ambiguity, I did not use the terms 'new middle class' and 'old middle class' but replaced them with the Goldthorpe class categories 'service class' and 'small employers/self-employed' respectively.

Moreover, I decided to not distinguish the private entrepreneurs/capitalists from the mass of professional and managerial employees but kept the private entrepreneurs/capitalists in the service class[69].The capitalists are considered to be the higher service class in Goldthorpe's schema; nevertheless, Li Chunling (2010; 2011) singles out the capitalists or private entrepreneurs as one exclusive category. ISCO88 code 1200 indicates the occupation as business owner of large enterprise with more than 25 employees. However, they can barely be found in nationwide surveys. For example, in the CGSS 2015 survey, only two respondents were reported to be 'capitalists'.

3.2.5 The other socio-demographic variables from the CGSS

Before carrying out a descriptive analysis, I removed any missing values for each variable. In addition, age, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status variables required redefining or recoding (see Appendices A). The respondents' age could not be directly derived through the

[69] I did not differentiate between higher service class and lower middle class but integrated them into one broad service class.

variable as it captured the year when the respondent was born. A calculation is needed in order to generate a new age variable. The other three variables (ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status) included too many response categories for my analysis and the number of observations under some of these categories was too small to allow meaningful analysis. I used data recoding to address this. The reason I chose not to single out 'cohabiting' as a new category is that there were too few observations of people in cohabitation and the principle behind the recoding process is to ensure a sizable number of observations in each category.

3.3 Sources of Qualitative Data

Semi-structured interviews were used for collecting qualitative data. I conducted 51 interviews with members of the middle class who were identified according to Li Chunling's (2010; 2011) social class scheme. Interviews were conducted between May and October 2018. Interviewees were asked about their understandings of happiness, attitudes towards the change in societal-level happiness over the past decade, subjective class identification, and awareness and perceptions of how their socio-demographic attributes may shape their experiences of happiness. In the following sections, I explain the design of the qualitative interview, sample recruitment strategy, sample description and method of analysis.

3.3.1 Interview Design

As set out earlier, the qualitative element of the research aimed to illuminate the survey data analysis in a number of ways in order to overcome the limitations of the survey data and expand and enhance the understanding of levels of reported happiness among the target population. Of the range of qualitative methods available to social scientists, interviewing – characterised by Burgess (1984: 84) as 'a conversation with a purpose' – is particularly useful for learning about others' stories. This is because it emphasises the importance of the subject's own capacity for meaning making (Seidman, 2010). There are three main styles of qualitative interview: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and narrative (unstructured) interviews. These forms of interview differ primarily in terms of the amount of

control and influence the researcher retains over the interviewing environment (which in any case is dynamic). A tightly structured interview is commonly applied in survey research. It is composed of a set of specific closed questions expecting standardised answers from each interviewee (Bryman, 2012). Unstructured interviews, at the other end of this continuum, may include only one question allowing the interviewee to talk freely and then the researcher may respond to the points that intrigue them. Seidman (2010:15) calls this a 'friendly conversation'.

The semi-structured approach lies between these two ends of the spectrum. This uses an interview guide, as does the structured interview, but the interviewees' responses direct the interview process. Even though the same questions are asked, and a similar wording used with each interviewee, the interview guide is not followed slavishly and there is significant leeway to allow the conversation to develop naturally in each case and to enable the exploration of specific responses in more detail (Bryman, 2012). I adopted this form of interviewing as I believed the semi-structured interview would allow my interviewees to respond in their own words and direct the conversation in the way they wished, whilst, at the same time, affording me the possibility of ensuring all the key issues arising from the quantitative part of the study were addressed.

The questions raised, but left partially unanswered, by the statistical analysis of the findings of the CGSS became the starting point for designing questions to include in my planned qualitative interviews, aimed at exploring the personal experiences of urban middle-class individuals[70].

3.3.2 Reflections on the process of recruitment

Before commencing interviewing in the field, I received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Manchester (UREC). Interviews were conducted in line with the UREC ethical framework and informed consent was sought prior to interview from

[70] See Appendices B for a detailed demonstration on how my interview questions were formulated from the preliminary survey findings.

all respondents. Research data was collected with due regard to the rights to anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, including the removal of all identifying information from participants' data before inclusion in the data set for analysis.

In line with the survey research, I selected my sample based on occupation. In order to avoid self-selection bias and achieve maximum heterogeneity of socio-demographic attributes in terms of class status, age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and the presence or not of children, I used several recruitment channels. These included: 1) contacts from friends and acquaintances where the individuals were not previously known to me; 2) recruitment using a poster inviting participation placed in eye-catching places (e.g. on the bulletin board near the entrance of residential buildings) in several middle-class residential communities; 3) snowballing by asking research participants who had completed interviews to recommend other potential interviewees, or to circulate the recruitment post via their WeChat; 4) proactive search for particular types of respondents e.g. by visiting a business incubator centre to search for small employer/self-employed respondents.

If I had no prior connection with a certain person/organisation, there was a relatively higher chance of being refused. The majority of my interviewees were found through the first and the third methods. I do not know how many people took the initiative to contact me after seeing my poster in their complex as I did not ask how those who contacted me had heard about the research. The poster might have seemed interesting to them initially, but a friend's recommendation made them feel more trustful. For the fourth method, most people working in the business incubator centre were relatively young (aged under 40). This centre is located on the 3rd and 4th floor of a hotel and each entrepreneur has a small office. I found that it was really hard to get total strangers to feel free to talk without a 'gatekeeper'. I chose those offices which had open doors; I knocked at the door, went in, and introduced myself as well as my research purpose. Some interrupted me, even before I had finished my sentence, and refused to take part, on the grounds that 'I/We have no interest or time'. During that day, only one person agreed to participate. She told me that during her Master's degree she had undertaken a research study that required her to conduct interviews, so empathy spurred her on to become an interviewee in my study. However, when I told her that I had to voice-record the whole conversation for later analysis, she shook her head and said, in a rather solemn

tone, that she would only feel comfortable being interviewed and answer me truthfully if I turned off the recorder. She said she was the legal representative for the enterprise, and so she could not reveal her real thoughts if I insisted on recording. Even after explaining to her that all identifying information would be removed during the transcription and how the data would be used, she remained distrustful. Thus, the interview was conducted but not recorded, with the interviewee committing to speak slowly to allow me to note every word down.

In order to explore further the relationship between ethnicity and happiness, I aimed to include a proportion of ethnic minorities in the respondent set. However, in Guangzhou, the Han Chinese make up 97.92% of the total population[71], which made it difficult to encounter non-Han Chinese. Accordingly, I contacted the Department of Ethnic and Religious Affairs of Guangzhou to see if they could help me get access to any communities or forums. A person (possibly a secretarial clerk) answered the phone and said he would pass my request to his superior. Ten days later, I contacted him again and asked what his superior thought about my research. He apologised and explained that his superior had been very busy. I thought this might be an excuse and that my request had actually been refused. Later, I recounted this experience to a participant who was a civil servant. She told me that it might be true that the receptionist's superior had been very busy, but that if I was introduced by a person who was familiar with someone working in that department, they would be more likely to help me out. This indicated the importance of 'knowing somebody' who was familiar with the gatekeeper and could serve as a bridge. I used this technique when I planned to advertise my research in several middle-class complexes; three or four relatives who lived there were willing to introduce my research to the people working in their neighbourhood committee, who then acted as gatekeepers.

Reflecting on my own positionality in relation to respondents, I might be considered an 'insider' since I come from a typical middle-class family in Guangzhou and my research is on the happiness of the middle class. However, the issue of positionality relating to the concept of insider/outsider remained open and could shift depending on the specific context or

[71] This figure is taken from 1 % National Population Census of the People's Republic of China which was conducted in 2015. (See: http://stats.gd.gov.cn/tjgb/content/post_1430125.html [Accessed in December 2020])

moment. Reflecting back on the research experience, I found that a few middle-aged male participants who were in managerial positions were sometimes able to control the focus of the interview. There was a marked difference between the extent of the information they offered about the changes in happiness at the societal level, and the much-reduced information they divulged about their private lives and questions related to marriage. Frequent short pauses and negative facial expressions such as frowning indicated that they had become uncomfortable, and were being cautious about my 'intrusion' into the private aspects of their lives. One female interviewee told me that most men tended not to talk about their families, or anything associated with the private sphere; a man who talked about his personal relationships and emotional feelings in public might be considered to lack masculinity and so be dismissed by other men. This view was confirmed by some male interviewees. When I asked what their same-sex relatives or friends usually said about happiness, many male interviewees said they did not discuss such issues with colleagues or friends, and their conversations normally focused on material matters, career development and social connections.

Most interviews took place in cafés and restaurants. In China, who foots the bill for a meal is a fundamental aspect of the etiquette concerning the establishment and maintenance of social connections (*guanxi*). Given that respondents had given their time to help me with my research, I anticipated that I would pay the bill in the café or restaurant as a courtesy. However, few respondents allowed me to do this, insisting that this was their privilege because I was a student and had no sources of income. This reflected the fact that socioeconomic status played an important role in social behaviours. They perceived themselves to be in a higher social-economic position than me. Many of them were total strangers to me, and it was likely that we would not meet again after our interview. A drink was cheap, but a meal for two costs more than a hundred *yuan*[72]. I felt very emotionally indebted to them. In a café we normally went to the counter to order and pay before our drinks were served and we started the interview, but in a restaurant we paid after finishing the meal and interview. When the payment was made before a meal, it made me feel less

[72] *Renminbi* is the official currency of China and its basic unit is *yuan*. According to the exchange rate in 2020, one GBP is worth nearly nine Chinese *yuan*.

powerful in managing our researcher-participant relationship; at any rate, it made me reluctant to 'push' them to elaborate on something if they appeared reluctant to do so.

3.3.3 Sample Description

Given my research design – which required the recruitment of interviewees across my nuanced class-based sample – I needed to identify a large and established industrialised environment as the field site for the research. Guangzhou, which is considered a Top-3 city in China, fitted this criterion. I conducted 51 semi-structured interviews between 22 May and 1 November 2018 in Guangzhou. It is critically important to note that the selection of Guangzhou for the qualitative research does not enable any claims to be made to support generalisability of the findings. Four pilot interviews were conducted prior to the main study in order to test the validity and feasibility of the questions in the interview guide. I selected a sample of middle-class participants based on their occupation, and then assigned them to the three pre-determined sub-categories of middle class – service class, small employer/self-employed, and routine non-manual worker – to which they belonged. Since I intended to explore how happiness is individual-specific within the middle class, I asked each subject for a brief socio-demographic background, including their age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status, at the beginning of each interview session. The demographic characteristics of all interviewees are detailed in Table 3.3 below. Throughout this thesis, interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms[73] in order to ensure anonymity. Table 3.4, in addition, shows the proportion of participants falling into each category of attributes.

[73] I used pseudonyms that reflected research participants' identities. Specifically, for participants who had received education in the West/showed interest in Western cultures/had to communicate in English in the workplace (e.g. they worked with foreign people who could not speak Chinese, they were English teachers, etc.)/had an English name and prefer others to call them by that, I used English names. For participants with a higher social status (e.g. government officials, senior managers, etc.), or who were usually referred to by others as 'surname + job title' rather than by their names, I allocated Chinese surnames to them. For the rest of the participants, I used Chinese names.

Table 3.3 – Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees, Guangzhou, 2018

Name	Class category	Age group	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital status	Children
Annie	Service class	40-59	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Audrey	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Female	Han	Never married	N/A[74]
Boyong	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Byron	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Carl	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Cathy	Routine non-manual	18-39	Female	Han	Never married	N/A
Daxing	Self-employed & small employer	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Diane	Service class	18-39	Female	Han	Never married	N/A
Evelyn	Routine non-manual	18-39	Female	Han	Married	No
Fang	Routine non-manual	40-59	Female	Han	Widowed	Yes
Hao	Service class	40-59	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Haoran	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Hongmei	Service class	40-59	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Huang	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Jiayi	Routine non-manual	18-39	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Jing	Service class	40-59	Female	Han	Married	Yes
John	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Jun	Self-employed & small employer	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Kathleen	Service class	40-59	Female	Han	Divorced	Yes
Kevin	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Lacey	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Lei	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Leo	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Lily	Routine non-manual	18-39	Female	Han	Never married	N/A
Liu	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Meimei	Routine non-manual	18-39	Female	Han	Married	Yes

[74] The question relating to the presence of children was asked only of married interviewees; it was not appropriate for never-married participants.

Mengting	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Miles	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Nana	Routine non-manual	18-39	Female	Non-Han	Married	Yes
Nanhua	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Ningning	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Female	Han	Never married	N/A
Qingping	Service class	60+	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Qingyun	Service class	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Rose	Service class	60+	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Shufen	Service class	40-59	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Spencer	Self-employed & small employer	18-39	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Weiguo	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Will	Routine non-manual	18-39	Male	Han	Married	No
Xiangdong	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	No
Xiaofei	Routine non-manual	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Xiaoyu	Routine non-manual	18-39	Male	Non-Han	Married	Yes
Xiulan	Service class	60+	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Yang	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Yayun	Routine non-manual	40-59	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Yi	Routine non-manual	18-39	Male	Han	Never married	N/A
Ying	Service class	18-39	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Yinghua	Service class	18-39	Female	Han	Married	Yes
Yuanchao	Service class	60+	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Yun	Service class	60+	Female	Han	Widowed	Yes
Zhiqiang	Service class	40-59	Male	Han	Married	Yes
Zhongwei	Service class	60+	Male	Han	Married	Yes

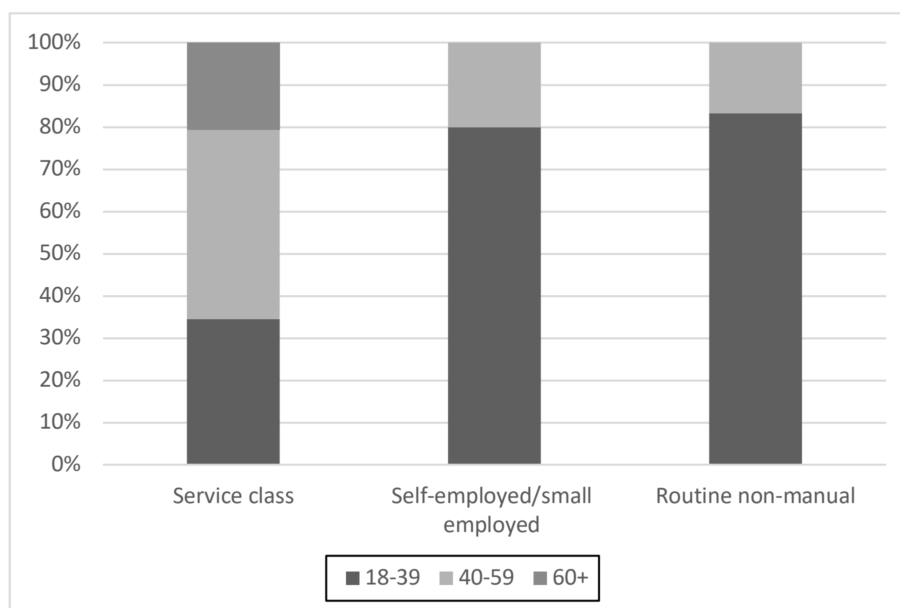
Table 3.4 – Summary statistics for demographic attributes, Guangzhou, 2018

Demographic attributes	N	Percentage
Sub-class of the middle class		
Service class	29	57
Self-employed/small employer	10	20
Routine non-manual	12	23
Age group		
Young (1-39)	28	55
Middle-aged (40-59)	17	33
Elderly (60-95)	6	12
Gender		
Female	23	45
Male	28	55
Ethnicity		
Han	49	96
Non-Han	2	4
Marital status		
Divorced	1	2
Widowed	2	4
Married	35	69
Never married	13	25
Parenthood status/Whether or not they have children (married interviewees only)		
No child	3	8
Have child	35	92

As shown in Table 3.4, of those interviewed, 29 were service class (57%), ten were self-employed/small employers (20%), and 12 were routine non-manual workers (23%). This table will be useful when we start to look at the qualitative findings.

In the data in Table 3.4, the following graphics show how the demographic variables of interest are split across the 3 sub-classes.

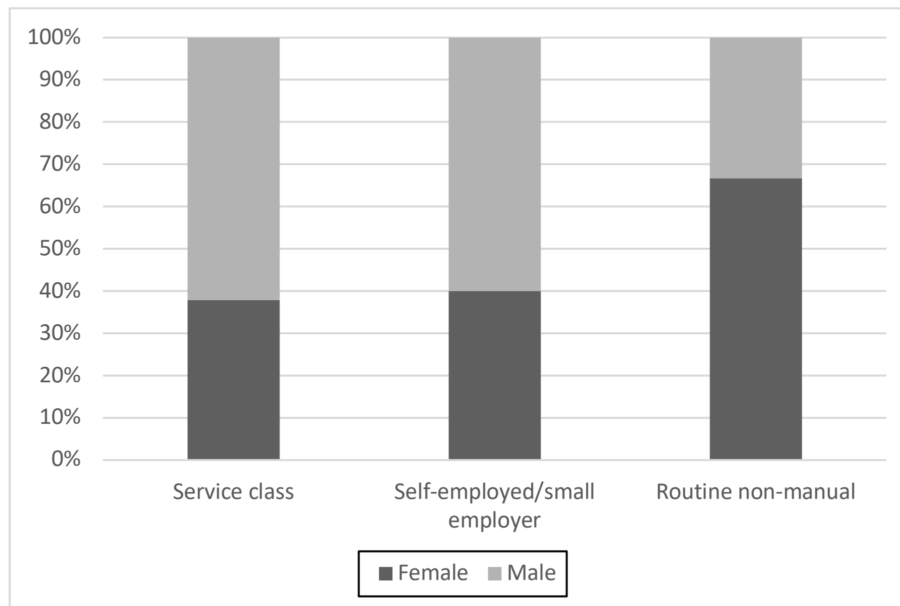
Figure 3.1- Age by Class Status



When the respondents' age groups are categorised by class status, it is clear (Fig 3.1) that the self-employed/small employers and the marginal middle class seemed to have more youthful composition than the service class (Figure 3.1). 80% of the self-employed/small employed are aged 18-39 and 82% of the routine non-manual groups are in this category, with the remainder being 40-59 (none in the 60+ age group). In the service class category, the age split is 34% (18-39), 46% (40-59) and 20% 60+.

Moving onto the gender breakdown, of the total number of respondents, 28 were male (55%), and 23 were female (45%). Figure 3.2 below shows the gender distribution within each class status. There were more women than men in the routine non-manual class of my sample, compared with the other two classes.

Figure 3.2 - Gender by Class Status



From Table 3.4, it is evident that only two interviewees were non-Han Chinese (4%): one was from Miao, and the other belonged to the Tujia ethnic group. This profile reflects the proportion of ethnic minorities in Guangzhou, which is 97.92% of the overall population, as mentioned previously.

Regarding marital status[75], as presented in Table 3.4, 35 were married (69%), 13 had never married (25%), two were widowed (4%), and one was divorced (2%). In China, due to the ambiguous birth policy which is somewhat paradoxical in practice[76], it is rather rare that an unmarried woman is willing to 'take the risk' of giving birth to and raising an illegitimate child. All never-married participants were therefore not taken account in the descriptive statistic

[75] I did not include figures to show interviewees' marital status or parenthood status against sub-class category, as I did for age and gender. As I mentioned earlier, I only asked married interviewees to share their experiences of marital happiness and/or how the presence of children affected their individual happiness. I did not have any unmarried participants who had children, and those married interviewees who were childless were just too young.

[76] Article 25 of the Marriage Law of the PRC states that children born outside of marriage enjoy the same rights as those born within marriage, and hence harm and discrimination toward them contravenes the law. (See http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1384064.htm [Accessed in November 2018]) However, unwed mothers have to present a marriage certificate in order to get a *hukou* for the children. If she fails to do so, she will be subject to a penalty. (See https://www.sixthtone.com/news/946/single-mothers-forced-pay-fines-giving-birth [Accessed in November 2018]) Without a *hukou*, a mother may not be able to register her child register for school.

for children. Leaving out the 13 who had never married, three respondents had no children (8%), and 35 had at least one child (66%).

In addition to age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status, I also collected information regarding participants' education, personal income and household income in the previous year, ownership status of current housing, number of houses/flats they owned, and whether they were urban or rural residents. These status-related characteristics may have had some impact on their perceptions of class identities. The distribution of participants in terms of their *hukou*, educational attainment, income, and house ownership is demonstrated in Table 3.5 below.

Table 3.5 – Summary Statistics for status-related attributes, Guangzhou, 2018

Demographic attributes	N	Percentage
***Hukou* status**		
Rural *hukou*	8	16
Urban *hukou*	43	84
Education		
Middle school	2	4
High school	1	2
Vocational high school	1	2
Specialised college	10	20
University	26	51
Master's degree	11	21
Annual personal income in 2017		
38,000 - 76,000 yuan	14	27
76,000 - 19,0000 yuan	18	36
Higher than 19,0000 yuan	19	37
Annual household income in 2017		
68,000 - 136,000 yuan	7	20
136,000 - 340,000 yuan	15	43
Higher than 340,000 yuan	13	37
Ownership status of current housing		
Living with friends or relatives	3	6
Rented house/flat	7	14
Owned House/flat	41	80
Number of Houses owned		
One house	16	39
Two houses	21	51
Three houses	1	2
Four houses	1	2
Five houses	2	6

It is worth noting that directly asking about income may be either too sensitive, or the participant might have difficulty in recalling the figure accurately. For this reason, I aimed to group responses into bands. Li and Zhang (2008) define and measure the income range of the Chinese middle class by taking the average annual income of urban residents as the reference point. They then calculate 'high income' as being 250% of that figure while those who earn half or less of the average are in the low income group. They define lower middle income as between the upper limit of lower income and the average, and higher middle income as falling between the average to 250% of that. Since 'hiding one's wealth' is a widespread virtue in Chinese culture and/or the fact that people may have amounts of undeclared 'grey income', the data on income level captured by the questionnaire is likely to be well below people's real income. In accordance with past empirical experience, Li and Zhang (2008) estimate people's actual income is roughly 1.5 times higher than the figure respondents reported in the survey. Therefore, they multiplied the average income by 1.5, which is the adjusted income used for further analysis.

The latest Statistical Yearbook of Guangzhou (2017) indicates that the average annual personal income in 2016 was 50,941 *yuan*[77]. In line with Li and Zhang (2008), I initially multiplied this number by 1.5, which means the actual income should be 76,412 *yuan* after accounting for the effects of omission and underestimation. Then I calculated the range of each income stratum:

1) low income – below 38,000 *yuan*;
2) lower middle income – between 38,000 and 76,000;
3) higher middle income – between 76,000 and 190,000;
4) high income – more than 190,000[78].

[77] Section 8.1 – Per Capita Annual Disposable Income and Expenditure for Consumption of Urban and Rural Residents (See http://210.72.4.52/gzStat1/chaxun/njsj.jsp [Assessed in November 2018])

[78] The original figures here are 38,206, 76,412, 191,030. I rounded them up to the nearest thousand, which I thought might make it easier for the participants to work with. The same rule was applied to household income.

It is important to note that the *household* income needs to be multiplied by the number of employed persons. In Guangzhou, on average there were 1.79 persons per household employed in 2016[79]. Hence, household income could be also divided into 4 strata:

1) low income – below 68,000 *yuan*;
2) lower middle income – between 68,000 and 136,000;
3) higher middle income – between 136,000 and 340,000;
4) high income – more than 340,000.

Because my study mainly focuses on the urban population, in the survey study, I left out the rural population. The only efficient way to do this is to use their types of household registration – the *hukou* – to find out whether survey respondents held an urban or rural residency status. However, this would omit those who had a rural *hukou* but are living and working/studying in the city. In my qualitative interviews, as might be expected, eight interviewees (as shown in Table 3.5) who were rural *hukou* holders were currently living in the city.

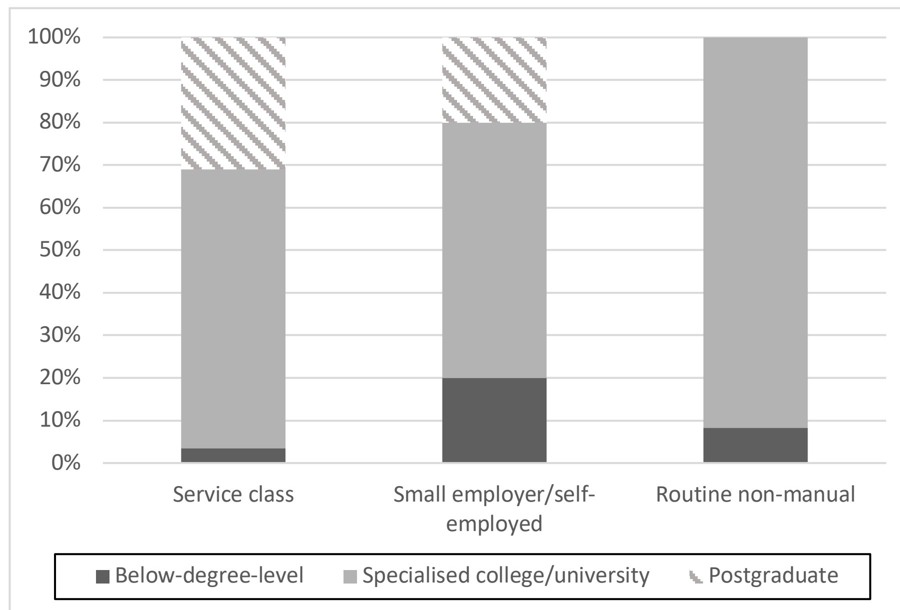
It seems that the overwhelming majority of Chinese middle-class interviewees had completed higher education. Ten of them had gone to a specialised college[80](20%), 26 had achieved a Bachelor's degree (51%), and 11 had a postgraduate degree (21%). In contrast, just two interviewees had finished their education at high school or equivalent level (4%), and two had completed middle school (4%). The distribution of the education of participants by their sub-class status is shown in Figure 3.3. For ease of illustration, I incorporated 'middle school', 'high school' and 'vocational high school' into 'below-degree-level', and I also grouped together 'specialised college' and 'university' into one category. Regarding those who were employed, none of the skilled non-manual participants had taken up postgraduate-level studies. It

[79] Section 8.3 – Basic Conditions of Urban Household (See http://210.72.4.52/gzStat1/chaxun/njsj.jsp [Assessed in November 2018])

[80] In China, a college is a different system from a university. The former is considered to be at a lower educational level than the latter. A university degree requires at least 4 years of study (in a few cases – for example, medicine – it normally takes five years to complete the degree), while a college only provides three-year technical courses. Nonetheless, a college student can upgrade his/her diploma certificate to a bachelor's degree through self-taught study.

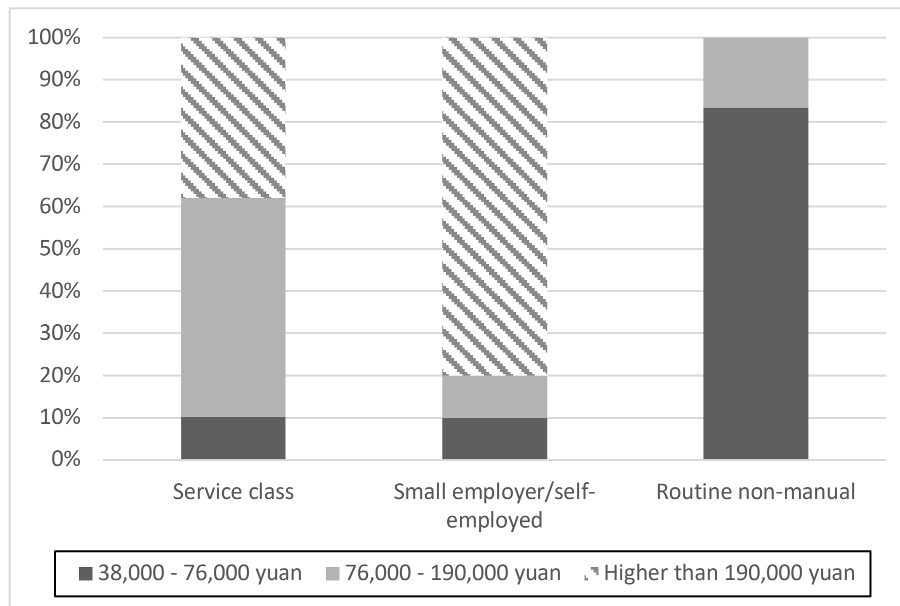
appears that marginal middle-class people tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than the service class.

Figure 3.3 – Education by Class Status



Of my interviewees, 19 earned a high income last year (37%), 18 had an upper-middle income (35%), and 14 fitted into the lower-middle income group (28%). Of those who had started families, the incomes of their spouses/partners had to be included when calculating the household income. Thirteen of them lived in a high income household (37%), 15 had a higher-middle household income (43%), and seven were below the average (20%) in the past year. I visualised the spread of personal income for each sub-class of the middle class in Figure 3.4. The marginal middle class appears to have a lower income than those in the other groups.

Figure 3.4 – Annual Personal income by Class Status



Most people owned their houses/flats (80%). Seven interviewees rented houses/flats (14%) and three were currently living with friends or relatives (6%). Of the property owners, 16 had one property (39%), 21 had two properties (51%), one had three properties (3%), one had four properties (2%), and two had five properties (5%).

The honesty of respondents in answering interview questions is vital to the achievement of validity in data collection but cannot always be guaranteed. In this research, one participant (Xiangdong, male, middle-aged) appears to have not disclosed his full marital status on purpose. A very good friend of his had made me aware that Xiangdong had divorced at least once. When he completed the socio-demographic form prior to our interview, he stated that he was 'married', but during the interview he barely mentioned his wife. When I came to the questions relating to happiness and marriage, he said he was very satisfied with his marriage and he had a good wife. Yet according to the person who knew him, he was separated (or even officially divorced) from his second wife at the time of interview. In possession of this counter-factual information, during the interview I prompted him to talk more about his marriage, asking, for example, 'Although you have experienced a happy marital life, do you know anyone who is divorced? Did the dissolution of the marriage affect their happiness?' He pondered the question for a while and then answered that his divorced friends did not seem as happy as he was, but that their happiness might be 'recovered' if they found the right

partner later in life. According to all his 'performing-to-be' answers, I still have to classify Participant 038 as 'married', although information I received from a third party contradicted this. It is possible that the interviewee did not reveal his full marital history because he thought that being married was a precondition of being a happy person, and he was trying hard to be a happy person. This would confirm the relationship between marriage and happiness.

3.3.4 Data analysis

After each interview I transcribed the conversation word-for-word in Chinese since this was the language in which the interviews were conducted and the common native language both of myself and the study participants. The retention of the original language of the data for as long as possible is advised as the best means of avoiding potential mistranslations and minimising the subtle difference in meaning caused by translation (van Nes et al., 2010). Thus, in this research, there were two key moments of translation. First, the instruments (e.g. ethical acknowledgement, information participant sheet, and interview guiding questions) were translated from English into Chinese language prior to data collection. Second, at the stage of writing, the findings, especially the quotes from the interviews with respondents, were translated into English. Simply put, the qualitative data were collected in Chinese and analysed in Chinese but reported in this thesis in English.

After transcribing all recorded interviews, I imported the transcribed texts into NVivo 12.0 for Mac to carry out a meaningful thematic analysis. The findings were coded into five themes: 'socio-demographic differences in happiness', 'the meaning of happiness', 'reflection on the wording from CGSS', 'subjective class identification', and 'views on 10-year societal-level happiness'. From the very beginning, I created these five themes – the 'tree nodes' reflecting the research concerns as nodes without coding. Then, I devised sub-themes – the 'free nodes' under each theme through 'reading' the data. I used two ways of reading the data: literal and interpretive. Literal reading is concerned with collecting a version of 'what is there' (Manson, 2002, p.149). Hence the aim of these literal codes is to highlight and pick up participants' answers to each theme, for example, 'comments from participants on the CGSS happiness

questions', 'marital happiness', 'views on the happiness trend line', and 'differences between *kuaile* and *xingfu*'. However, according to Manson (*ibid*.), a purely literal reading is not possible, as 'how we see it' is shaping 'what we see'. Accordingly, at this stage, I placed more emphasis on how I made sense of their words and language. I moved the literal account of codes to more interpretive and analytic concepts, which included, for example, 'quality of marriage matters', 'collective identities', 'age role expectation', and 'gender expressiveness'. These are clearly different nodes to the descriptive ones. The majority of these interpretive nodes are at a lower level, that is, refining and categorising the descriptive nodes.

As a result, I obtained 217 free nodes, which were hierarchically structured into three or four levels beneath the five pre-assigned, thematic nodes. The coding procedure is essentially to connect free nodes to each other in a logical sense. For example, 'views on the happiness trend line' is a pre-assigned thematic node and has two sub-categories, including 'Becoming increasingly happy' and 'Impact of hosting the Olympics'. 'Olympics' is made up of four sub-nodes: 'no influence', 'collective identities, 'positive emotions', and 'benefit from the legacy'. Under 'no influence', there are three categories of reason explaining why respondents thought the Olympics had not brought individual happiness: 'away from the host city', 'individualistic', and 'cost concerns'.

In order to ensure the validity of the findings, I used respondent validation to test the validity of 'outliers' – the serendipitous comments that are strikingly different from others' accounts. For example, on the question of whether or not the Olympics helped to promote national happiness, a male, middle-aged interviewee disagreed with the assumption that the Olympics made people happier, referencing the costs and poor return on holding a mega-event in a developing country. He claimed that if any of my previous interviewees told me of the great happiness they felt at the time of 2008, they were probably lying. In order to validate his arguments on the topic of the Olympics, in subsequent interviews I attempted to gain other interviewees' views on this finding.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework of my research study. I used mixed methods – integrating quantitative and qualitative research to gain a deeper and broader understanding of how and why urban middle-class citizens in China experience and narrate their happiness. Five rationales for using a mixed-method design were identified, including triangulation, complementarity, development, expansion, and initiation. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches can offset the limitations of using either approach alone while providing more robust, comprehensive and insightful research findings. The mixed methods design in this research involved two main stages of research. Firstly, I used an authoritative nationally representative survey dataset – CGSS 2003-2015 (for available years) – to carry out secondary data analysis using descriptive statistics. I demonstrated the trends of the Chinese middle class's average level of happiness, as well as their responses in relation to socioeconomic characteristics (i.e. sub-classes, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status) in the time period for which data were available. Secondly, issues uncovered in the descriptive analysis as well as in the survey questions design informed my qualitative research. The interviewing guide for my semi-structured qualitative interviews included people's understandings of happiness, attitudes towards the change in societal-level happiness over the past decade, subjective class identification, and awareness and perceptions of how their socio-demographic attributes might shape their experience of happiness. The personal experiences of 51 middle class individuals allowed closer insights into how happiness was socially constructed. In my empirical chapters (Chapter 4 to Chapter 7), I report the findings drawn from the analysis based on this mixed methods approach. We should note that the interview data cited in the succeeding empirical chapters were collected and analysed to capture and illustrate the experiences of the middle class in Guangzhou, and thus the findings cannot and should not be generalised to other geographical locations in China, nor do we claim that these are fully representative of the urban middle class in Guangzhou.

Chapter 4 Examining the Happiness Trend of the Middle Class in China

This chapter follows a mixed-methods approach to empirically explore the self-reported happiness of the Chinese middle class. It draws on findings from my qualitative semi-structured interviews together, combined with secondary data analysis using all available CGSS surveys between 2003 and 2015. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section uses quantitative data to look at trends of reported happiness for the Chinese middle class over a twelve-year period. The second section uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews to provide insights into how and why societal-level happiness has shifted over the past decade. This approach, combined with the survey data analysis, will help illuminate findings on how happiness has changed in the past decade among the middle class, providing a richer result than using a single method approach would achieve. The third section returns to the quantitative survey data to provide a descriptive analysis of the socio-demographic differences in the Chinese middle class's happiness.

4.1 The shapes of happiness amongst Chinese urban middle-class citizens

In order to assess trends in the happiness of the Chinese middle class, I start by comparing their happiness with that of the working class between 2003 and 2015[81] (Figure 4.1). This period reflects data availability as discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2). The time series has nine data points, with four missing points. Note that the term middle class in this analysis denotes a broad category, combining the three sub-classes (the service class, the self-employed/small employers, and the marginal middle class) into a single group (for more on this, see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2). In Figure 4.1, individual levels of happiness were reflected in happiness scores. The happiness levels of both the middle class and the working class showed a fluctuating upward trend across these 12 years, although the mean scores for the middle class in each year were higher than for the working class (Table 4.1). Due to the missing

[81] Note that the CGSS sample used for my analysis drew only from the urban population.

data points in 2004, 2007, 2009 and 2014, we cannot know whether happiness increased, declined or remained stable in those years. The analysis here assumes that the missing years followed the same trajectory as the previous years (as indicated on the graphs used throughout this chapter).

Table 4.1 – Mean Score of Happiness by Social Class (2003-2015)

Year	*The Middle Class*	*N*	*sd.*	*The Working Class*	*N*	*sd.*
2003	3.42	2,567	0.76	3.17	2,430	0.80
2005	3.54	3,154	0.76	3.39	2,792	0.76
2006	3.56	3,730	0.73	3.40	2,697	0.72
2008	3.89	2,276	0.90	3.66	1,813	1.01
2010	3.91	2,918	0.76	3.75	1,520	0.86
2011	3.95	1,286	0.79	3.86	793	0.81
2012	3.83	2,880	0.79	3.75	1,619	0.83
2013	3.79	2,879	0.80	3.65	1,560	0.83
2015	3.91	2,404	0.75	3.72	1,336	0.88

Note:

1. The five nominal categories in the happiness variable have been transformed into numerical categories: 1 = 'Very unhappy', 2 = 'Unhappy', 3 = 'So-so'/'somewhere between unhappy and happy'/ 'hard to say happy or unhappy' 4 = 'Happy', 5 = 'Very Happy'.

Tables 4.1, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.9 and 4.11 include standard deviations. The standard deviation of a distribution is a measure that reflects the spread (or dispersion) of the sample around the mean. In this case it shows the spread of the happiness scores of all respondents around the mean of all the happiness scores. A higher standard deviation indicates more variation in the sample and in almost all cases in 2008 the standard deviation was the highest recorded in all the years included in the analysis (there were two exceptions in Table 4.10 and 4.11). In this thesis the descriptive statistics covered in this Chapter, and included in the tables, serve to provide information about a cross-sectional analysis of the population drawn from the CGSS (for each year included), a large scale nationally representative survey. The confidence in the mean value from the sample drawn would merit further consideration if we were to continue to undertake statistical modelling; however, that is not the purpose of including these data. Standard error is a commonly used measurement of sampling error, which reflects the

variation between the means of different samples (that is we can compare variation between different samples). The standard error as the 'precision of the sample mean' depends on both the standard deviation and the sample size, and the calculation of the standard error is computed by dividing the standard deviation by the square root of the sample size (Altman and Bland, 2005). A larger sample size tends to result in a smaller sampling error (leading to better estimates for the population, when conducting inferential statistics). There are noticeably small sample sizes in certain sub-groups of the demographic variables (e.g. the elderly, the non-Han, the S/D/W, and the childless), and it is therefore imperative that no generalisations are drawn from these patterns and inferred to the general population. As a qualitative-driven mix methods design, the quantitative research findings of this study are included to provide context and help develop meaningful questions for qualitative interviews. Therefore, all statistical tables and figures reflect this approach, and confidence intervals (which would be computed by adding and subtracting twice the standard error from the sample mean) have not been calculated for this reason. All quantitative data included in this thesis adds context to the research questions posed.

Figure 4.1 – Trends in happiness by class

The trends for both the middle and the working class have similar peaks and troughs, and show mean happiness increasing from 2003 to 2011, then falling for two years before rising again in 2015 to match the 2011 levels (Figure 4.1). There was a marked rise in happiness in 2008 (compared to 2006 when the previous data was available); this increase is certainly the highest in the time series data that are available, compared to previous years. Reflecting on why this might be so, one possible explanation could be that China was the host country (and Beijing the host city) of the 2008 Olympic Games. This was considered an important turning point, when China started to make a difference in the world (Brownell, 2011). One might speculate that hosting the Olympic Games carried a 'feel-good' factor', giving China an opportunity to showcase the country and its citizens through the platform of the Olympic Games. One might think that the Olympics would also be beneficial to the host city by leaving behind not only tangible impacts (e.g. job creation) but also intangible effects (e.g. community engagement) (Dolan et al., 2019). Was the rise in reported happiness affected (even partly) by the celebration of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which promoted social cohesion and, in doing so, boosted citizens' psychological state? I explored this in the interviews, and the findings will be discussed in Section 4.2.2 of this chapter.

Another important fact in explaining this increase in happiness in 2008 is that the wording of the happiness question in the 2008 questionnaire is different from that of other years. In 2008, it asked people 'are you happy or not?', using the word '*kuaile*'; this might be interpreted by respondents as asking them whether they felt the kind of positive emotion denoted by that term. In other years (both prior to and after 2008, please see Chapter 3.3.2 for further discussion), the term used in the survey question on happiness was '*xingfu*', which asks for an overall evaluation of one's life, with reference to the quality of one's relationships with family and friends, mood, health and material comfort (Hsu et al., 2017). That one experiences emotional gratification in the moment ('*kuaile*') does not necessarily mean that one appraises one's life-as-a-whole positively ('*xingfu*'). Could the change of wording in the 2008 questionnaire account for the marked increase in the middle class's happiness? My qualitative interviews probed individuals' understanding of how they teased out the

ambiguities and nuances in the concepts of *kuaile* and *xingfu*. These findings are examined in detail in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4).

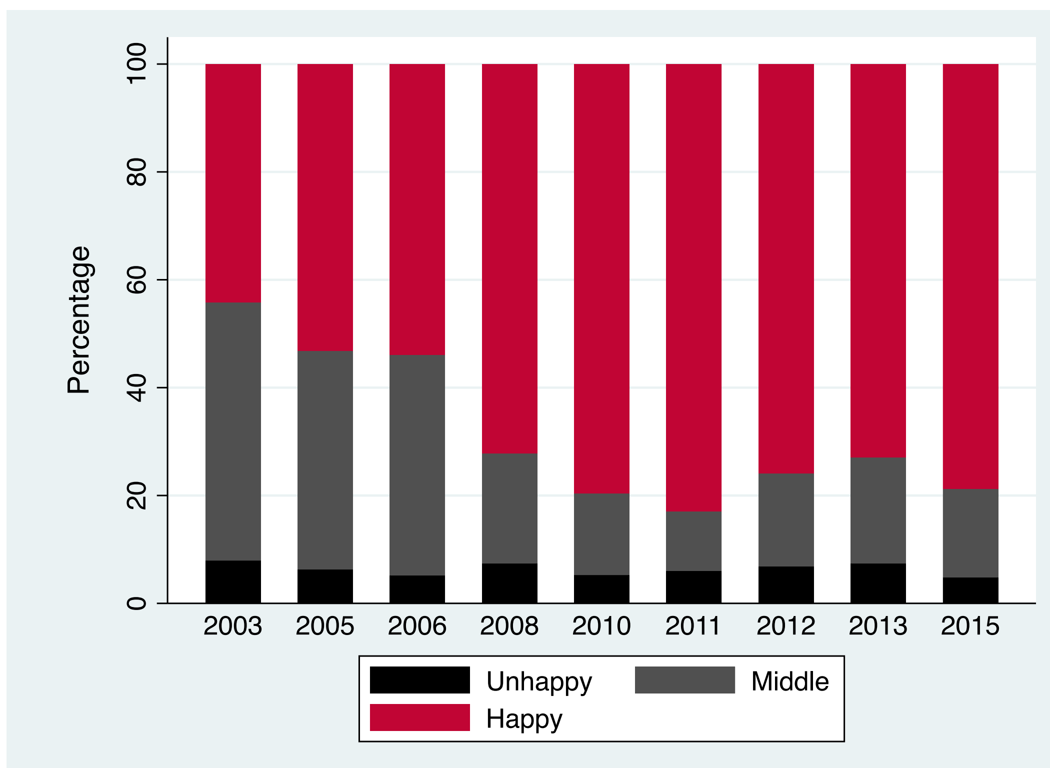
The rising trend in happiness, in relation to both classes, is further confirmed in Figure 4.2 which shows the distribution of different degrees of happiness between 2003 and 2015. For the purpose of this investigation, and to align with my research questions, I combined the responses 'happy' and 'very happy' into one – 'happy', and both 'unhappy' and 'very unhappy' into one – 'unhappy'. In this case, the answer categories have been recoded to 3, including 'happy', 'middle', and 'unhappy'. As shown in Figure 4.2, the data show that in the period 2003 to 2011 the proportion of people reporting they were happy almost doubled (from 44% to 83%, as indicated in Table 4.2), but went down slightly in 2012, and rose again in 2015. In contrast, the trend fluctuated much less for those who reported they felt 'unhappy'. The proportion reporting being 'unhappy' showed an overall decrease from 8% in 2003 to 5% in 2015 (Table 4.2).

The share of respondents in the 'middle' category (see Table 4.2), in 2015 (16%) was a third of that reported in 2003 (48%). Note that there were three different kinds of 'middle' answer in the questionnaires: 'so-so' (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008), 'somewhere between unhappy and happy' (2010), and 'hard to say happy or unhappy' (2011; 2012; 2013; 2015). Figure 4.2 also shows that a substantial proportion of people gave the neither happy nor unhappy answer between 2003 and 2015. Notably, in 2003, the share of people in this category (48%) was even higher than the share of people who were 'happy' (44%). The tendency of choosing the 'middle' category has not persisted. The proportion of these respondents fell from 48% in 2003 to 20% in 2008 (hence it more than halved), showing that the vast majority of the respondents in 2008 and beyond opted for a clear-cut answer in reporting happiness.

Table 4.2 – The Distribution of Happiness in Each Answer Category (2003-2015)

Year	*Percentage of 'unhappy'*	*N*	*Percentage of 'middle'*	*N*	*Percentage of 'happy'*	*N*
2003	**8**	203	**48**	1,229	**44**	1,134
2005	**6**	199	**41**	1,278	**53**	1,676
2006	**5**	194	**41**	1,525	**54**	2,012
2008	**7**	168	**20**	466	**72**	1,643
2010	**5**	153	**15**	442	**80**	2,323
2011	**6**	78	**11**	142	**83**	1,067
2012	**7**	197	**17**	498	**76**	2,185
2013	**7**	213	**20**	567	**73**	2,099
2015	**5**	116	**16**	393	**79**	1,894

Figure 4.2 – Trends in the distribution of happiness of the middle class



Traditional Chinese culture fosters a preference for being reserved or moderate. Chinese society follows the ancient Yin-Yang philosophy which leads its people to believe that good things and bad things have no clear-cut division but are interdependent and co-occur (Lu and Gilmour, 2004). In the field of happiness research, Chinese people are inclined to regard 'happiness as dependent on unhappiness, while unhappiness is hidden in happiness' (Lu, 1998,

p.118). As happiness and unhappiness exist side by side, it is not straightforward to judge the events happening in one's life as either extremely good or bad (Hsu, et al., 2017). Therefore, Chinese people may find it difficult to make a definitive statement as to whether they are happy or not. This might explain the high proportion of respondents from the Chinese middle class opting for the response category that was neither 'happy' nor 'unhappy' (at least before 2008).

If this were the case, however, why did the proportion of middle-class respondents choosing the middle category reduce by more than half in 2008? One possible reason could be due to the changes in the wording of the middle category between 2003 and 2015. These different answer options might have affected how survey participants responded. 'So-so' roughly conveys the same meaning as 'somewhere between unhappy and happy', but the expression 'hard to say happy or unhappy' denotes a 'refusal' (of the other categories) – implying that the respondent might find it difficult to select an unambiguous answer – either 'happy' or 'unhappy'. To explore whether this was the case, I introduced questions in my qualitative interviews that allowed interviewees to reflect on the connotations of each of these response options should they encounter them in a survey. Since my interviewees were not a sub-sample of the CGSS survey samples, the findings cannot be used to explain why there has been a significantly high proportion of survey respondents choosing the middle answer in year 2003, 2005, and 2006 and why, since 2008, this category received a far lower response proportion than was previously the case. However, the qualitative interviews I conducted can provide insight into the complexity of narrated happiness among the Chinese, and into whether the question wording shapes people's response. These findings are discussed in Chapter 5.4, when considering how individuals perceive the meaning of happiness.

4.2 An in-depth exploration of the happiness trend line for the middle class

Whilst descriptive statistical analysis is helpful for exploring trends over time, it leaves the 'why' questions untouched. In this study, the questions which the statistical analysis failed to answer provided the starting point for designing questions for my qualitative interviews. Do

people recognise through their own experiences the upward-sloping happiness trends over the past decade? What do they make of it? Do they think this means that more people are happy now than a decade ago? What might explain why an increasing proportion of the Chinese population report being happy over the last 10 years? Does a national event (such as the Olympic Games) contribute to an individual's happiness, which is then reflected in national happiness statistics? In this section, I will explore these questions through the personal experiences of middle-class individuals in China.

4.2.1 Are the Chinese middle class becoming increasingly happy? And if so, why?

In order to elicit discussion during interviews regarding the upward trend identified in the survey data of national happiness for the Chinese middle class, I extracted a somewhat provocative finding from the latest World Happiness Report[82] and asked what interviewees thought about it. This finding was that on the one hand, China, with an average happiness score of 5.246, came 86th out of 141 countries in terms of overall happiness levels, but on the other, that China's position was considered to be the 20th in terms of top gainers (with the average ladder score increasing by 0.592 points) with regard to movement in happiness between 2008-2010 and 2015-2017. I found that the majority (35 out of 51) of interviewees agreed that the happiness of the Chinese population has been on the increase since 2008. Moreover, they did not consider this upward trend to be paradoxical given China's ranking on the global stage. An interesting quotation, from an interview with Leo (male, young)[83] compared the rising happiness of China to the physical concept of acceleration[84]:

> …I am aware that our starting value was rather low, it's normal… like acceleration in physics…which is when your initial velocity is low, compared with your

[82] For the full report, see https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2018/WHR_web.pdf, accessed in April 2018. The World Happiness Report measures individual happiness by asking people to evaluate the quality of their current lives on a scale of 0 to 10. I did not ask my interviewees to answer and reflect on the question, but told them the main findings of China in terms of its rank in average happiness in 2015-2017 and the changes compared to 2018-2010, and asked them what they thought about this statistical evidence.
[83] Note that hereinafter I will give gender and age only the first time I mention the interviewee.
[84] The formula of calculating final velocity is that the final velocity (V_f) equals initial velocity (V_i) plus change in velocity (Δv); and Δv is equal to acceleration (α) times time taken (t). As a result, Δv is determined by accelerated speed, that is, a higher acceleration implies a higher Δv.

> counterparts, but you have a very high accelerated speed. And after a period of time, I reckon we will be ranked higher than the country with the same final velocity.

Leo used this metaphor in an attempt to describe his anticipation that China's national happiness would experience a dramatic improvement or that China would eventually become one of the happiest countries in the world on the basis of the higher growth rate of happiness it was currently experiencing.

Three major explanations for why the majority of my interviewees thought the Chinese were and would continue to be experiencing a greater level of happiness than a decade ago emerge from interview narratives. Firstly, interviewees reported that higher individual-level openness to new ideas and information among citizens as a result of increased exposure to globalisation is potentially a cause of the greater levels of happiness they have experienced. They attributed the rising level of happiness to China's 'open door' policy that increases people's experience of foreign ideas and lifestyles. As Carl (male, young) indicated, technological developments from 2008 to the current day have speeded up the process of gaining in-depth knowledge about the world, which leads to increased levels of tolerance and happiness. Carl argued that the development of social media was an effective way for people to express and present their self-identities as well as to satisfy their psychological needs, and in turn, boost their individual-level happiness. Moreover, John (male, young) compared China with its neighbour North Korea in terms of the openness of market policy. He stated that the main reason why people in North Korea felt unhappy and always dreamed of fleeing to South Korea was that they did not have a chance to learn about the world. John articulates this in the following extract from his interview:

> The North Koreans are fed with unreal propaganda; they don't know what is actually happening around the world. It is still using a strictly planned economy, and its people are not allowed to travel. How could they be happy? Whereas in our county, we are living in a relatively open society, and it is going to be more open. We are inclusive, we send our people to the more developed world, or bring

> in talented people from foreign countries. We can watch Hollywood movies; we can shop for and eat from a wide range of foreign brands.

Secondly, interviewees confirmed that the rising happiness cannot be separated from the fast-growing economic growth experienced by Chinese people during the last decade. Broadly speaking, one obvious benefit of macro-economic development at the individual level is the improvement in ordinary people's material well-being. Interviewees reported that their income had been increasing year on year, which was usually followed by a further increase in consumption as they have more disposable income. For the established middle-class, their spending can now go beyond the necessities of life, which provides them with a more comfortable life. In the meantime, their attitudes and behaviour about luxury goods have also been shifting. This is expressed by two interviewees below:

> Ten or so years ago, if I wished to buy something expensive, I would think twice, in case I had to tighten my belt. But now, I have much to spare. I don't need to…my living standards have been greatly improved, which is connected to my pay rise. I feel grateful. (Shufen, female, middle-aged)

> I mean, at a materialistic level, people now pursue more in order to have a better life, don't they? People in the past tended to save every drop of their earnings for retired life. We now have more to spare. We don't, don't need to be that miserable [laughs]…More and more people no longer feel satisfied with basic needs only…they have already achieved the state of *xiao kang* [fairly well-off] without worrying about life's necessities. Since minimum financial security has been guaranteed, they will want more, then no doubt they can stay upbeat. They are more and more capable of satisfying themselves… (Hao, male, middle-aged)

Additionally, China has made a great attempt to promote its scientific and technological capacity, along with its accelerated economic development. The unique and convenient experience of e-commerce was a frequently mentioned example facilitating people's happiness in all walks of life. Liu (male, middle-aged) argued that money could not bring

happiness on its own; it had to be accompanied by substantial technological achievement which was integrated into and transformed Chinese people's consumption:

> What did your phone look like ten years ago? But now, everyone is paying for everything via WeChat or Alipay on their smartphones. In the past, when you needed something, you had to wait for the weekend, running to the stores…You now have Taobao. So, you definitely feel happier. It saves you a lot [of time]. However, money is one thing, but imagine what your life would be like if you have a lot to spare but the society you are living in has no such thing called technology? …(They) are interconnected…If there is no technological achievement, you won't feel happiness…you would be like the emperor in ancient times. He was the richest, but what could he do with his…say, gold…? He had to spend months travelling to another province, but we now have high-speed rail and airplanes…

Thirdly, a few interviewees praised governmental actions, particularly the massive anti-corruption campaign led by Xi Jinping in recent years, which has had a discernible effect on their life satisfaction. For example, Yang (male, middle-aged) argued that the Chinese survey respondents in the World Happiness Report definitely would have recognised the improvements the Chinese government had made in combating corruption in the time period of 2015-2017, compared to 2008-2010:

> The second time point is a phase of…our anti-corruption battle, a battle like a raging fire trying to sweep away corruption. It is a phase of reconstructing our government's image, which also includes how to manage social immorality. You can see the socio-political environment is constantly changing toward a new era.

Previous studies confirm that corrupt behaviour reduces national happiness (e.g. Bjørnskov et al., 2010; Tay et al., 2014; Wu and Zhu, 2015; Di Tella et al., 2008). People usually feel frustration, shame or even guilt when they personally encounter corruption, while those people who have to pay bribes to get what they want are also deeply affected by corruption (Wu and Zhu, 2015). In this sense, Xi's vow to crack down both on powerful, high profile CCP

leaders – the ‘tigers’ – and lower-ranked bureaucrats – the ‘flies’ – aims to punish the transgressors who have made people victims of epidemic corruption, as well as to correct the current chaos and to establish an effective and transparent corruption-prevention mechanism that eliminates further frustration stemming from bribery.

All those interviewed who agreed that Chinese people were becoming increasingly happy were more aware of this trend (the average happiness score increases by 0.592 points between 2008-2010 and 2015-2017) than the fact that China was ranked as a less happy country than others in the global context. Interviewees who discounted the upward trend in happiness – or took a neutral position on this – focused on China’s happiness ranking in the global context, that is, its status as 86th out of 141 countries (in 2015-2017). Most argued that the level of happiness had actually decreased or was stagnant, as a result of the side-effects of China’s fast-growing economy, including income polarisation, life stress, the inefficient social safety net and food or drug safety scandals. In other words, they implied that an increasing level of happiness of society as a whole should be accompanied by an improvement in the current social and moral order in order to constructively alleviate or address the loss of moral direction that accompanies profound social and economic transition. Although my interviewees argued that the promotion of a morally good society would make Chinese society happy, it is worth noting that they did not mention morality as a factor determining their own understandings of a good life or happiness. As will be shown in Chapter 5 (Section 5.1), almost all interviewees stated that their individuals’ familial relationships and fulfilment mattered the most to their senses of happiness, and failed to make the link between a happier society and an individually more fulfilling life. One possible reason for this could be that my samples was not drawn from particular professional groups (e.g. social workers in the case of Madsen, 2019a or political activists in the study by Chen, 2019) whose professional satisfaction came from daily public service in the interests of a better and brighter society. Thus, in my sample, when initially asked what happiness meant to them, no interviewee immediately referred to something that directly related to the greater good. This does not mean that my interviewees did not recognise the interrelation between societal level (*structure*) and individual level (*agency*) in their pursuit of happiness. As illustrated in the case of people’s attitudes to the relationship between hosting an Olympic Games and

individual happiness (Section 4.2, subsection 2 below), some interviewees agreed that the Olympics hosted in 2008 had, in some way, boosted their happiness.

A few people regarded individual happiness as relative, and thought social factors might have some minimal effect on their happiness as long as developments and rejuvenation constantly and 'quietly' occurred. They acknowledged that Chinese society or the 'big picture' has been more and more promising, and that they have benefited from societal changes which contribute towards a 'moderately prosperous society (*xiaokang shehui*)'. They stated that everyone, or at least the majority, could be satisfied with the legacy of economic growth and the omnipresent upgrading of infrastructure. However, many people were inclined to evaluate their economic gains in relation to others. This evokes the 'Easterlin Paradox' (Easterlin, 1974; 2010): the contradiction that over the long-term a higher rate of economic growth may not necessarily bring about an increase in levels of happiness for all. This, it is argued, is because the comparison of one's living conditions or real income with another subject is the internal norm on which we make our life appraisals dependent[85] (Easterlin, 2004). Miles (male, young) reflected on his own experience where economic growth had initially improved his level of happiness but he soon adapted to the rising standards of living and became more aware of the constant relative distance between his friends and relatives' standard of living and his own. As a result, his happiness levels were left unaffected, making him feel as if he was 'walking on the treadmill'.

It is interesting to note that interviewees' attitudes concerning the upward happiness trend might be individual-specific, varying with age, gender, and class. The distribution of responses in 'upward happiness trend by age, gender and class' are shown in Tables 4.3a, b and c below. These respectively explore interviewees' responses by age group, gender, and sub-classes in terms of their tendency to celebrate or challenge the idea that China's national happiness has

[85] This is well-illustrated in the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), which proposes that, in the absence of an objective physical basis for comparison, the individual involuntarily evaluates his/her opinions and abilities by reference to the opinions and abilities of others. In terms of assessment of individual happiness, people tend to find a point of reference (usually their neighbours and relatives) for assessing their socioeconomic achievements. Even though their economic situations continue to improve, they cannot experience a substantial difference in their sense of happiness, since the life of the reference group has synchronously been improved and their relative differences remain.

been rising. It is worth noting that these findings may be lacking in generalisability, as my qualitative interviews did not draw on a representative sample and the absolute numbers in some categories (e.g. the elderly) were very small.

Table 4.3a – Distributions of responses in 'upward happiness trend' by age

Response	Young (18-39)	Middle-aged (39-59)	Elderly (60+)
Decreased/Hard to say	6	10	0
	21	**59**	**0**
Increased	22	7	6
	79	**41**	**100**

Table 4.3b – Distributions of responses by gender

Response	Male	Female
Decreased/Hard to say	11	5
	41	**21**
Increased	16	19
	59	**79**

Table 4.3c – Distributions of responses by class

Response	Service class	Self-employed/ small employer	Routine non-manual
Decreased/Hard to say	7	5	4
	24	**50**	**33**
Increased	22	5	8
	76	**50**	**67**

All of the older participants claimed to have witnessed the unprecedented economic growth in China over the past half century and tended to argue the rising happiness was not just a published statistic but was 'something out there', learnt from their day-to-day experience. In contrast, over half of the middle-aged participants (59%) were more aware of the side-effects accompanying China's economic developments. Gender difference is also evident. Women were more likely than men (79% compared to 59%) to confirm that happiness had increased

over the past decade. In contrast, two-fifths of the male interviewees (41%) were doubtful about the increasing trend of national happiness.

In terms of class difference, those within the service class were three times more likely to agree that happiness had increased (76%) than those who said it had not (24%). There were far less marked differences within the self-employed/small-employer group, but over twice as many on the routine non-manual group agreed that happiness had increased (67% compared to 33%; although the numbers in this group were smaller, the equivalent numbers in the service class were only 12 compared to 29). Compared to the other classes, the reflections of the self-employed class on the trends of national happiness were less favourable. One of the challenges of self-employment is that these workers provide their own safety nets. Working under uncertainty and/or lack of security means that their career prospects are sometimes conditional on fluctuations in the market and in the economy. Daxing (male, middle-aged), a small employer of a logistics company with fewer than 5 employees, complained that entrepreneurship or maintaining a company was getting a lot harder than it had been in the past.

These qualitative data reaffirm the subjective nature of reported happiness, and show how people’s perceptions of the upward happiness trend vary with age, gender, and class. They also suggest that national-level economic developments might not always translate into individual happiness. That happiness is relative and individual-specific was further demonstrated by interviewees’ perceptions regarding the impacts of hosting the Olympic Games on their individual happiness.

4.2.2 Impact of hosting the Olympics on happiness

It is important to reiterate that my interviewees were not drawn from a sub-sample of the CGSS 2008 survey, so their responses to the idea of an association between happiness and celebration of the Olympics cannot be directly used to unravel the marked upturn in the happiness trend line in 2008. Nonetheless, qualitative accounts may provide more insights into the effects of mega-events on individual happiness. As a country which is usually seen as

a predominately collectivist society, it is surprising that just less than half (24 out of 51) of the interviewees reported that the 2008 Beijing Olympics contributed to their happiness. They agreed that the Olympics did facilitate good feelings before, during, and after the event. To interviewees who confirmed the positive effect of the Olympics on their individual happiness, they highlighted intangible emotional satisfaction as well as the tangible legacy of the Olympics.

Firstly, the positive emotions attached to the Olympics was contagious, with several interviewees indicating that they were influenced by the media or their surroundings. Before and during the Olympic Games, it became a 'major hashtag' (John, male, young) either in the print media, on television, and on social media. The promotion of the Olympics in China was permeated with patriotic rhetoric – or, rather, patriotism was camouflaged by all kinds of supporting strategies that aimed to mobilise citizens to embrace and celebrate the Games. Hence supporting the Olympics was regarded as a way of expressing one's devotion to the nation. For example, Xiaoyu (male, young) recalled that shortly before the Olympics he actively participated in the virtual torch relay campaign on the Chinese social media platform QQ to demonstrate his patriotism: '…Because people around me – young and old alike - were talking about it. I was trying to get involved. For the first time in history China hosted the Olympics; of course we were supportive…'.

In this sense, the Olympics had brought people together and stirred their hearts by re-activating a sense of nationalism. According to Zhongwei (male, elderly), the Olympics were treasured as an imaginary collective property, and this helped to create an awareness of togetherness among citizens. The starting point of their thoughts and actions became '"We" instead of "I"', whereas normally 'everyone was busy with their own things' and did not mind what was happening outside of their lives. Hongmei (female, middle-aged) stated that '…from that moment I felt like a social citizen, I was with my…our country.' In addition, during the time of the Olympics, people were more likely to evaluate positively their collective identity as Chinese. Hosting a mega-event could raise China's image on the world stage, which in turn made people proud to be Chinese:

> I was sitting in front of the television with my family and the opening ceremony was on live; I suddenly felt, Oh My God, our country was so powerful and brilliant. That was really happening... (Evelyn, female, young)

> Only a thriving and mighty country is able to host the Olympics, right? … China captured worldwide attention during the games. People could hear what happened in the Olympics, or in China, in every corner of the world. Such a big event happened in my country, I felt, Wow! That was awesome! I was proud of being Chinese! (Jiayi, female, young)

Secondly, the tangible legacy of the Games, especially concerning infrastructure improvement, ameliorated traffic problems and laid the blueprint for sustainable living in the host city. Li (2007) suggested that one of the underlying mechanisms in the relationship between Beijing citizens' happiness index and the Olympic Games was the improvement in Beijing's appeal and the regeneration of the living environment of local residents. Owing to the distance between Guangzhou and Beijing, interviewees tended to make reference to the 2010 Asian Games hosted by the city of Guangzhou, of which they had first-hand experience, as an example of the lasting benefits brought about by a sporting mega-event. Several interviewees had witnessed a tremendous improvement in the transport infrastructure within the host city. The Asian Games, they felt, had made society better, for example through the refurbishment of the major expressway, the construction of the bus rapid transit system (BRT)[86], and a bike sharing scheme – all of which provided a solution to congestion on commuter highways and were considered 'gifts' from the Games, which had transformed their lives in some ways.

However, at least in a city which was not the host of the games, the positive effect on people's happiness could be short-lived. My interviewees recalled that they did not last very long. As expressed by Xiulan (female, elderly): '…it was in the time before and during the event. When it ended, everything was back to your normal routine.' Half of the interviewees argued that

[86] Bus Rapid Transit is a fast, convenient, and efficient bus transit system aiming to reduce delay caused by the long interval between buses, long queue times to pay on board, etc.

hosting sports-related mega-events had minimal or no impact on their individual happiness. One reason for this was their geographical distance from Beijing, where the event took place. Some of my interviewees confirmed the spatial influence on happiness. People living in or closer to the host city were already involved in the atmosphere of the Olympic spirit, while those who lived far away could only experience it on TV screens. As expressed by Lacey (female, young):

> I wouldn't say because it was hosted in Beijing, in our country, I could claim to have felt excited. I don't think there is an association…Because I didn't have any chance to visit Beijing, I wasn't inspired by the spirit, or whatever, on the spot. I watched it on TV, on the screen, but I couldn't find any meaning in it.

I asked them if they felt the same about the 2010 Asian Games. As soon as they heard the question, they modified their previous remarks and referred to the positive outcomes of the Games, simply because they were living in the host city.

Compared with the supporters of the Olympics who placed more emphasis on the collectivistic benefits contributing to their happiness, those who had developed a negative attitude towards the same event perceived it in more individualistic ways. 'One World One Dream (*tongyige shijie, tongyige mengxiang*)' was the promising slogan of the Beijing Olympics, stressing the universal values of the Olympics spirit and encouraging every citizen to strive for a brighter future in spite of the differences between cultures. However, can everyone belong to the same world and share the same dreams? Boyong (male, middle-aged) reflected, in relation to the psychological universal captured by the slogan, that not every individual's mood has been lifted in a surge of national passion triggered by the Olympics: '…not every individual is equally interested in sports or such events…he has his own life, he is an individual who thinks and acts like an individual…'

The non-supporters shed light on the irrelevance of such occurrences to their overall life quality. They tended to dwell on the degree to which hosting the event coincided with their personal interests – 'could it transform my current living standards?' (Miles). Here are some of the responses from my interviewees:

> …It may improve national pride, but pride is different from happiness. Well, for me, I didn't feel any difference. It will make no difference to my well-being if it is not part of my necessities. (Yi, male, young)

> The Olympics, the Asian Games, or any other competition, is far beyond our concerns. You know, I have never bothered before. I'm not an athlete, right? It is even not related to my – an ordinary person's [*lao bai xing*] life. How could it affect my happiness? (Haoran, male, young)

> I feel happiness is not about shouting slogans, whether happy or not. It hinges on two things. One is your active participation. The other is that whether you have found anything spectacular that might improve your living or give you positivity.
> (Hao, male, middle-aged)

Moreover, grave concerns about the cost of the events, at taxpayers' expense, generated adverse effects on people's happiness. Interviewees grumbled that most of the costs were met by the taxpayer, but they had not received any discernible benefits either economically or psychologically. As they expressed it:

> I would say…how could I say it? China lost a lot of money, again! [laughs] This money, our taxpayers' money! You know, the government should have made the most efficient use of it, I mean by using it on livelihood improvement, education and the like. (Spencer, male, young)

> The impacts on me? Well, I do have a lot to say. I wish it had not happened! It turned traffic into a tangled mess. Also, it required us to donate. Although it was voluntary, the relevant leader would talk to you if you did not support it. People in higher positions had lots of pretty good ideas for improving our city image, which meant the burden on our shoulders was increased. We worked hard to actualise their concepts. We had to undertake the risks if there was something wrong. But, in the end, where were the rewards for us? What were the benefits

> of supporting it to the ordinary people? I heard a series of embarrassing scandals happened, like someone had taken backhanders from the projects… (Weiguo, male, middle-aged)

There were socio-demographic differences in interviewees’ views about whether the Games were positively associated with their individual happiness. Table 4.4a, b and c below demonstrate the distribution of interviewees’ opinions in terms of the impact of the Games on their happiness by age group, gender, and sub-classes. Again, the sampling in my qualitative interview was not drawn representatively from the middle-class population in China, so it is not possible to make statistical inferences from the sample to a larger population.

Table 4.4a – Distributions of responses on 'the Olympics' by age

Response	**Young (18-39)**	**Middle-aged (40-59)**	**Elderly (60+)**
Positive Impact	14	7	3
	50	**41**	**50**
No impact	14	10	3
	50	**59**	**50**

Table 4.4b – Distributions of responses by gender

Response	**Male**	**Female**
Positive Impact	11	13
	41	**54**
No impact	16	11
	59	**46**

Table 4.4c – Distributions of responses by sub-class

Response	**Service class**	**Self-employed/ small employer**	**Routine non-manual**
Positive Impact	11	5	8
	38	**50**	**67**
No impact	18	5	4
	62	**50**	**33**

Nearly two thirds of the middle-aged interviewees (59%) reported that they did not include the national celebration when thinking about sources of happiness, while within both the young and the elderly group, the split in responses on the impact of the Olympics is exactly 50:50. In terms of gender, female interviewees were more likely than their male peers to celebrate the effect of hallmark events on their happiness. Furthermore, class discrepancy is also noticeable. Within the self-employed/small employers the positive/no effect of the Games on individual happiness was 50:50. The service class and the marginal middle-class had exactly reverse responses. The ratio of positive to no impact was roughly 1/3:2/3 in the service class and this was reversed in the routine non-manual class.

To summarise, those interviewees who stated that the 2008 Olympics or the 2010 Asian Games had contributed to their happiness related this to what they experienced as the tangible or intangible collective benefits from hosting a mega-event. Those who did not feel their happiness had increased because of the hosting of any mega-event often stressed the 'remoteness' of the Games, i.e. they felt very distant or remote from the Games, either geographically or emotionally. Some also explained this by suggesting that happiness was affected only by directly tangible experiences; as Weigo put it, 'only things that are directly related to my living can affect my happiness' (Weiguo).

Slightly over half of the interviewees stated that the Olympics were outside of their life, career, and family on a day-to-day basis, thereby excluding it from factors they considered could determine their happiness. One possible explanation for this is that the impact of the Games on individual happiness of the host city is individual-specific. Not every 'we' consciousness is perceived to take priority over 'I' consciousness. Characterising the social behaviours of the Chinese as homogeneously 'collectivistic' is overly simplistic, as the dynamics of interpersonal relations have been overlooked. Although the self is constructed as an interdependent entity in Chinese culture, leading to a socially oriented view of happiness (Lu and Gilmour, 2004), such a socially-oriented view of the self does not mean that others or social relations are consistently significant in the sense of self. As Fei's (2006) theory of 'the differential mode of associations (*chaxu geju*)' suggests, Chinese social structure is, in fact, based on individual-centred networks, while at the same time, the boundary between the 'self' and the 'other' is permeable. The self is located in the most central place and determines the significance of the others – 'who can be one of us (*zijiren*)' (Yang et al., 2010). Interviewees who celebrated the bonus brought by hallmark events on their happiness had incorporated the 'other' (i.e. the national duty in this case) into the 'self' and, for them, the Olympics generated community bonding and national pride and had a positive impact on their happiness. In contrast, those who questioned the impact of the Olympics on their individual happiness tended not to perceive the 'self' in relation to the Olympics, and thus, hosting or celebrating the Olympics made no difference to their feeling of happiness.

The findings discussed in this section point on the one hand to the importance of collective experiences on happiness but, at the same time, reveal clear within-group and between-individual differences in people's attitudes to and perceptions of happiness. It seems that different social groups report, as well as experience, happiness differently. The next section will explore socio-demographic differences within the Chinese middle class in general, by using quantitative data to illustrate how self-reported happiness differs with class, age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and the presence or not of children.

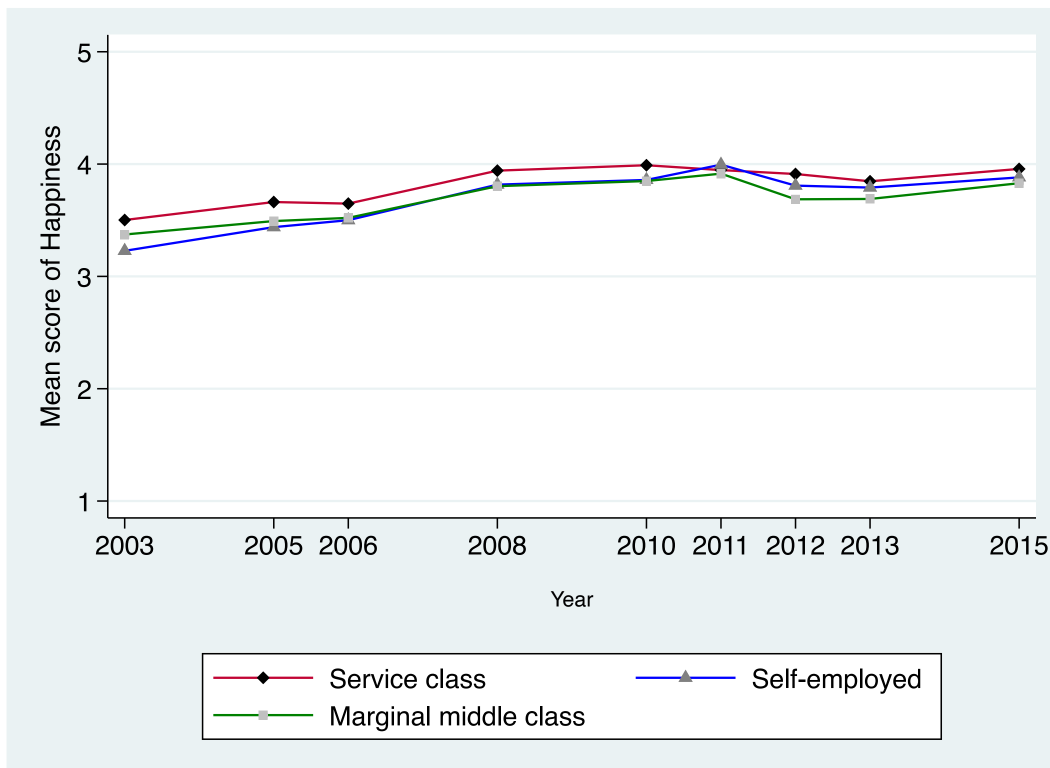
4.3 Socio-demographic differences in happiness within the Chinese middle class

As discussed in Chapter 2, happiness studies (e.g. Liu, 2007; Xing and Huang, 2007) suggest that people's levels of happiness are class-differentiated. By dividing the broad middle class into three sub-categories, it becomes clear that, except in 2011 in which the mean happiness level of the self-employed narrowly surpassed that of the service class (3.99 compared to 3.95, see Table 4.5), the service class has been the frontrunner of happiness between 2003 and 2015 (see Figure 4.3).

Table 4.5 – The mean happiness score within the middle class (2003-2015)

Year	*The Service Class*	*N*	*sd.*	*The Self-employed*	*N*	*sd.*	*The Routine Non-manual*	*N*	*sd.*
2003	3.50	1,382	0.72	3.23	389	0.85	3.37	796	0.76
2005	3.66	1,102	0.73	3.44	497	0.77	3.49	1,555	0.77
2006	3.65	1,276	0.72	3.50	983	0.74	3.52	1,471	0.72
2008	3.94	1,405	0.88	3.82	158	0.88	3.80	713	0.93
2010	3.99	1,293	0.69	3.86	955	0.82	3.85	670	0.75
2011	3.95	621	0.76	3.99	368	0.85	3.91	297	0.78
2012	3.91	1,449	0.74	3.81	728	0.83	3.69	703	0.83
2013	3.85	1,302	0.77	3.79	750	0.82	3.69	827	0.84
2015	3.96	1,150	0.74	3.88	629	0.74	3.83	625	0.78

Figure 4.3 – Trends in happiness among different divisions of the middle class



It appears that the survey respondents' mean happiness was associated with their relative socioeconomic rank within the middle class: the higher their level within the middle class, the higher their mean happiness score. Correspondingly, in the qualitative interviews (which will be explored in detail in Chapter 6), I found that the routine non-manuals tended to stress

their ‘precarious’ sense of happiness, mainly due to their unstable and insecure life circumstances; because of its absence in their own lives, the Chinese expression of stability – ‘*wending*’ – was an important perceived barrier to their happiness. According to the routine non-manuals, having a stable life or a secure occupation, as most of the service class did, was the primary and essential source of individual happiness.

Following on from the above, the higher the socioeconomic status of an individual, the more likely they were to report a higher level of happiness. However, these data reflect the mean of the sub-groups within a population; this averages out the survey results and masks the variation within the group. The inclusion of the standard deviation reflects the level of variation within the sub-groups but the actual experience of individuals within those groups is still not apparent. Exploring the relationship between happiness and objective class position is possible, but it could be argued that objective class status is not the best variable to explore in relation to happiness. Recent happiness research (e.g., Adler et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2008; Islam et al., 2009; Kraus et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2019) suggests that subjective class, focusing on relative class differences vis-à-vis others, may be more meaningful in illuminating the variations in happiness by class. This will be examined in Chapter 6.3.

The above discussion has shown that individual levels of happiness vary in accordance with occupational class. Now I will explore the question as to whether people with different age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and parenthood status report happiness differently. Figure 4.4 below shows that, across the time period studied, the middle-aged middle class was the least happy group, while the elderly middle class was the happiest group.

Table 4.6 – The mean happiness score by age group (2003-2015)

Year	*Young (18-39)*	*N*	*sd.*	*Middle-aged (40-59)*	*N*	*sd.*	*Elderly (60+)*	*N*	*sd.*
2003	3.46	1,119	0.75	3.33	1,080	0.77	3.54	368	0.76
2005	3.58	1,438	0.75	3.45	1,159	0.77	3.61	557	0.76
2006	3.59	1,802	0.73	3.51	1,490	0.73	3.57	438	0.71
2008	3.92	1,154	0.88	3.80	829	0.92	4.03	293	0.86
2010	3.92	1,550	0.72	3.89	1,268	0.79	3.98	99	0.83
2011	3.96	673	0.79	3.93	565	0.79	4.06	48	0.78
2012	3.83	1,465	0.79	3.83	1,287	0.80	3.89	128	0.74
2013	3.80	1,515	0.79	3.76	1,243	0.81	3.89	121	0.81
2015	3.92	1,257	0.75	3.88	1,042	0.76	4.03	105	0.67

Figure 4.4 – Trends in happiness by age group

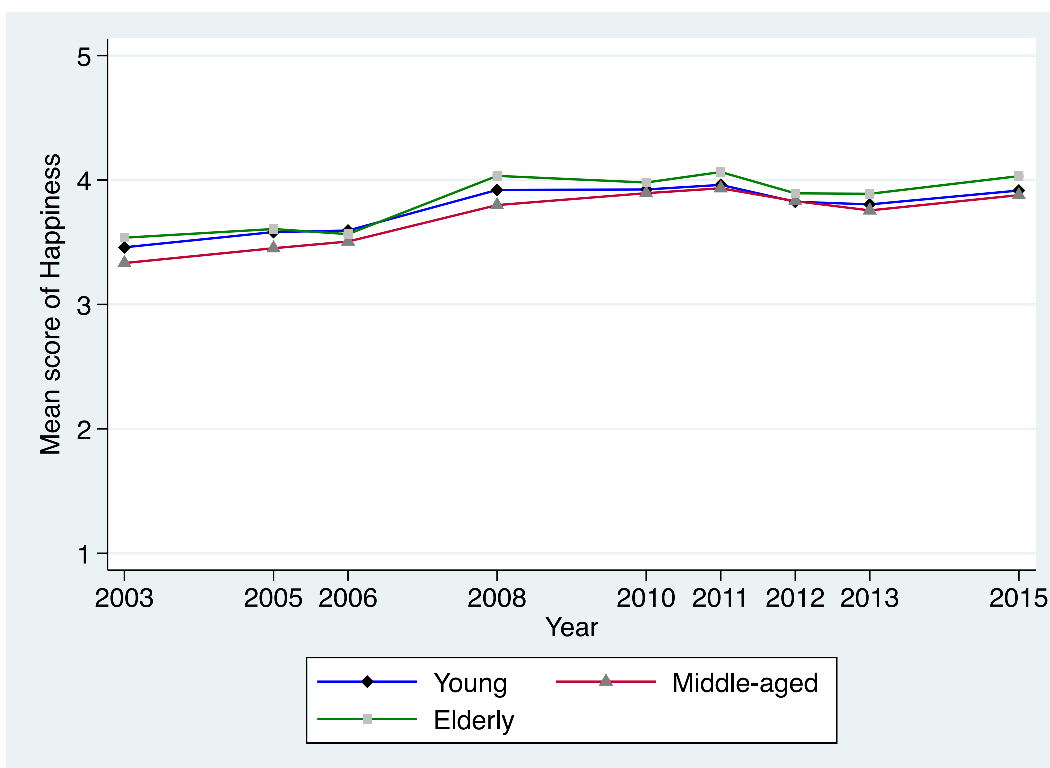


Figure 4.4 is consistent with the U-shaped age-happiness association found by a number of happiness studies (e.g. Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008; Xing and Huang, 2014). One underlying reason for this might be that, as posited by Miller (1981), the middle-aged are considered the 'sandwich generation' – trapped between their potentially physically frail parents and their dependent children – and are, hence, more likely to experience a lower

level of happiness than the young and the old. In the Chinese context, the middle-aged are usually identified as the 'backbone of the family'. Culturally constructed as being at the 'age of success', people in this age group are more likely to occupy important positions, which leads to higher expectations from the society and hence to them having to shoulder a greater burden (Xing and Huang, 2014).

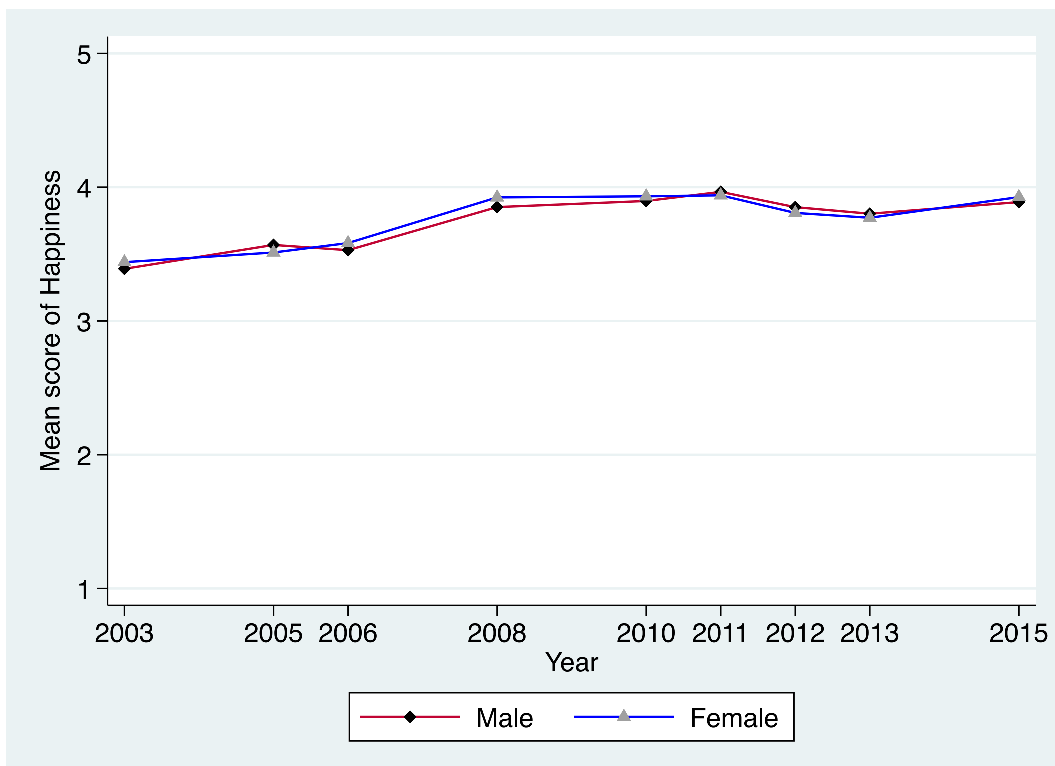
In contrast, there also are a number of studies (e.g. Easterlin, 2006) that argue that the midlife period is usually associated with a higher level of status and prestige than the early or later periods of life, resulting in the middle-aged experiencing a higher level of satisfaction with life. Does this mean that there is a happiness shift within the middle-aged? Do all middle-aged people, nonetheless, experience an equally lower sense of happiness? This will be examined in Chapter 7.3.

With regards to gender, Figure 4.5 shows that the levels of reported happiness for men and women are extremely close. However, when paying attention to the mean score of happiness in each year, as shown in Table 4.7, in some years (2005; 2011; 2012; 2013) males reported higher average scores than those of the average female, while in other years (2003; 2006; 2008; 2010; 2015), women felt happier with their lives than men. Gender, as a socially constructed attribute, is governed by socially acknowledged norms. Different sets of rules concerning feelings are assigned to men and women in line with gender norms. For example, it is socially more acceptable for women to be more emotionally expressive than their male counterparts (e.g., Grossman and Wood, 1993; Wood et al., 1989). Although the mean self-reported happiness scores for men and women were very close (rounding up to one decimal point shows that there was never more than 0.1 difference between the mean scores, and often they were the same), they leave open the question of whether men and women report happiness differently – for example, being more or less open to discussing emotions associated with happiness. Findings on this from the qualitative research undertaken for this study will be examined in Chapter 7.4.

Table 4.7 – The mean happiness score by gender (2003-2015)

Year	*Male*	*N*	*sd.*	*Female*	*N*	*sd.*
2003	3.39	1,200	0.73	3.44	1,367	0.79
2005	3.57	1,494	0.73	3.51	1,660	0.78
2006	3.53	1,709	0.74	3.58	2,021	0.71
2008	3.85	1,103	0.94	3.92	1,173	0.86
2010	3.90	1,530	0.78	3.93	1,388	0.73
2011	3.97	622	0.76	3.94	664	0.82
2012	3.85	1,540	0.76	3.81	1,340	0.83
2013	3.80	1,531	0.79	3.77	1,348	0.83
2015	3.89	1,169	0.76	3.93	1,235	0.74

Figure 4.5 – Trends in happiness by gender



Whilst a two-way cross tab is a good starting point to identify relationships between the outcome variable (happiness) and the independent variable (age, gender etc.), it is limited in what it can reveal. The age variable has been shown to affect the difference in happiness between men and women, since they may have different individual life circumstances or be culturally valued differently when going through the same stages of the life cycle (Easterlin,

2003; Inglehart, 2002). I therefore produced a three-way contingency table to explore the interaction between age, gender, and happiness. As I am interested in the happy category, I combined the middle category into the unhappy group and referred to it as 'undecided/unhappy'.

Table 4.8 demonstrates that the analysis of happiness by age and gender resulted in non-significant results for the young group whilst there was a statistically significant result (p = 0.004) for the middle-aged and older (p = 0.025) groups. The middle-aged and elderly female respondents were slightly less likely to report being happy than their male counterparts. Especially for respondents over 60, the gender split in happiness was wider than for the middle-aged. The relative unhappiness of older women might be related to the depreciating social status of women as they age, as reflected in the mass media and advertising (Inglehart, 2002), or the greater likelihood of women suffering widowhood than men (Easterlin, 2003).

Table 4.8 – 3-way crosstabulation among age, gender, and happiness

Whether happy or not	Young (18-39)		Middle-aged (40-59)		Elderly (60+)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Not decided/ unhappy	**32**	**31**	**33**	**37**	**33**	**38**
	1,688	1,855	1,683	1,542	404	831
Happy	**68**	**69**	**67**	**63**	**67**	**62**
	1,855	4,117	3,409	2,617	250	401
Number of observations	11,973		9.963		2,157	
Design df	11,972		9,962		2,156	
Uncorrected chi2(1)	1.1436		17.585		6.9632	
Design-based F	0.7560		12.6394		5.0266	
P-value	**0.3846**		**0.0004**		**0.0251**	

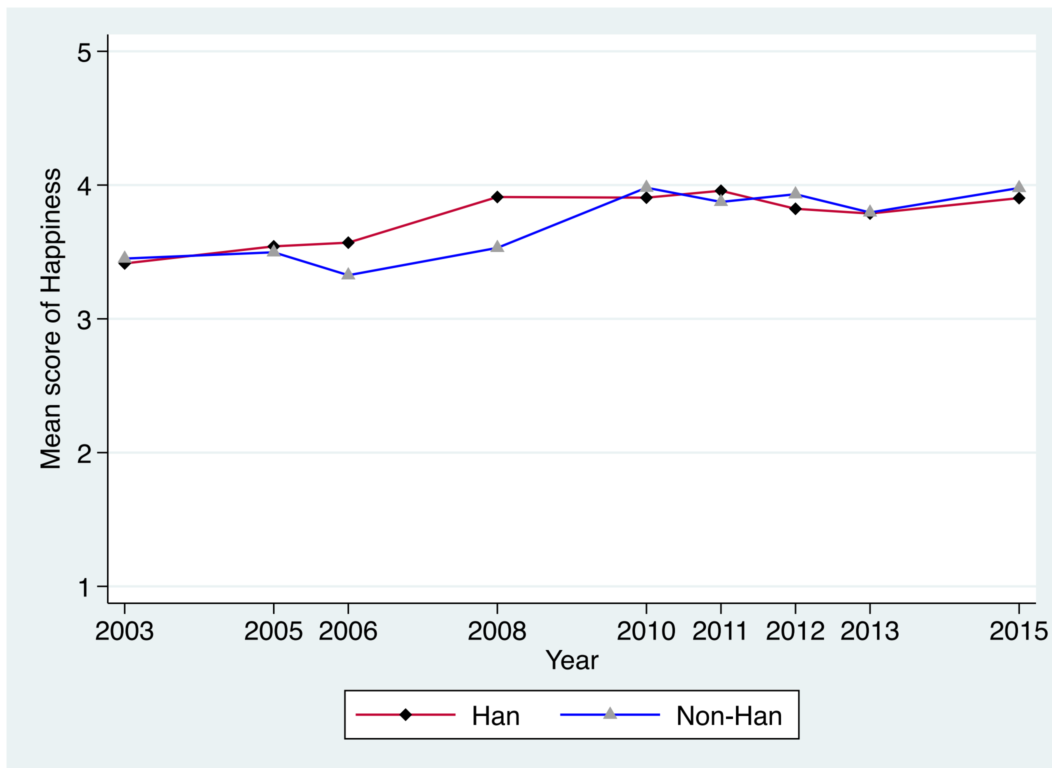
Note: Using the command -svy: tab- to carry out a two-way tabulation analysis automatically takes the weights into account. But the Chi-square test in Stata does not allow turning on weights. In order to get a valid p-value based on weighted data, the Chi-square statistic has been converted to an F statistic. In order to get a valid p-value based on weighted data, the Chi-square statistic has been converted to an F statistic.

Before I comment on ethnic differences, it should be borne in mind that the ethnic minorities (the non-Han) comprised only 6.35% of the total CGSS sample I analysed, and the numbers are so small relative to the Han group that any observations based on these data are no more than that. When considering the shapes of the trends by ethnicity in Figure 4.6, I found it difficult to tell which ethnic group (either Han or non-Han) was more likely to feel happy between 2003 and 2015. In some years (2003; 2010; 2012; 2013; 2015), non-Han Chinese reported a higher happiness score than Han, while in other years (2006; 2008; 2011), this pattern was reversed. The happiness gap between Han and non-Han Chinese was particularly wide in 2006 and 2008. Although as the numbers in these groups were so small, we should not deduce anything from this difference (small sample sizes can be perturbed by a few outliers).

Table 4.9 – The mean happiness score by ethnicity (2003-2015)

Year	*Han*	*N*	*sd.*	*Non-Han*	*N*	*sd.*
2003	3.41	2,429	0.76	3.45	138	0.73
2005	3.54	3,006	0.76	3.50	148	0.84
2006	3.57	3,552	0.72	3.33	178	0.76
2008	3.91	2,139	0.88	3.53	137	1.09
2010	3.91	2,660	0.75	3.98	254	0.83
2011	3.96	1,227	0.78	3.87	59	0.91
2012	3.82	2,659	0.79	3.93	218	0.87
2013	3.79	2,691	0.80	3.80	184	0.92
2015	3.90	2,267	0.76	3.98	135	0.67

Figure 4.6 – Trends in happiness by ethnicity



On the subject of marital status, Figure 4.7 shows that married people reported higher levels of happiness than those who were never married or who were separated, divorced or widowed. This is consistent with a mounting body of happiness research on marriage (e.g. Joung et al., 1997; Mookherjee, 1997; Proulx et al., 2007; Stack and Eshleman, 1998) indicating its positive effect on happiness. According to Stack and Eshleman (1998), there are two mechanisms explaining the association between marital status and happiness: married people tend to enjoy materially improved life and face lower risk of financial deprivation, and people living with a spouse are more likely to follow and maintain healthy lifestyles, which in turn contributes to their emotional and physical well-being. Yet It is also worth noting that in 2008, the mean happiness score of the never married was a little higher than the married (Table 4.10).

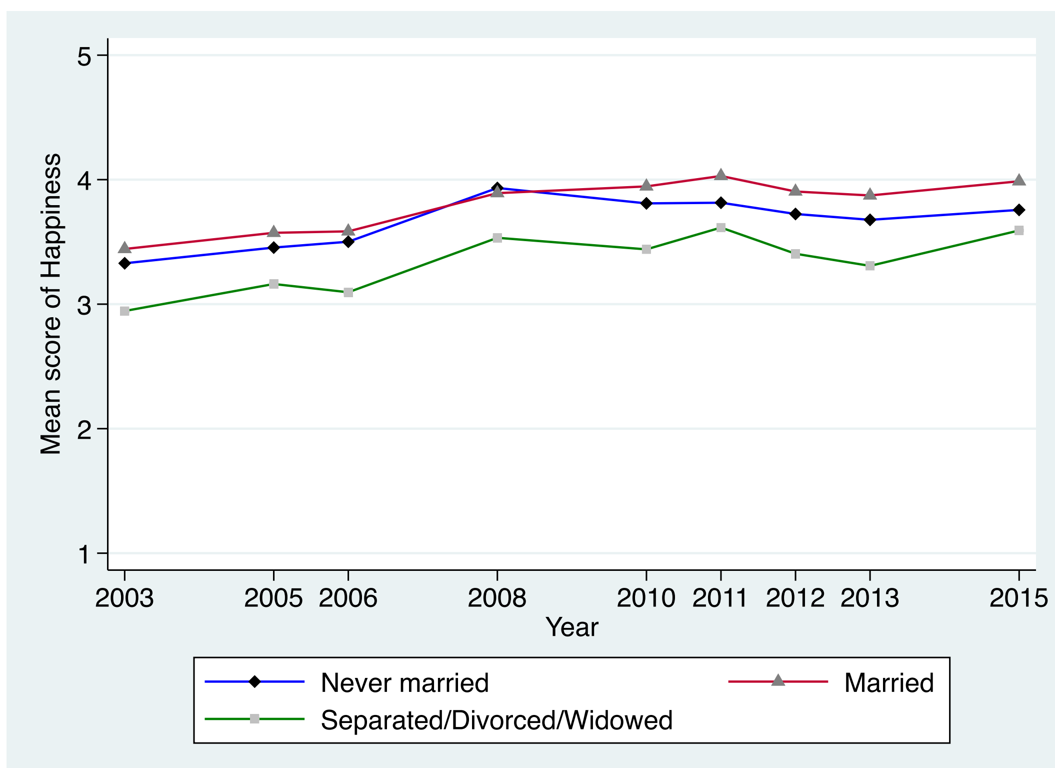
Marital happiness may also be experienced differently by men and women as a result of the mediating role of gendered expectations: i.e., men and women may differ in their experiences

of happiness in marriage. As Hochschild (1989) suggests, the role of husband and wife and how they should feel about his or her role at the workplace and inside the home are shaped by different framing rules (i.e., gender ideologies) in terms of manhood or womanhood. Accordingly, women and men would develop different perceptions of how marriage improves their happiness. This will be examined in Chapter 7 (Section 7.2).

Table 4.10 – The mean happiness score by marital status (2003-2015)

Year	*Never married*	*N*	*sd.*	*Married*	*N*	*sd.*	*S/D/W*	*N*	*sd.*
2003	3.33	246	0.71	3.44	2,195	0.76	2.95	113	0.93
2005	3.45	366	0.75	3.57	2,619	0.75	3.16	168	0.88
2006	3.50	576	0.80	3.58	2,957	0.71	3.10	197	0.80
2008	3.93	303	0.82	3.89	1,867	0.90	3.53	105	1.16
2010	3.81	414	0.77	3.95	2,361	0.74	3.44	141	0.91
2011	3.81	200	0.91	4.03	1,023	0.71	3.62	61	1.02
2012	3.72	399	0.81	3.90	2355	0.75	3.40	126	1.00
2013	3.68	445	0.88	3.87	2,293	0.74	3.31	134	0.98
2015	3.76	418	0.85	3.99	1,891	0.70	3.59	95	0.79

Figure 4.7 – Trends in happiness by marital status

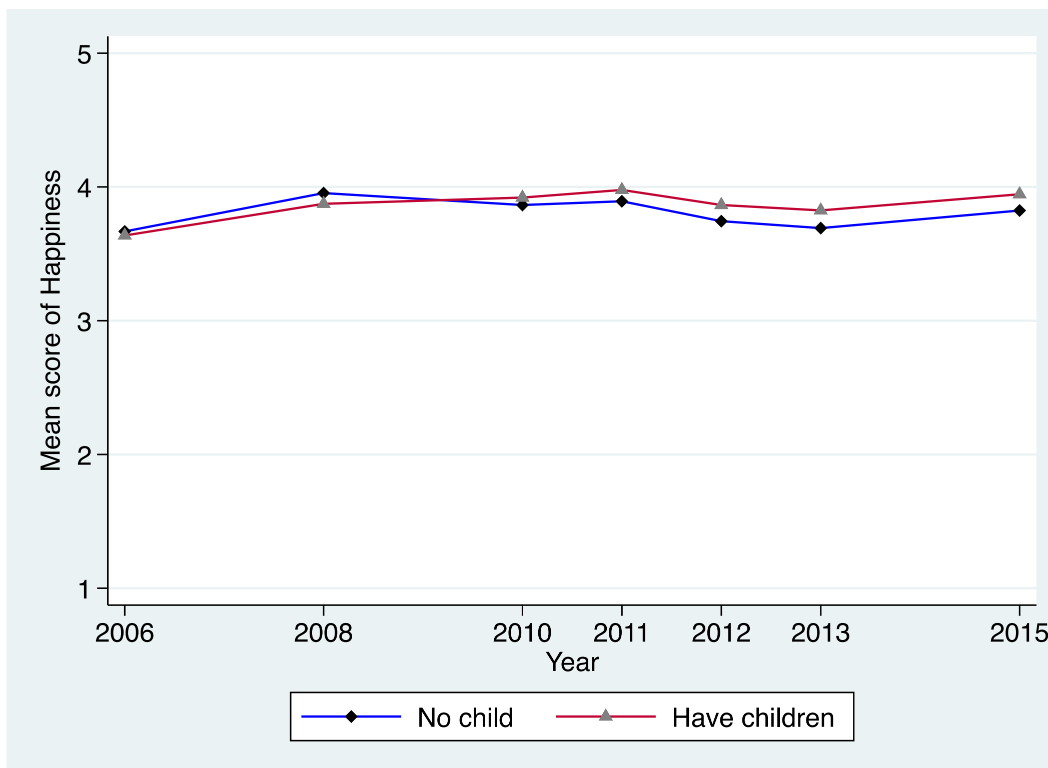


There was no related question asking respondents to report their parenthood status (whether they had children or not) in the 2003 and 2005 questionnaire. Therefore, data is missing in terms of the mean happiness score between parents and the childless in 2003 and 2005, and I have omitted these two data points in Table 4.11. As shown in Figure 4.8, respondents with children, as a whole, had higher mean happiness scores than childless respondents. This seems to run counter to the prevailing view that children have a negative or null effect on marital happiness (i.e., marital quality/husband-wife relationship) in the West (e.g. Cowan and Cowan, 1986; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; and White et al., 1986) as well as in China (Pimentel, 2000). We will examine reasons for this in Chapter 7.2.

Table 4.11 – The mean happiness score by having children or not (2003-2015)

Year	*No child*	*N*	*sd.*	*Have children*	*N*	*sd.*
2006	3.67	224	0.75	3.64	1,079	0.73
2008	3.95	441	0.85	3.87	1,835	0.91
2010	3.86	554	0.76	3.92	2,333	0.76
2011	3.89	254	0.87	3.98	1,025	0.76
2012	3.74	559	0.81	3.86	2,318	0.79
2013	3.69	596	0.84	3.82	2,279	0.79
2015	3.82	558	0.84	3.95	1,844	0.71

Figure 4.8 – Trends in happiness by having children or not



In China, people who have children normally do so after marriage. Childbearing is considered an integral part of marriage in China (Pimentel, 2000). This is reflected in the CGSS survey data. To corroborate the relationship between respondents' marital status and whether or not they have children, I used a cross-tabulation (Table 4.12). As shown in Table 4.12, Cramer's V statistics between a respondent's marital status and parental status is 77.6%, indicating a strong positive relationship.

Results show that 92% of the married respondents, and 90% of those who had been married in the past, had children, while only six percent of the never married had them. As the p-value is less than 0.05, a statistically significant relationship between respondents' marital status and their childbearing experiences could thus be verified. Therefore, the relationship between marriage and happiness might be due to the positive effect of the presence of children.

Table 4.12 – Crosstabulation between marital and parenthood status

Whether or not they have children	**Marital status**		
	Never married	*Married*	*S/D/W*
No child	**94**	**8**	**10**
	2,111	1,025	51
Have children	**6**	**92**	**90**
	248	11,790	674
Total	2,359	12,815	725
Pearson:			
Uncorrected chi2(2) = 9579.7961			
Design-based F (1.90, 30227.52) = 2605.9587 P = 0.0000			
Cramer's V: **0.77623501**			
Note: Using the command -svy: tab- to carry out a two-way tabulation analysis automatically takes the weights into account. But the Chi-square test in Stata does not allow turning on weights. The Chi-square test here is based on unweighted data, which could be ignored. In order to get a valid p-value, the Chi-square statistic is converted to an F statistic.			

This section illustrates socio-demographic differences within the middle class in terms of self-reported happiness. However, these preliminary quantitative results, whilst revealing and offering insight, do not reveal why the service class, the elderly, the Han Chinese, the married, and those who are parents reported higher levels of happiness through the time period studied than their peers. According to a comprehensive review of theories and empirical studies in Chapter 2, research exploring the relationship between happiness and class, age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, or the presence of children has yielded inconsistent results. Data from the qualitative interviews will propose possible explanations in the following chapters.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, these descriptive analyses of CGSS data in all available years (2003-2015) show that the Chinese middle class has reported increasing levels of happiness. As indicated in Table 4.1, this emerging class, are much happier than the working class, and their self-reported happiness has been increasing between 2003 and 2015. When asked whether these survey data reflected their own perceptions of how people feel in China, most of my Chinese middle-class interviewees confirmed the growing happiness trend for Chinese individuals. Three main social forces shaping individual happiness were highlighted by interviewees: globalisation, economic and technological developments and the anti-corruption campaign. Those people who felt that the happiness of the Chinese population as a whole had not increased in the past decade, explained this by reference to the negative side-effects of rapid economic growth in China or the persisting inequalities between individuals. There are also differences regarding age, gender and class in people's attitudes and responses to the upward happiness trend. In terms of the noticeable increase in happiness in 2008, the Olympics Games hosted by China that year could be an explanation, but it would seem not the definitive one, since over half of my middle-class sample did not relate the Games to their individual happiness. The wording change in 2008 might also shape how people responded to the happiness question (and in fact 2008 shows the largest standard deviation in the CGSS samples in all tables indicating more variation in responses). The qualitative interviews, the findings of which will be presented in the next chapter, will help me to explore how individuals themselves teased out the ambiguities and nuances of the concepts of *kuaile* and *xingfu*.

Socio-demographic differences within the middle class have also been found to impact on reported happiness. The service class were more likely to report being happy than the self-employed and the routine non-manuals. In terms of age differences, the middle-aged middle class reported to be the least happy, and the elderly were the happiest. There is no major difference in mean self-reported difference between men and women when considering all age groups. However, when taking into account age differences in exploring gender-happiness relationships, men and women in different age categories reported happiness differently. Young women seem to be as happy as their male counterparts. In contrast,

middle-aged and elderly women were unhappier than men in the same age categories (and both these findings were statistically significant). Han Chinese were happier than the non-Han (although the small numbers mean caution is needed here). Regarding personal life, those who were married were more likely to report being happy than those who had never been married and those who were separated/divorced/widowed. Those who had children also appeared to be happier than those without children and being married and having children revealed a statistically significant relationship.

These are the general patterns of the intra-group differences in self-reported happiness among the middle class in China demonstrated by the survey data. However, it is important to treat these descriptive statistics as just that; inference cannot and should not be drawn to the wider population from the data included, nor was this the purpose of this thesis. Besides, the reasons why a certain socio-demographic group is more likely to report a higher level of happiness than the others cannot be elicited from these quantitative data. In the subsequent empirical chapters, qualitative findings will be used to shed light on the meaning of happiness (Chapter 5), how Chinese individuals perceive their socioeconomic status subjectively, and why subjective class identification is a better predictor of individual happiness than occupational class (Chapter 6), and how individual experience of happiness differs by age, gender, class, ethnicity, marital status and the presence or not of children (Chapter 7).

Chapter 5 What is happiness to Chinese people? Defining the concept of *xingfu*

Before exploring intra-individual differences in the levels of self-reported happiness of the Chinese middle class, it is important to understand what 'happiness' means for them. In this chapter, I present the findings from interviews in which respondents explained how they perceived happiness in relation to their own lives. Recognising the difficulty for respondents of articulating the meaning of such an abstract and philosophical concept, I started by asking them to tell me what immediately came to mind when they heard the word 'happiness (*xingfu*[87])'. For all research participants a positive, warm image of happiness was evoked. However, their initial imaginings of what constitutes happiness can be categorised into two broad forms. One form concretised the concept of 'happiness' by reference to practical motifs and actions (e.g., harmonious intra-family relations, a stable and decent level of salary, less life pressure, etc.) that represented happiness for them. Interviewees sometimes mentioned more than one thing that constituted happiness, but first and foremost, they generally accorded importance to their families, which is consistent with the familial centric perspective of individual happiness found in most recent happiness studies in China (e.g. Davis, 2019; Hsu, 2019b). The second form of response, in contrast, did not directly indicate 'what happiness is' but employed synonyms or images to symbolise happiness in an abstract way.

This first question provided space for my informants to reflect on, and clarify through their own questions, any ambiguity they identified in the question itself. Thus, although I chose the term *xingfu* when introducing the question of what they associated with happiness, this did not close down, but opened up the question of how they imagined happiness. This was evident from the way, in the course of reflection, they articulated the difference between *xingfu* and *kualie*. In so doing, they used the term *kuaile* to describe positive emotional feelings. *Xingfu*, in contrast, was equated with whether they felt they had been living a good life. *Xingfu* was thus reserved for a state that did not come and go as easily as people's feelings, but that was deeper and more lasting. These provisional discussions helped me later in my

[87] I used the Chinese characters *xingfu*, which is now the commonly used and standard translation for the English word 'happiness' (Chen, 2019; Hsu, 2016; Wielander, 2018).

attempt to make sense of people's understanding of happiness. At the same time, they prepared respondents for more specific questions that I asked later in the interview to help me understand how these understandings of the concept might affect people's responses to the CGSS survey.

This chapter is organised into four sections. The first and second sections draw on interviewees' understandings of what happiness is. The third section considers in more depth the structure of happiness (*xingfu*) and distinguishes between the characteristics of its two components, the affective and cognitive. The final section uses the respondents' understandings of *xingfu* and *kuaile* to reflect on the validity of the survey measures of happiness used in the available CGSS surveys.

5.1 Happiness (*xingfu*) is a good life

My findings support Hsu's (2019a) argument that happiness is defined as a morally good life in contemporary China. Most of my informants defined happiness in a concrete and specific way by citing a set of life goals that were important for their achievement of a better, happier life, which included the domains of family and work. On the one hand, their answers reflected the subjective nature of happiness, given that each individual might set and strive for different goals that they considered would bring happiness. On the other hand, their specific ideas of what happiness is were more or less shaped by social expectations, i.e. what they thought happiness ought to be. These two clear aspirations and/or goals of attaining happiness through the maintenance of family relationship, on the one hand, and professional success, on the other, are consistent with the first two moral strands identified by Hsu (2019a). Probably due to the fact that my interview sample was not drawn from specific professional groups, who sought to make a difference in others' lives (e.g. social workers), the third moral strand extrapolated based on Madsen (2019a) and Chen (2019) – striving for the greater good – was not explicitly mentioned by my interviewees as an important source shaping their visions of happiness.

5.1.1 A healthy or harmonious family

Almost every middle-class interviewee saw family as being the key to their happiness; this holds true across all the three sub-classes. Commonly used expressions were: ‘a healthy family (*jiankang de jiating*)’, ‘a harmonious family (*hemu de jiating*)’ and ‘family happiness (*jiating xingfu*)’. These findings demonstrate that the very traditional notion of happiness that places emphasis on family remains prominent and widespread. This is evident from my conversation with Fang (female, middle-aged) who believed that family harmony was the foundation for achieving a happy and successful life:

> Interviewer: So, family comes first?
>
> Fang: Of course, without a doubt.
>
> Interviewer: Have you found a tendency, or have you ever noticed that others in your circle when friends, colleagues, and relatives talk about happiness, their first response is ‘family’?
>
> Fang: Yes, I have noticed this tendency, and it is like a knee-jerk reaction [laughs]. Because you know, for our ordinary people (*lao baixing*), I feel family happiness is the main thing for everybody. This might translate to a higher level also, that of the whole country. It is common sense that only when our country becomes prosperous and powerful can everybody’s family be happy […] I now feel that family happiness is the fundamental, true happiness.

Fang’s answer also suggests how family happiness intersects with happiness at the national level. Their relationship, according to her, is two-way; the family happiness of each individual adds up to happiness of society as a whole, whilst, at the same time, improving national happiness benefits everyone and their family. In this sense, everyone bears a social responsibility for preserving harmonious family relationships, which serves to maximise the harmony within their communities. However, Fang herself did not explicate whether she felt

a sense of mission – for the greater good – to engage in maintaining or promoting family happiness. She indicates only that, for her, family happiness is 'fundamental' and 'the main thing'.

Since the cultural value of family-centrism continues to be of importance to people's happiness in today's China, it follows that we need to ask what people consider to be the necessary conditions for having a healthy or harmonious family. The first condition interviewees mentioned was that a healthy family required its individual members – especially the elderly (i.e. the interviewee's parents and/or parents-in-law if they were married) – to be healthy physically and to be blessed with longevity. As Weiguo (male, middle-aged) put it, 'Happiness is just […] the health of the elderly. I hope my parents will be healthier and healthier, so that there is no need for me to worry.'. Thus, although most participants suggested being healthy was one of the necessities for happiness, they were concerned, first and foremost, about the health of their family members. Only Xiulan, who was in her seventies, associated 'whether or not you have good health' with one's own happiness, because, as she stated, 'to stay healthy and live as long as possible is a common expectation for every old person'.

Secondly, a healthy family does not just signify the maintenance of the physical health of all family members, but also prescribes harmonious interpersonal relationships within the family unit. A 'happy family' is considered synonymous with 'harmony':

> Happiness includes two parts; one is material life, the other is spiritual life. Spiritual life is at experience level, right? That is, whether you are happy or not, especially with your family. We call it 'harmony'… whether your family is harmonious or not, that's it. (Qingping, male, elderly)

> Happiness, well, I think my family can be counted as a happy family. The reason is quite simple – because we are living in harmony compared with everybody else. We are happy, no disputes, and we respect each other. (Jun, male, middle-aged)

The concept of ‘family member’ is not limited to those living together under one roof. The latter was usually referred to as the ‘small family’ (i.e. nuclear family) by participants. Interviewees made a distinction between ‘small family’ and ‘big family’ (i.e. extended family) in which direct relatives may not physically live together (e.g. parents, parents-in-law, siblings). The relationship between/with one’s siblings also contributes to the climate of a harmonious family:

> This concept is like this…in the big family, like my parents, my brother and sisters, my role is to try my best to make everyone feel harmonious. The last time I went back [to my hometown], my two younger sisters had a quarrel over some trivial issue and they started to give each other the cold shoulder, which was really stressful. Then I managed to bring them together, to be the person taking on this responsibility. This [big family] includes my parents-in-law as well. Only after I have sorted out big family issues can I take good care of our small family. [Small family] is my wife plus our son. (Yuanchao, male, elderly)

Thirdly, interviewees who were themselves parents highlighted the importance of having sensible and dutiful children[88] to both their family and individual happiness. The parents among my interviewees liked to note that children who heeded their parents’ advice, and had turned out well, were a great source of happiness:

> I feel very happy. Why? […] my children are all the obedient type, I don’t worry too much. Besides they all study very well, without me prodding them, and went to the top universities. (Jun)

> It is really simple to answer. Happiness is… I hope my child has a smooth future, hope she graduates with academic excellence, and after that she will have a good job. I also expect she will find the right kind of guy, and yes, this is my happiness. (Weiguo)

[88] Being taken care of by responsible children is also important, particularly to the elderly Chinese’s individual happiness. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 7, Section 7.3.3.

We can also see that all three characteristics that are demanded for family harmony and happiness are non-material and highly emotionally laden. However, in some senses, for promoting or maintaining a healthy family, higher levels of material resources may be associated with physical healthiness of the elderly. This could be a reflection of the relatively good socio-economic situations of these members of the Chinese middle class, which lead them to be less concerned with economic well-being in ensuring harmony with family members.

5.1.2 Hard work

In addition to a happy and harmonious family, the second most frequently cited indicator of happiness related to participants' employment [89]. My 51 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in 2018 and the inspirational slogan of the year for 2018 – 'happiness is achieved through hard work (*xingfu doushi fendou chulai de*)' – was frequently quoted in explaining the relationship of work to individual happiness. This phrase was pronounced by Xi Jinping in the president's New Year greetings speech on New Year's Eve, 2017[90] and it appeared to resonate among my middle-class informants who were keen to note the importance of hard work to happiness[91].

However, interviewees also revealed that they were living under high levels of stress on their path to achieving happiness through hard work. Accordingly, 'less/no stress' was considered a desirable life situation. This is expressed by Weiguo, who notes that 'individually, my own

[89] The initial question put to interviewees concerned their immediate associations with what constituted 'happiness'. The responses suggested they pursued what they understood as a good life in both family and work domains – to use Hsu's (2019b) expression, they strived to 'have it all'. In these initial reflections on happiness, the potential tensions between maintaining family harmony or fulfilling expectations from family members and individual career achievements were largely unarticulated. However, as interviewees discussed happiness in more detail, such tensions became apparent, for example, young people's experience of frustrations or stresses due to the discrepancy between what their parents or parents-in-law expected of them and their perceptions of a good life. Such examples are discussed in subsequent sections and chapters.

[90] See http://www.china.org.cn/china/2017-12/31/content_50181054.htm [Accessed in April 2020]

[91] This political reference articulates but does not explain my middle-class interviewees' association of happiness with hard work. This association, in my view, had already been established. The president's speech simply gave them a go-to phrase – 'happiness is achieved through hard work (*xingfu doushi fendou chulai de*)' – with which to express it.

happiness comes from less stress, chiefly from my work. I hope for lots of good rest. It… [sigh] is too much hard work.’ However, for many interviewees, although less stress would certainly improve their sense of happiness or make them more satisfied with life, ‘too much hard work’ or ‘more stress’ did not necessarily lead to unhappiness. All the same, they might sometimes fantasise about a life free from any stress. Annie (female, middle-aged) said this formed the basis of her daydreams: ‘happiness, I feel…I think it means no stress, like the popular saying – “I wish to sleep in every day whilst counting money till my hands cramp”. Don’t rush to deny it [laughs]! This is everyone’s dream, huh?’

Nonetheless, at the same time, Annie clearly recognised that complete avoidance of stress was not possible in real life. Interviewees, including Annie herself, understood that experiencing a higher level of stress or anxiety as a result of a high-pressured but high-achieving job was normal. The old adage ‘What you plant now, you will harvest later (*you fuchu, cai huiyou shouhuo*)’ was quoted several times by some interviewees. It seemed that happiness came at a price; stress, tiredness or other negative emotions resulting from hard work was the price you had to pay. For example, Weiguo, one of the leading surgeons in his department, was aware that he had gained a good reputation, status and material prosperity through his hard work, and therefore, he had a positive perspective on the resulting stress.

5.2 Happiness (*xingfu*) is to feel happy

In contrast to the majority of interviewees, who associated happiness (*xingfu*) with their perceptions of a good life, a few respondents equated happiness with feeling positive emotions. Hao (male, middle-aged) and Yinghua (female, middle-aged) used synonymous terms denoting a variety of positive feelings to communicate their understandings of happiness. For Yinghua, these terms included ‘healthy, stable, moderate, harmonious, and peaceful’. Hao unpicked what happiness meant by commenting, ‘Happiness (*xingfu*), these two characters… Wow! It’s so broad, isn’t it? (It) is being cheerful (*kaixin*), happy (*kuaile*), and delighted (*gaoxing*).

For Hao, '*kuaile*', '*kaixin*' and '*gaoxing*' are synonyms; they all convey the state of 'feeling good'. In the case of Yinghua, her use of terms such as 'healthy' seems straightforward and referred to both a vigorous body and a healthy mind. But what did she mean when she associated 'happy' with being 'stable', 'moderate' etc.? When asked to be more specific, and to give examples for what she meant when she used these synonyms, Yinghua said again that various kinds of things or situations could evoke feelings of happiness, and that the list was too extensive to summarise. For both Hao and Yinghua, it seems that rather than being a state of mind, happiness is an event-associated emotion.

Hongmei (female, middle-aged) argued that happiness could consist of happy, satisfying emotions felt immediately upon the act of fulfilment:

> mostly, happiness is a kind of feeling. When you achieve something you have always wished for, or when you try desperately to get close to a goal, satisfying emotions will arise spontaneously. Well, I reckon this feeling is basically happiness.

Similarly, when hearing the word 'happiness', Yi (male, young) began to search his memories for happy moments. As Yi expressed it, 'as you are now asking me about happiness, in this moment, I recalled my memories, the happiest moment I have experienced in these days just re-appeared. My little boy can ride a bicycle, you know, that's, a wow!' Yi constructed his happiness through recalling a series of happy scenes that he had recently experienced. He then picked out the happiest one; his toddler son had figured out how to ride a bike, which became a source of happiness that enabled him to feel happy every time he recalled that memory.

So far in this chapter, we have considered the immediate associations of respondents with happiness and, as they reflected further on what happiness meant to them, what its constituent elements might be. They primarily used the Mandarin phrase *xingfu,* which has been widely acknowledged as the Chinese equivalent of happiness, when referring to

happiness[92]. Accordingly, I asked them for their impression of happiness using the term *xingfu*. The findings of my qualitative interviews suggest that when Chinese people saw or heard the word happiness (*xingfu*), they could either associate it with a state of 'being' after a conscious appraisal or just with the elusive 'feeling' of positive emotion (*kuaile*) which they experienced.

Most people tended to associate *xingfu* with life evaluation: whether (aspects of) their life were considered happy. They equated happiness with a harmonious and healthy family and/or hard work. According to such interpretations, the nature of happiness could be referred to as a series of subjective criteria of 'what constitutes a good life', and their sense of happiness (*xingfu*) is an outcome of their positive evaluation of their own lives in relation to these standards. However, a few interviewees suggested that *xingfu* was synonymous with other terms denoting any delightful and warm feeling, for example, '*kuaile*'. Happiness (*xingfu*), in this sense, means to feel happy through the experience of any event or situation that evokes such feelings.

However, the relationship between *kuaile* and *xingfu* remained unclear from these general references to what constitutes happiness. Since the identity or difference between these two notions is central to my exploration of the meaning of happiness in the Chinese context, in the next section I elicit the differences, as well as the connections, between *xingfu* and *kuaile*.

5.3 The relationship between '*xingfu*' and '*kuaile*'

In order to explore more about what respondents understood as 'feeling happy', I asked them to recall any particular periods when they had felt happy and when they had felt not so happy. In these questions, I used the Mandarin phrase '*kuaile*'. I then asked them if they discerned or perceived any difference between the term '*kuaile*' and '*xingfu*'. Although *kuaile* and *xingfu*

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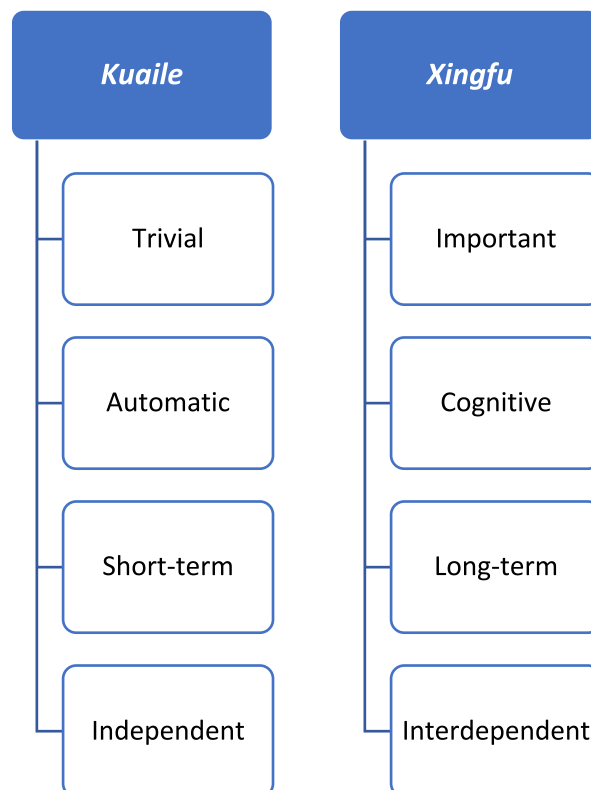
[92] It is not possible to know whether using *xingfu* prior to *kuaile* in eliciting the meaning of happiness might have encouraged research participants to focus on the first term. However, at least in this study, most participants differentiated *xingfu* from *kuaile*, and were able to provide justifications for the distinctions. Thus, it is proposed that any influence arising from using either *xingfu* or *kuaile* in the first instance is overridden by subsequent extended discussion during the in-depth interviews with research participants.

may be used interchangeably in everyday life, the vast majority of my interviewees (47 out of 51) distinguished between *kuaile* and *xingfu* by suggesting that *kuaile* related more to emotional experiences, while *xingfu* denoted contentment or satisfaction with one's life. Examining how respondents differentiated between the two notions, however, revealed that the distinction between *kuaile* and *xingfu* is, in fact, far more complex. Respondents' articulations of the meaning of the two concepts suggest four key differences between *kuaile* and *xingfu*, which are captured in Figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1 – The differences between *xingfu* and *kuaile*



5.3.1 Trivial vs. important aspects of life

People could feel happy (*kuaile*) with 'little things' (Qingyun, male, young) or 'the bits and pieces in our life' (Lily, female, young). As Byron (male, middle-aged) states, '*kuaile* is essentially found in the bits and bobs of life, it is very easy to find, while *xingfu* is not easy to attain as it concerns our life-as-a-whole.' *Xingfu*, is thus understood as a summary or

evaluation of one's life, which is much broader than *kuaile*. However, not every life event that we feel happy with leads us to experience a higher level of *xingfu*:

> You cannot definitely say that winning a basketball game brings you happiness (*xingfu*). (Boyong, male, middle-aged)

> In our China, *xingfu* implies something comprehensive. You can attain *kuaile* by a short nice trip, or a reunion party with your old classmate. But *xingfu* is not that simple, it is like a summation of your life. It includes many aspects - family, work, the education of your children, yes, a lot of things. (Fang)

In this respect, the attainment of *kuaile* is a lot easier than *xingfu*. *Kuaile* can be readily experienced in daily life. However, that which improves one's sense of *kuaile*, such as going on a wonderful trip or throwing a party, may not necessarily result in any impact on one's happiness or *xingfu*. Huang (male, middle-aged) illustrated the point that change in *kuaile* may not affect *xingfu* by recounting his recent experience of losing tens of thousands of *yuan* on the stock market as a result of the US-China trade war. However, he insisted that this professedly unhappy event was less important and was 'just a trifle' in his life; it did not impact his level of *xingfu*, which was associated with 'more important things':

> […] Yesterday I was unhappy when I knew the trade war hit stock markets. Tens of thousands of *yuan*! […] I felt unhappy (*bu kuaile*) yesterday, […] but that loss was just a trifle in my life, I have much more important things to do, so I am still *xingfu*. […] happiness is a very broad concept, comprising all aspects of our life - career, family, familial harmony… after considering all these things, I am fairly *xingfu*.

Thus, a sense of *kuaile* may be found in every 'little thing' or 'bits and bobs' in our life'. However, *xingfu* consists only of aspects of life that are considered important to contribute to a good life, and, for Huang, happiness (*xingfu*) came from family and career. Only if his experience of *kuaile* related to his standards of what a good life was (e.g. a successful career, familial harmony) could it affect his sense of *xingfu*. This limited sense of *kuaile*, which is

sourced from family happiness or individual fulfilment only, is referred to by Madsen (2019a) as ‘day-to-day happiness’, that is a momentary, immediate sensation aroused during daily interactions with others (usually family members, friends, and colleagues) or processes of achieving a goal at work, and can contribute to ‘ultimate happiness’ or *xingfu*. Although Madsen (2019a) uses the Chinese expression *kuaile* to convey the meaning of day-to-day happiness, for my interview findings, Madsen’s concept of day-to-day happiness only partially translates what *kuaile* is. In this study, the feeling of *kuaile* might be spontaneously triggered by anything, including feelings not associated with the two main good-life indicators (i.e. family and work) or could even lack cognitive meaning, as discussed in the subsection below. This suggests that, contrary to Madsen’s (2019a) understanding of happiness, quotidian, temporary bits and bobs of affective sensations are not transformed into overall happiness through a cumulative process and, indeed not every piece of *kuaile* can shape or be accumulated into overall happiness or *xingfu*.

5.3.2 Automatic vs. Cognitive happiness

Several interviewees suggested *kuaile* to be an instinctive expression without, or with limited, thinking activity; it is something ‘even an animal can feel’ (Yinghua). Thus, *kuaile* was imagined as something directly observed on the surface of the body which went no deeper. As Yang (male, middle-aged) put it, ‘we can tell if someone is *kuaile* through the facial expression muscle’. As *kuaile* is assumed to be an automatic, bodily reaction, it is external to people’s life goals or motives, such as harmony in the family and achievement at work, which are considered to be important reference standards for happiness, as expressed below:

> sometimes you are amused by a joke, you may feel *kuaile* at that moment. But within a few seconds, other things might start to make you annoyed. *Xingfu*… I mean when I make progress toward my purpose, I feel very happy (*xingfu*). Because this is related to my life and what I am trying to achieve, it is from my internal thinking. (Yi)

According to Yi, *kuaile* is automatically generated when enjoying a joke, and is experienced as the surface level of happiness. In contrast, *xingfu* digs deeper into one's conscious mind. As Yi argues, it is experienced after 'internal thinking' about the progress made towards what he was trying to achieve for a good life.

5.3.3 Short-term vs. long-term happiness

This sense of the ephemeral nature of *kuaile* – that it comes and goes along with the ebbs and flows of life – is captured in the general tendency of interviewees to envisage *xingfu* and *kuaile* as having different time frames. *Kuaile* is seen as a short-term experience – a feeling that is not stable and fades quickly. For example, Huang had felt unhappy on the day before our interview as a result of his worries about China's stock market. Nevertheless, he claimed to be happy (*kuaile*) on the day of our interview and reflected on the capricious nature of *kuaile*:

> […] today I am happy (*kuaile*) […] It is normal that you have to deal with unanticipated things every day. You don't know what you will come across. So, when it happens, you experience emotional ups and downs.

Thus*,* *kuaile* is fleeting and episodic, while *xingfu*, in contrast, is enduring, and draws on long-term experience. This is expressed by Jun:

> *Kuaile* is momentary. People have pleasure (*xi*), anger (*nu*), sorrow (*ai*), joy (*le*), which happens and ends in a flash. However, *xingfu* lasts longer – it is not just felt at this or that moment, but exists, rather, over a long period of time.

5.3.4 Independent vs. interdependent understandings of happiness

As stated in Section 5.1.1, *xingfu* is highly family-oriented, as demonstrated by the fact that most interviewees prioritised the happiness of their family when considering how good their life was. Carl (male, young) distinguished *xingfu* from *kuaile* as follows:

> I found I can be *kuaile* on my own…but for *xingfu*, I feel it must come from more than just one person, rather… it is from a bunch of people. It is not that easy to achieve because it is associated with collective matters… It depends on my relationship with others, more specifically, with my family and friends.

According to Carl, *xingfu* depends on 'collective matters' and to achieve it, he needed to have a good relationship with his family and friends. As discussed in Chapter 2.2.1, happiness is culturally relative, and the understanding of happiness is related to how the 'self' is constructed. In East Asian cultures the boundary between the 'self' and the 'other' is blurred; the self is constructed as an interdependent entity, leading to a socially oriented conception of happiness (Lu and Gilmour, 2004). This relational perspective of happiness is not confined to the family sphere (Davis, 2019; Hsu, 2019b), but can extend to a lifelong and fulfilling friendship (Farrer, 2019). Perceiving *xingfu* as interdependent, I suggest, is an expression of how harmonious relationships are central to Chinese people's understandings of happiness. *Kuaile*, in contrast, is understood as a spontaneous reaction that occurs when people soak up the things they enjoy and may occur independently from their sense of *xingfu*.

The findings outlined above demonstrate that how people understand *xingfu* and *kuaile* differs. Only a small proportion of participants (4 out of 51) maintained that *kuaile* was similar to *xingfu* or happiness. Two respondents, for example, claimed the terms mean the 'same thing':

> Honestly, I don't know very much about the word *xingfu*. *Kuaile* literally means *kaixin* (cheerful) or satisfying. Or at least I think so. As for me, I rarely use *xingfu*, because *xingfu and kuaile* are the same thing and I definitely prefer to use *kuaile*. (Xiaofei, male, young)

> [They are] Exactly the same. Because according to my understanding, no one would be willing to sit down and think, and to differentiate *xingfu* and *kuaile*. In English, *xingfu* is translated as 'happy', so is *kuaile*. Therefore, at least for me, I haven't found any differences between the two. (Audrey, female, young)

In response to being asked to reflect further on the two terms which the four interviewees had equated earlier, two of them reasserted that they saw no difference between the meaning of *xingfu* and *kuaile*, and they had habitually employed these two concepts in the same way. Surprisingly, the other two interviewees began to consider their previous statements critically. They had never thought about the subtle nuances between *xingfu* and *kuaile* as they had always used these phrases interchangeably in daily life. The discussion had led them to reflect and clarify what they were really thinking. On reflection, they still felt that *kuaile* was similar to *xingfu* but not completely the same. This is expressed in the conversation below:

> Xiaofei: Because my family is around, the company of my parents, and… friendship. I am happy (*kuaile*) every day, I experience happiness (*xingfu*) in this way. At least I get three good meals[93] a day [laugh] and have nothing to worry out. I guess that's it.
>
> Interviewer: Right, so you think 'relationship with others' and 'adequate standard of living' that you mentioned earlier are the most important factors for your happiness (*xingfu*)?
>
> Xiaofei: Yeah…but sometimes they're not.
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean by 'sometimes they're not'?
>
> Xiaofei: Sometimes I find myself joyful (*kuaile*), I would then say I am happy (*xingfu*). *Kuaile* is only the emotional part, isn't it? […] I think *xingfu* may depend on my perceptions. I have to figure out if I am happy (*xingfu*) or not, depending on those standards.

In the last line of this conversation, Xiaofei suggests that *xingfu* and *kuaile* might operate in different ways after all. *Kuaile* is assessed possibly by the frequency of positive emotions he

[93] Note that Xiaofei was not talking about 'happy meals' as explored in Farrer's (2019) research on culinary happiness. Xiaofei used the expression of 'three good meals a day' to pithily describe himself as an easily satisfied person who felt there was nothing more to be worried about once he was protected from the bodily experience of deprivation in the form of hunger.

experienced. For Xiaofei, *xingfu* needs two conditions to be met: one is the quality of his kinships and friendships, the other is to have an adequate standard of living. We can also see that, for Xiaofei, *xingfu* and *kuaile* are connected. Xiaofei perceived *kuaile* and *xingfu* as related rather than completely independent, and this led him to suspect that the two were interdependent; the presence of one affected the presence of the other. The happy, joyful feeling he experienced every day was due to his good relationship with his parents and friends, which was defined by him as a key source of happiness (*xingfu*).

In this way, *xingfu* may have the ability to shape the feeling of *kuaile*. A higher level of *xingfu* or a good life may be accompanied by a higher level of *kuaile* or feeling happy. However, *kuaile* cannot affect the level of *xingfu*, as clarified earlier in this section; *kuaile* comes from trivial things in life, while *xingfu*, or the evaluation of life-as-a-whole, depends on more important factors which are the standards of what is considered to be a good life. For example, Huang, reflecting on his recent bad luck on the stock market, noted that he was not happy at that moment when he knew he had had lost money. but he could still experience a higher sense of *xingfu*. *Kuaile*, which is understood as a transient, affective experience automatically generated from all the ebbs and flows of ordinary life, may make no difference to a person's life assessment (*xingfu*). It thus seems that *xingfu* may be understood to operate at a higher level, to be above the experience of *kuaile*.

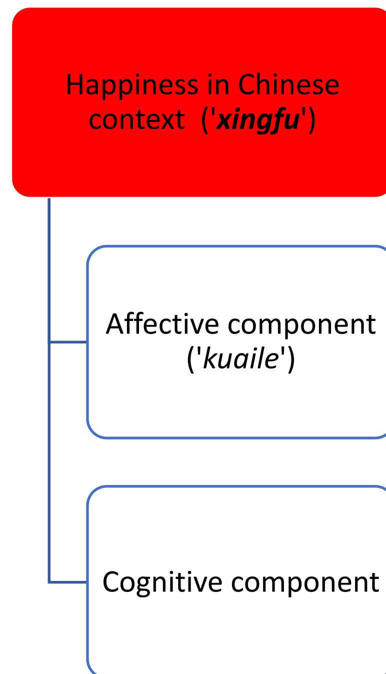
In Veenhoven's (1984) definition of overall happiness as reviewed in Chapter 2.1, happiness consists of two different components: the affective, hedonic component, i.e. the fleeting and episodic sense of 'feeling happy'; and the cognitive component, i.e. the sense of 'contentment' evaluated on the basis of the fit (or gap) between one's standards of what constitutes a good life, and perceived reality. The distinctions between the affective and the cognitive components of happiness are illustrated in Chapter 2, Figure 2.2 (for a more detailed exploration of this, see Chapter 2, Section 2.1). Figure 2.2 indicates that the affective component is a largely automatic, unconscious, and barely controllable feeling. The cognitive component, on the contrary, is a thoughtful, deliberate process of assessing the degree to which the standards constructed by us are met.

Xingfu is considered to be the Chinese equivalent of happiness by many happiness researchers and sinologists (e.g. Chen, 2019; Hsu and Madsen, 2019; Wielander, 2018). As suggested by Chen (2019), the modern usage of the phase *xingfu* often represents a combined experience of '*le*' (or its modern expression '*kuaile*') and '*fu*'. *Kuaile* means inner joy and requires only minimum external conditions, whereas *fu* is used to describe the condition of having achieved external (usually material) prosperity. In this way, the structure of *xingfu* is comparable to that of happiness as understood in Veenhoven's (1984) framework in that it consists of two components – affect and contentment.

Based on the findings from interviews, *kuaile*, or feeling happy, is, evidently, comparable to the affective component of happiness. And the Chinese way of understanding happiness focuses more on its cognitive component. As outlined above, almost all interviewees interpreted *xingfu* in terms of its cognitive nature alone. When talking about *xingfu* they referred to their appraisals of life and made clear distinctions between this and the affective component of happiness – *kuaile* – which was understood as the positive emotions spontaneously arising from pleasant experiences. *Kuaile*, requires no, or minimal, external conditions, and therefore it can be evoked automatically. It can be referred to as an instinctive, bodily reaction, and 'we can tell if someone is *kuaile* through the facial expression muscle' (Yang). The cognitive component, in contrast, digs deeper into our conscious minds, and Chinese individuals place much emphasis on their standards or expectations of what a good life might be in reflecting on their happiness. Based on these findings, and drawing on Veenhoven's model (as presented in Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.2), Figure 5.2 depicts how we might conceptualise the structure of *xingfu* as consisting of an affective component (*kuaile*) alongside its cognitive component[94].

[94] One example of the Chinese equivalent of the cognitive component might be '*manzu*' or '*manyi*', conveying the meaning of 'contentment' or 'satisfaction' in English. This term was mentioned by a number of interviewees, and it was used in its adjectival form, for example, the phrase 'I feel very *manzu/manyi*' means that 'I feel very contented or satisfied'. The recent World Value Survey Wave 7 (2017-2020) used the term '*manzu/manyi*' in its Mandarin Chinese questionnaire to translate 'satisfied' in assessing life satisfaction (As clarified in Chapter 2, overall life satisfaction is a synonym for overall happiness). (See the questionnaire from http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp for original English question (Q49) and Chinese question (Q49), Accessed in November 2020]). Further research is needed to clarify and illuminate the concept of '*manzu/manyi*' or other interchangeable synonyms to see if they provide further insight into the nature of cognitive happiness. It may also be worth investigating the relationship between *kuaile* and *manzu/manyi* in the way the relationship between *kuaile* and *xingfu* has been explored here.

Figure 5.2 – The structure of happiness ('*xingfu*'), based on 51 qualitative interviews in Guangzhou, 2018



To sum up, this section has explored how *xingfu* is understood differently from *kuaile*. In terms of the relationship between *xingfu* and *kuaile*, *kuaile* is considered to be the affective component of happiness (*xingfu*). Given that Chinese people draw heavily on the cognitive component of happiness to report and narrate their experiences of happiness, the choice of the wording in social surveys to ask about happiness is crucial. Depending upon what researchers are measuring, the most appropriate word must be selected if the validity of the study is to be ensured. However, with reference to the CGSS survey, the wording in the happiness question was changed in the 2008 questionnaire. In 2008, survey respondents were asked to report their level of *kuaile*, while the term used in questions in other years (both prior to and after 2008) was *xingfu*. Did the wording variation influence how people answered the question? To explore whether this was the case, I introduced questions in my qualitative interviews that allowed interviewees to reflect on the connotations of each of these response options were they to encounter them in a survey. In the following section, I explore the potential impact of this inconsistency of the wording used on the assessment of people's level of happiness in the CGSS survey.

5.4 Reflections on the wording in the CGSS survey

The CGSS used three forms of question to assess happiness. In Table 5.1 (below), the measurements of happiness from each year's CGSS survey questionnaire are listed. Q1 and Q2[95] ask participants to evaluate whether their life-as-a-whole can be counted as '*xingfu*' or not, and which are typical measures of overall happiness. However, Q3 (used in 2008) uses the expression '*kuaile*', which is primarily related to positive emotions or good mood (Hsu et al., 2017), and is thus likely to evoke the affective component of happiness – a fleeting sense of 'feeling happy'.

Table 5.1 – The Happiness Question from Each Year's Dataset

Happiness question in CGSS	Question number	Year	**Component of happiness being asked**
On the whole, how do you feel about your life?	Q1	2003 2005 2006	Overall happiness (*xingfu*)
On the whole, are you happy or not?	Q2	2008	Feeling happy (*kuaile*)
On the whole, do you think you live a happy life?	Q3	2010 2011 2012 2013 2015	Overall happiness (*xingfu*)

Most interviewees understood the nuances between the question about affective happiness (Q2) and the question about overall happiness including affective and cognitive components (Q1 and Q3). Their reflections on these questions suggested they were very clear in their own minds about what questions using '*xingfu*' (Q1 and Q3) as well as the question using '*kuaile*' (Q2) intended to measure. Three distinctions were noted and are illustrated in Figure 5.3 below.

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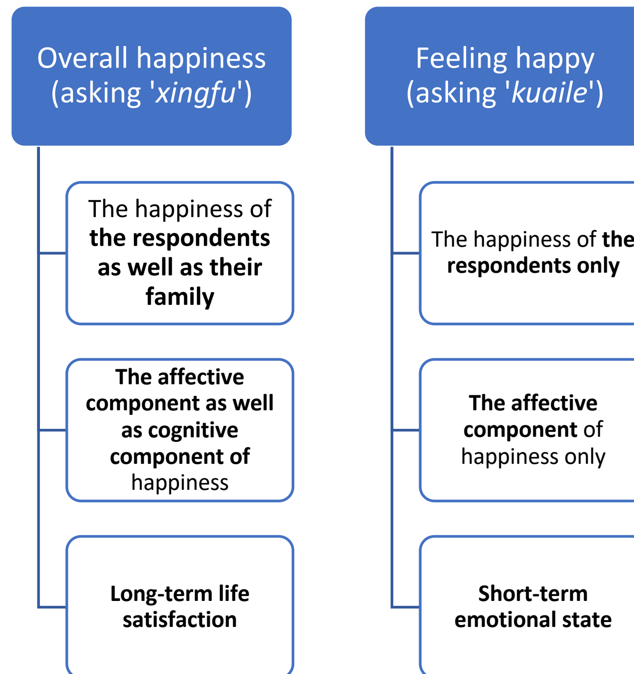
[95] Note that the question number listed in Table 5.1 was not the question number in the survey, but a label I am using here for ease of discussion.

Figure 5.3 – The differences between 'xingfu' and 'kuaile' questions used in the CGSS 2003-2015



Firstly, as discussed in the previous section, the assessment of *kuaile* depends primarily on the individual, while *xingfu* entails the well-being of their family as well. Secondly, *xingfu* is a much broader category than *kuaile*, which is understood as a purely emotional construct. As stated by Yi, to describe a person is *xingfu* means they must have 'a healthy and harmonious family', and 'a standard of living they are satisfied with'. Thirdly, *kuaile* is based on an appraisal of an interviewee's current and momentary emotional state, while *xingfu* denotes a long-term judgement on their overall satisfaction with life.

Only a few interviewees interpreted all three of the CGSS survey questions in the same way. Two of them kept to the same meanings associated with *xingfu* and *kuaile* that were used in the initial stage of the interview. It would seem then, that to them, all three questions measured the same concept of happiness regardless of the minor modifications in question wording. Although the rest of the interviewees were able to clarify at least one difference between *kuaile* and *xingfu*, they were more or less influenced by the opening phrase in Q2, 'on the whole'. In their view, Q2 asked about *kuaile*, but with the added modifying adjective 'on the whole', they assumed that Q2 was not asking just about an in-the-moment emotion

but something more long-term, and accordingly, they viewed it as another way of assessing their senses of *xingfu*, that is not dissimilar with Q1 and Q2. As Kevin (male, young) put it, ‘numerous pieces of little *kuaile* now are aggregated into a big *xingfu*’. According to him, the aggregation of short-term, momentary *kuaile,* when experienced over time, could be converted into long-term, relatively stable *xingfu*. John (male, young) illustrated this point with his experience of following the NBA Season. Over the course of several months, the exciting games became part of his life, since he took pleasure in ‘chasing’ every competition. Therefore, he also argued that *xingfu* could be an accumulation of ceaseless, persistent *kuaile*. This, again, stresses the earlier point (see Section 5.3.1) that *kuaile* experienced on a daily level can provide sources for the long-lasting evaluation of happiness or *xingfu*, but only when feelings of *kuaile* are attributable to people’s engagement in activities related to their visions of the good life.

However, a couple of interviewees argued that the two measures of overall happiness (Q1 and Q3) were not compatible with each other due to slight changes in question wording. As listed in Table 5.1, Q1 asks ‘how do you feel about your life?’, whereas Q3 asks ‘do you think you live a happy life?’. They felt that in Q1, respondents were given the power to decide for themselves what determined whether or not their lives were happy. In contrast, they noted that the phrase ‘a happy life’ in Q3 more or less insinuated what ‘a happy life’ might be. Accordingly, they understood Q3 to be asking if they thought they had or had not achieved the collectively shared notion of ‘how-life-should-be’. As expressed by Yang, Q3 required the respondent ‘to compare oneself with the social norms about what a good life should be’. For this reason, Liu (male, middle-aged) had circled different answer categories for these two questions. Liu, a middle-aged male in a senior management position in a big telecoms company, stated that he had problems feeling happiness, partly due to the huge burden of responsibility associated with his work role; accordingly, he chose the middle answer (‘hard to say happy or unhappy’) in Q1. However, in response to Q3 he gave a positive answer, indicating the objective fact that he was living a happy life. He stated that his socioeconomic position had brought him substantial social and economic capital which allowed him to easily reach his goals or to cope with various kinds of unexpected situation: ‘…I have achieved…at least, my life is happy, I mean, compared to most people…’. In other words, although both Q1

and Q3 assess overall happiness ('*xingfu*'), in Q1 happiness is perceived subjectively, but Q3 directs people towards evaluating their happiness through the eyes of others.

Based on interviewees' understandings of these questions, *kuaile* and *xingfu* are assessed by distinctive mechanisms. My findings show that the question used in 2008, which asked about people's level of *kuaile,* is completely different from the questions using the wording '*xingfu*'. This means that it is harder to compare the results about happiness in 2008 with those of other years. The quantitative findings based on the CGSS in Chapter 4 also show that a high proportion of survey respondents chose the middle answer category between 2003 and 2006 (48%, 41%, and 41% respectively). However, the proportion of respondents choosing the middle answer more than halved between 2003 and 2008 – from 48% in 2003 to just 20% in 2008. The wording of the middle category was also not consistent between 2003 and 2015. There were three different kinds of middle answers used: 'so-so' (2003; 2005; 2006; 2008), 'somewhere between unhappy and happy' (2010), and 'hard to say happy or unhappy' (2011; 2012; 2013; 2015). These different answer categories might also influence the responses of survey participants, even if they did not intend to report that they were neither happy nor unhappy.

It is worthwhile noting that since my interviewees were not a sub-sample of the CGSS survey samples, their reflections can only provide suggested explanations for why such a high proportion of survey respondents chose the neutral answer in 2003, 2005, and 2006, or why this proportion dropped dramatically in 2008. However, qualitative interviews help us to understand why people opt for the middle category or why they felt neither happy nor unhappy. The majority of my interviewees were able to give a definitive positive or negative answer – that is, they described themselves as being either happy or unhappy – in reporting their sense of happiness. Only a few interviewees chose the middle category. Three reasons for this were indicated.

Firstly, two interviewees explained that choosing the middle answer reflected their moderate personalities. They defined themselves as 'modest' people who tried to avoid being extremely negative or extremely positive when asked to describe their life experience. Secondly, my sample is drawn from the Chinese middle class, who were placed in the middle of the social

structure according to their socioeconomic attributes. Two interviewees revealed that they compared their situation with those of the people they knew and even with wider society in order to get a broader perspective. This led them to the conclusion that there were always people richer than them and people poorer than them, and thus their levels of happiness, which depended on how good their life was, were also in the middle, neither happy nor unhappy. Lastly, since happiness is an overall judgement of life, it is possible that one may experience varying levels of satisfaction from different aspects of life; people may be satisfied with one aspect of life, but unsatisfied with another. Carl (male, young) stated that he was happy about his personal life, but felt a bit unsatisfied with his work, leading him to balance the negatives and the positives in his life.

As mentioned earlier, the wording in relation to the middle category changed slightly between 2003 and 2015. However, according to the accounts of these five interviewees who maintained that they were in the middle of the happiness scale, the wording of the category had not had any impact on their decisions. This was because they already had their answers in mind even before they were made aware of what the answer categories were. This meant that I could not examine whether the inconsistency in the wording of the middle answers caused any change in people's responses. These findings, nonetheless, provide a meaningful insight into why some people avoid choosing a clear-cut answer (i.e. either happy or unhappy) in survey responses.

5.5 Conclusion

Happiness, or its Chinese equivalent *xingfu*, is subjectively experienced and comes from 'within'. This suggests that we are likely to understand what is meant by 'happiness' if we allow individuals to define happiness on their own terms. On the basis of this study, which allowed respondents to do just that, it was clear that happiness was understood in two ways: as a feeling of happiness in the moment, and as how close we feel to the goals or aspirations we set ourselves for achieving a better life. The former refers to the transient, easily influenced notion of 'feeling happy', i.e. the affective component, the latter to the long-

term state of ‘being happy’, the cognitive component. This way of conceptualising happiness supports the framework proposed in Veenhoven’s (1984) study. Madsen’s (2019a) understanding of *kuaile* (as ‘day-to-day happiness’) has been shown to illuminate particular moments of pleasure. However, the qualitative interviews in this study suggest both a broader range of experiences referred to as *kuaile* (which are not necessarily associated with the two main good-life indicators i.e. family and work) and a somewhat different relationship between *kuaile* and *xingfu* in that these quotidian, temporary bits and bobs of affective sensations are not transformed into overall happiness through a cumulative process. Thus, the data gathered for this thesis, suggests, rather, that the Chinese expression ‘*kuaile*’ might be best understood as the affective component of *xingfu*. It is worth noting that my Chinese interviewees were more inclined also to associate happiness with the cognitive component – that is, to regard happiness more as a satisfying state of life-as-a-whole than as the frequent experience of positive emotions. Interviewees argued that their sense of affect or *kuaile* could spontaneously arise from the ‘bits and pieces’ of daily experience, which did not require any external conditions to be experienced. The cognitive component, on the contrary, is the outcome of the comparison between their standards of 'what a good life constitutes' and their life in the here-and-now. The sources of *xingfu* which they identified were associated with ‘more important things’, the most frequently mentioned of which were family relationships and achievement at work. People’s understanding of ‘a good life’ is deeply embedded in the cultural construction of what a good life ought to be, which is where their standards or aspirations for a better life or a higher level of happiness come from. In the Chinese context, happiness (*xingfu*) is family-oriented, as the vast majority of my interviewees prioritised family relationships in evaluating whether they were experiencing a happy life.

Ensuring the consistency of wording is important in surveying happiness in China. Findings from qualitative interviews adds to our understanding of how such a wording change in the happiness question might impact on survey findings. Given that findings from the qualitative interviews indicated that *xingfu* and *kuaile* cannot be used interchangeably in daily discourse, social surveys which aim to measure happiness should be attentive to the wording used in relation to the meaning of happiness in order to ensure the validity of the survey results. Inconsistency in question wording across the years – for example, using *kuaile* as a substitute for *xingfu*, as happened in the 2008 questionnaire of the CGSS survey – can raise concerns

over comparability for any trend analysis, and any changes in people's responses might be partially due to the change in question wording. While interviews were not able to explain why the proportion of survey respondents choosing the middle category differed between pre-2008 and post-2008, they allow us to understand why some people were inclined to use the middle category in describing their feelings of happiness. The middle answer to the happiness question suggests a sense of middling-ness, which can reflect people's moderate personalities, middle socioeconomic status or middle level of living standards. Also, being neither unhappy nor happy can be understood as an overall judgement of balancing the negativity and the positivity in our lives.

Chapter 6 The classed nature of happiness

The primary research interest of this thesis is the exploration of how the Chinese urban middle class reports and narrates happiness. However, when individuals (classified as middle class based on their occupations) were approached for interviews during qualitative fieldwork, they often expressed surprise that they had been 'labelled' as middle class. Objective categorisations seem to have sometimes contradicted individuals' own understanding of where they stood within the social milieu. Accordingly, before proceeding to the in-depth exploration of the qualitative research findings, it is important to first address the key question of whether respondents recognised themselves as appropriate 'middle class' subjects of this research. As shown in Chapter 4 (Figure 4.1), the CGSS showed that the middle class (measured objectively by socioeconomic status) in China, reported being happy more often than the working class between 2003 and 2015. However, these 'average' trends can obscure the fact that individual middle-class respondents might report a lower sense of happiness than the average happiness score of their working-class counterparts. Such findings, that seemingly buck the trend, are also of interest, since they suggest that the relationship between happiness and objective class position is not straightforward. Socioeconomic situations are not detached from the individuals who inhabit them, but are 'felt', experienced, and inform individuals' assessments of happiness. By exploring cases where respondents, who were categorised as middle class based on their occupational status, actually perceived themselves to be in a lower socioeconomic situation and were less likely to report feeling happy, we might uncover the role of self-identified, as opposed to objective, class in explaining the relationship between class and happiness in contemporary China.

To explore this, the chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, the conceptual question of what constitutes social class in a subjective sense, compared to measuring this objectively through socioeconomic status, is addressed. This means examining how the Chinese middle class – ascribed on the basis of Goldthorpe's occupational categories – respond to their assigned social status. Do they subjectively identify with the middle-class category they are placed in? To answer these questions, first the relationship between the

Goldthorpe occupational category and subjective social status based on CGSS 2006[96] is examined. The same question is then explored in relation to the 51 interviewees in the qualitative study. In this way, first-hand personal experiences of class identity can be used to illuminate the quantitative findings and to help explain why individuals' subjective assessment of status may or may not correspond to their socioeconomic status.

In the second and the third sections, the primary qualitative data are used to explore the relationship between social class and happiness. It is important to note here that the decision to use occupational class to identify and approach potential research participants in the qualitative study was guided by the importance of ensuring congruence (in terms of the measurement of social class) between the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study; the key purpose of the qualitative interviews was to illuminate the statistical evidence based on the CGSS survey datasets that have been investigated through secondary data analysis. Moreover, as illustrated in Section 6.1 below, most interviewees demonstrated a concordant identity with their objective socioeconomic position. Thus, notwithstanding the illuminating findings on objective versus subjective class explored in this chapter, occupational class, as opposed to subjective class, continues to be used in this thesis to elaborate the relationship between happiness and social class.

[96] The CGSS 2006 is the only dataset assessing respondents' subjective class based on categorical classification. From 2008 onwards, the CGSS started to employ a numerical 10-point scale (where 1 indicates the highest and 10 indicates the lowest) assigned to a social ladder and asked respondents to select the rung on which they felt they stood. The meaning each number tried to convey, with the exception of 1 and 10, was not unambiguous, which made interpretation confusing. For example, if someone chose '2', s/he might have three possible intentions: 1) upper class; 2) lower, but still upper class; 3) lower than upper class –i.e., an upper middle socioeconomic identification. Two kinds of questions were included in CGSS 2006 in assessing people's perceptions about their social standings: one asked respondents to choose one from five hierarchical social strata – the upper, the upper middle, the middle, the lower middle, and the lower; the other, instead, asked them to define their class by selecting one pre-determinate category from the groups labelled peasants, the working class, the middle class, and the capitalist. The latter introduced the middle class as a composite without further distinguishing its sub-classes, and hence, I used the first question which seems closer to the Goldthorpe class categories as a means to measure each respondent's subjective class identification.

6.1 – The interaction between objective and subjective class

The relationship between a person's ascription to a class based on their socioeconomic position and their class identification is not straightforward. As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.3), a substantial number of studies which focus either on Western societies (e.g. Payne and Grew, 2005; Savage et al., 2001) or on China (e.g. Miao, 2017) indicate that objective class does not automatically generate subjective class identification. Only when people actively identify with others of the same socioeconomic status and consider themselves a member of the group to which they appear to belong by objective criteria, does their self-identified class concord with their objective class. Thus, middle-class status as measured by Goldthorpe's occupational scheme does not mean a middle-class identity is necessarily forged. In order to explore whether, and how strongly, the class identification of the Chinese middle class is associated with their objective class status, I used the CGSS 2006 to conduct a crosstabulation analysis, between Goldthorpe's occupational categories and respondents' subjective class identification.

6.1.1 Do subjects agree with their occupational class?

Table 6.1 and Table 6.2 below show the frequency tables of respondents' social class according, respectively, to their Goldthorpe occupational stratification and their subjective identification of social status. The Goldthorpe class variable, converted from information on respondents' non-agricultural occupations, is available in CGSS 2006 survey materials. After applying the Goldthorpe measure of class, excluding all those respondents employed in agricultural jobs during survey data collection, 6,427 observations (cases) remained from the original sample of 10,151 (reflecting the fact that 37% (3,724) of the cases in the CGSS 2006 sample were employed in agricultural jobs[97]). Table 6.1 shows that of the 6,427 non-agricultural worker respondents, 44.6% were classified objectively as working class, with 55.4%

[97] Excluding respondents who were employed in agricultural jobs during the period of data collection, the variable recording respondents' Goldthorpe class also includes: 2 unemployed; 1 job seeker; 6 housewives; 5 'no responses'; 1 'don't know'; 256 farm labourers; 46 self-employed farmers; 2 soldiers; and 2 military officers. Because these people are either taking non-agricultural occupations (e.g. farmers) or usually omitted from the Goldthorpe occupational scheme, I set them to the missing values.

(the majority) allocated to the middle class category (comprising of the three sub categories). Thus, more than half of the respondents are situated in the middle of the social hierarchy using objective measures. Hence, it is not surprising that as shown in Table 6.2 which demonstrates the proportion of each category measured subjectively, 63.4% of respondents identified themselves as non-lower class. The 8% difference between objective and subjective classification is relatively small. It would be interesting to have been able to see which individuals mapped subjectively to their objective class, and where this mapping was different, but this was not possible with the aggregated data.

Table 6.1 – Frequency Table for the Goldthorpe Class (CGSS 2006)

Goldthorpe Class	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Service class	1,162	**18**	18
Self-employed	1,105	**17.2**	35.2
Marginal middle class	1,296	**20.2**	55.4
Working Class	2,864	**44.6**	100
Total	6,427	**100**	

Table 6.2 – Frequency Table for the Subjective Class (CGSS 2006)

Subjective Class Identity	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Upper	15	**0.2**	0.2
Upper-middle	232	**3.7**	3.8
Middle	1,866	**29.4**	33.2
Lower-middle	1,915	**30.1**	63.4
Lower	2,325	**36.6**	100
Total	6,353[98]	**100**	

In order to explore the relationship between the Goldthorpe occupational categories and how individuals self-identify in terms of class, a crosstabulation of these two variables was

[98] Of the 6,427 respondents in total who gave information about their non-agricultural occupations (Table 6.1), 74 of them did not provide a valid answer to the subjective class question, and hence the total in Table 6.2 was 6,353.

conducted. The reason for the inclusion of the three sub-classes (i.e. the service class, the self-employed/small employers, and the marginal middle class) was firstly to look at intra-class differences within the broad middle class, and then to see if there are class identification differences that can be further explored in qualitative interviews. Table 6.3 below explores the relationship between occupational class and subjective class. Because the category of ‘Upper’ and ‘Upper-middle’ includes too few cases for meaningful analysis, I combined these into one category, which I named ‘Upper-middle’.

Table 6.3 – Crosstabulation Between Objective (Goldthorpe’s) and Subjective class

Goldthorpe Class	**Subjective Class Identification**				**Total**
	Upper-middle	*Middle*	*Lower-middle*	*Lower*	
Service class	**8**	**39.6**	**28.7**	**23.6**	100
	78	511	393	281	1,263
Self-employed/small employer	**4.8**	**32.5**	**30.5**	**32.3**	100
	37	306	317	313	973
Marginal middle	**3**	**30**	**30.6**	**36.3**	100
	38	419	469	530	1,456
Working class	**2.2**	**23.7**	**30.3**	**43.7**	100
	45	618	823	1175	2,661
Pearson:					
Uncorrected chi2(9) = 247.8973					
Design-based F (8.83, 56080.24) = 16.0709 P = 0.0000					
Cramer's V: 0.11404752					
Note:					
Using the command -svy: tab- to carry out a two-way tabulation analysis automatically takes the weights into account. But the Chi-square test in Stata does not allow turning on weights. In order to get a valid p-value based on weighted data, the Chi-square statistic has been converted to an F statistic.					

In Table 6.3, the first value in each cell provides row percentages for the subjective class identity, representing the number and percentage of survey respondents’ class identification for each objective class category according to the Goldthorpe occupational classification.

Results of the cross-tabulations showed that the service class were more inclined to develop upper-middle-class and middle-class identities than the self-employed, the marginal middle class, and the working class. Although the service class did self-identify with being lower class, they were almost half as likely as the working class to do so (23.6% compared to 43.7%). Of the other two sub-classes of the middle class, the marginal middle class were slightly less likely than the self-employed to forge middle-class identities[99] (63.6% compared to 67.8%).

When looking more closely at the data, over half of the service class[100] had a deflated perception of their class position, and approximately one third of the self-employed (32.3%) and marginal middle class (36.3%) subjectively identified with the lower class. The working class, in contrast, tended to have an inflated class identification, as over half of them (56.2%) identified as middle or lower-middle class.

Based on CGSS 2006 survey data, we might conclude that respondents' objective and subjective class positions show substantial discordance and that respondents from all categories of middle-class have a somewhat lower perception of their class positions. In order to find out if I could generalise the above findings to the Chinese population, I used a Chi-square test to examine the statistical significance between occupational class and subjective class and examined the p-value to see whether the findings could be inferred to the population as a whole. As shown in Table 6.3, the p-value is less than 0.05 and therefore a statistically significant relationship between respondents' occupational status and their perceived class identity can be verified (that is, we can infer this finding to the population as a whole). In addition, Cramer's V statistic is just 0.11, indicating that Chinese people's subjective self-reported class is only weakly associated with their objective socioeconomic position.

[99] I refer here to all categories of the subjective middle class, including the upper middle, middle, and the lower middle categories.

[100] By deflated class identification, I mean that respondents subjectively identified with a class category that was apparently lower than their occupational class. In the case of service class, self-reporting as lower middle class (28.7%) and lower class (23.6%) could be considered deflated perceptions. These two figures account for 52.3% of the sample.

6.1.2 Explanations for the discordance between objective and subjective class

What might explain such a weak association between occupational class and subjective class? In order to explore this question, the same class identity question used in CGSS 2006 was also used in the interview schedule in the qualitative part of the study. Based on the interview respondents' answers to, and reflections on, this question in interview, Table 6.4 constructs a cross-tabulation table to demonstrate how class identity relates to objective socioeconomic position for my interviewees.

Table 6.4 – Interaction Between Objective and Subjective Class from Interview

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Objective class</th><th colspan="4">Subjective class</th><th rowspan="2">Total</th></tr>
<tr><th>Upper-middle</th><th>Middle</th><th>Lower-middle</th><th>Lower</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Service class</td><td>20.7</td><td>41.4</td><td>34.5</td><td>3.4</td><td>100</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>12</td><td>10</td><td>1</td><td>29</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Self-employed</td><td>20</td><td>60</td><td>20</td><td rowspan="2">\</td><td>100</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>6</td><td>2</td><td>10</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Marginal middle class</td><td rowspan="2">\</td><td>27.3</td><td>72.7</td><td rowspan="2">\</td><td>100</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>8</td><td>11</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Note:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">There were 51 respondents participating in my qualitative interviews. However, one interviewee (Xiaofei, male, young) found it hard to locate himself. Therefore, I omitted his case from this table which only included those who had a clear sense of class identification.</td></tr>
</table>

The interplay between objective and subjective class looks more clear-cut (less variability) in Table 6.4 than in the findings from the CGSS 2006. In contrast to the survey findings, interviewees' subjective class identification was closely associated with their socioeconomic standing, Table 6.4 shows that almost all interviewees placed themselves somewhere within the middle class. None of the interviewees considered themselves upper class while only one considered himself lower class. Echoing the survey CGSS 2006 findings, the service class and the self-employed were more prone to embrace middle-class identities than the marginal middle class. However, 37.9% of the service class situated themselves in the lower middle and lower levels of the social hierarchy, which means, as indicated in the survey data, these individuals also held deflated perceptions of their class position.

One interviewee, Xiaofei (male, young), was excluded from the data in table 6.4 (see note in table) because he considered it difficult to 'locate' himself. This participant was a routine non-manual worker but he argued that his perception of social class was misleading and somewhat emotional as his every-day work experiences generated two kinds of class identity. Even though he was sure of his lower-level 'salariat' position – a term he used self-ironically to describe how he worked, most of the time, for his boss – he sometimes perceived himself as belonging to the category of 'upper' class, at moments when he found himself working at a more leisurely pace than many other higher-level positioned employees in the company. However, the other half of the time, especially when he was overworked and felt he was working hard to satisfy other people's ambitions, he located himself at the other end of the scale, as a physical labourer who happened to sit in a high-rise office building. Since he could not arrive at a decisive answer to the single-choice class identity question, I excluded this case from the sample included in Table 6.4.

These findings raise the interesting question of why none of the interviewees identified as upper class. From discussion in the interviews, it seems this was guided by their understanding of this group as consisting of the super-rich (e.g. Jack Ma[101]) and/or the powerful (particularly those with real political influence), or people who were exceptional in one or more field and had made a significant contribution to Chinese society or even humanity as a whole. There was a general consensus among interviewees that the upper class were not people who were encountered in everyday life, but who existed, rather, in the news or media.

When self-identifying as 'middle class', the phrase 'to fall short of the upper but to be better than the lower (*bi shang bu zu, bi xia you yu*)' was frequently used. This implies that

[101] Jack Ma is the founder and executive chairman of the E-commence giant Alibaba Group. Starting with only his bare hands, Jack Ma has transformed the entire internet industry of China. Jack Ma's inspirational start-up story enlightens every single young Chinese with dreams. 'Jack Ma' is not just a household name out of China. According to Forbes, Jack Ma's personal net worth is around $40 billion, and he has been ranked No.17 in the Forbes Billionaires 2020 list.

interviewees selected the descriptor of 'middle class' because it is literally halfway between the two extremes of the upper and the lower, as expressed below:

> Well, to me, the upper is basically the state of 'got nothing to worry about'. More specifically, they are very few, they have successful careers, and are more economically wealthy than the majority of us ordinary people. I am actually in-between, that is, if you try to compare yourself with the upper [class], they are the ones riding the horses, but there are still a lot of others dragging the handcarts, sweating behind you. We are between them, right? We are riding the donkeys [laughs]. (Yuanchao, male, elderly)

However, these findings are not necessarily indicative of a culturally distinct and unambiguous middle-class identification in any meaningful sense. This might resonate with the view, found in a substantial number of Western studies on class awareness and class identities, that most people brush class labels aside and stress their ordinariness or middlingness (Evans et al., 1992; Kelley and Evans, 1995; Savage et al., 2001). In explaining why the majority, regardless of personal economic situation and educational attainment, see themselves as middle class or just below[102], Kelley and Evans (1995) highlight the sociological mechanism of reference group processes which influence how people perceive their social position in the stratification system. In recent work on class identification, however, Bottero et al. (Bottero and Prandy, 2003; Bottero and Irwin, 2003; Bottero, 2005) demonstrate how reference groups influence class identification. They argue that people's routine interactions with others like them or with similar reference groups (such as friends, partners, and others sharing cultural similarities) can map social hierarchy and inequalities. This is well illustrated in my data by the case of Yuanchao who envisaged that there were always people above him – 'the ones riding the horses' – and below him – 'the ones dragging the handcarts, sweating behind' – in terms of socioeconomic standing. This led to his own perception of himself as

[102] Note that Kelley and Evans's (1995) study is based on the 1987-1988 'Ideology of Inequality' module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and the subjective class question used a 10-point numeric scale ranging from 'top'(100) to 'bottom'(0) in order to avoid the traditionally politicised terms 'the middle class' and 'the working class'.

a middling sort of person and helped him to articulate this identity (unlike Xiafei referred to above who was unable to reconcile the two sides of his perception).

Individuals' subjective experiences of social location hence are shaped and reinforced by their perceptions of similarities, or comparisons of dissimilarities, within their reference groups. The case of Yuanchao exemplifies how one's reference group behaviour raises one's own class awareness. He placed himself at the centre of all the people he knew or his social networks from a wider range of social locations, which helped him to reflect on class identity. In his personal world, he said, there were always people above him as well as people below him with respect to classed life opportunities, and therefore, he saw his social position as 'in-between' the upper class and the lower class.

Only three of the routine non-manual employees considered themselves middle class, and the overwhelming majority of them identified with the lower-middle class. Quite a few of these lower-middle class identifiers felt hesitant and hovered around the lower class in the first instance, bemoaning the pay and benefits they received, which put them in a comparable position to the working class. However, when asked which category they would put the physical labourers in, they suddenly realised that at least they were not working physically even if their occupations were not as creative or respected as those of many of the established middle class. They therefore highlighted 'lower-middle' to describe themselves. It is evident that the routine non-manuals had formed more or less ambiguous images of their positions in the social structure, mirroring the marginal nature of their jobs being neither middle-class nor working-class. It is worth mentioning that all of these marginal middle class expected, and were striving, to acquire middle-class status in the near future.

As mentioned earlier when I interpreted the findings from Table 6.4, almost every interviewee in the service class reported their social locations to be positioned somewhere in the middle. However, over a third of them – working as accountants, physicians, high-school teachers, college lecturers, and even a senior government official – settled on a deflated class identity. This inconsistency between objective and subjective class identities was noted also from the survey data, and it is to the question of why and how this pattern appears that we now turn.

Based on the experiences recounted by interviewees, it appears that such status discordance emerges for three main sets of reasons. First, there are other social categories that are just as important as one's social status and these dimensions are a natural reference point for people when they talk about their position within a social structure. Living in a heterogeneous society, where people have multiple group identifications, means that one's social circle may not always share the same economic status. This can produce a distorted image of class and lead individuals to regard their own objective class as alien to them since they perceive themselves primarily from a different perspective which is related to family origin, race, ethnicity or residence (Rosenberg, 1953). As Liu (male, middle-aged) commented: 'wherever you go, the people you are dealing with have an equivalent social position as you'. The socioeconomic influence of one's social contacts hence become a factor that determine one's class awareness. As a young, start-up investor, John (male, young) belonged to the self-employed class and viewed himself through the mirror of others in the same sector:

> I chose the upper-middle, not because my wealth condition matches that of the upper-middle class in our society, nor my ability. It is the sector I am engaged in… being in contact with a large group of people in the investment business I have changed my ideas, values, and way of doing things. I use 'what the upper-middle class will think and do' as the standard to discipline myself… So my own position has more to do with my surroundings.

It is worth noting that John was aware of the difference in economic capital between those upper-middle-class peer investors and himself. However, he did not think that where he stood in society was determined by his current economic situation. Rather, it was the 'ideas, values, and way of doing things' – his 'cultural capital' – that had influenced how he perceived his subjective class. Although John did not use this term himself, these intellectual and ideological qualities might be referred to as *suzhi* in as much as they were capacities that could be acquired through education and training. John had worked hard to learn and internalise 'what the upper-middle class will think and do', allowing him to identify with the upper-middle class in terms of *suzhi*, if not objective economic status.

Studies (e.g. Rosenberg, 1953; Samuels, 2010; Xu, 2020) exploring the relationship between parental socioeconomic status and one's subjective class suggest that the socioeconomic status of one's kin may prevent the formation of a consistent class identification. For example, Yang (male, middle-aged) was a senior-level official in a government institution and also anticipated future upward class mobility. However, these seemingly promising objective criteria did not play a role in his class identification. To him, his parental social class was more important than his achieved status based on his occupation. He felt greater identification with the lower-middle class, since his 'family by blood', as he put it, had brought him down to a lower level.

Moreover, a shared working experience or the association with a particular sector of production may make people in different economic positions feel more solidarity with each other (Rosenberg, 1953). For example, Byron (male, middle-aged), who worked as a middle-level manager at a transnational manufacturing corporation, continued to see himself as working class, since he felt himself a part of the industrial sector, working alongside those on the production line. Explaining this, he argued that, 'all people in the industrial sector are working class, even the chief executive of our corporation! But we are the middle to top level of the working class [laughs]…'

Second, the work organisations in which people are employed create and maintain systematic social inequalities. For example, even where people are employed in similar posts such as doctors or teachers, the classification of particular schools or hospitals within the education or healthcare systems, in terms of their quality or prestige, can engender different kinds of class awareness. Interviewees also noted that the pay range and occupational prestige attached to employees may also differ from one institution to another. In Guangzhou, for example, there are 43 national-level flag-ship senior high schools, or so-called key high schools (*zhongdian gaozhong*), which have a strong reputation and are expected to train the more talented students. These key schools are further ranked into three hierarchical levels: provincial-level (*sheng zhishu*), municipal-level (*shi zhishu*) and district-level (*qu zhishu*). Boyong (male, middle-aged) was a senior teacher from one of the district-level key high schools and he classified himself as lower-middle class. The reasons he provided were related to the rank of his school, as expressed below:

> A middle-class teacher should be more successful in their career. For example, in our province, the two provincial-level schools, every parent wants their children to go there, so the reputation of the teachers in those schools may be better than us… Also, as a teacher, the quality of your students matters! You don't need to invest too much energy but can still make good progress if you work in that kind of school. I mean, the position where they stand within the sector determines how they see themselves. The university teacher is much better than all of us, and they would not be in the same social class as us…

In the same vein, hospitals in China are categorised based on a hierarchical three-tier system, which, to some extent, helps the public to recognise the quality of a certain hospital. A primary hospital is usually referred to as a community care centre where minor medical treatment and disease prevention can be provided. A secondary hospital is a middle-sized regional hospital. A tertiary hospital – also known as the 'big hospital' in everyday Chinese discourse – is more comprehensive and sophisticated than the former. Within each tier, hospitals are further classified into three sublevels: A (*jia*), B (*yi*), and C (*bing*). Several participants in the qualitative study worked as medical doctors (one had retired) in these three types of hospital and they had developed different images of their social positions. Yun (female, elderly) and Weiguo (male, middle-aged) from 3A hospitals tended to see themselves as upper-middle class, whereas Ying (female, young), who was from a 2A hospital, and Lei (male, middle-aged), who worked in a 1A hospital, both declared a lower-middle class identity. Interestingly, all these four interviewees noted the importance of respect in the workplace, and it turns out that the hospital rankings have a direct bearing on doctors' identification of their social positions. Self-identifying as upper-middle class, Weiguo felt satisfied with his occupation since most of his contacts, whose economic conditions were obviously much better than his, held him in high regard. In contrast, Lei was frustrated with his current life being a doctor in a 'grassroots' level hospital, which made him experience lower levels of trust and respect from his patients at times.

As stated earlier, people may develop different class identities while doing the same job, but be employed in differently graded work organisations. At the same time, structural

inequalities persist even within the same work unit, to the degree that people undertaking the same job role and responsibility may not recognise each other as belonging to the same class. The reason for this resides in the *bianzhi* system, which is in essence an authorised list regulating the number of personnel in public employment.[103] An employee with *bianzhi* status is often referred to as 'eating imperial grain' (Brodsgaard, 2009), because they are on the state pay roll, and so enjoy the associated welfare. Not everyone working for the public sector receives state budget funds. People can work in an administrative organisation or a service organisation without a *bianzhi*, which gives them the status of being not 'formally' recruited within the arranged number of established posts. In such cases, they are outside the state budget allocations, but they are directly financed by their organisations with a lower salary and only a portion of (or no) subsidies and allowance.

The 'informal' status may further produce relative deprivation when a public employee does not have a *bianzhi*, and his or her colleagues enjoy its advantages. Hao (male, middle-aged) and Zhiqiang (male, middle-aged) worked in the same service organisation as accountants, but while the former were recruited on a contract basis, the latter were state-funded with a *bianzhi*. Status discordance did not occur in the case of Zhiqiang, as he claimed that his professional status – being an accountant – was a typical 'middle' class position. However, Hao identified himself as lower-middle class because his relatively low wage meant he had difficulty even supporting his family.

Thirdly, the depiction of what the middle class is, and the stories of middle-class life, are constructed and reinforced through the mass media, which shapes public attitudes and perceptions about the emergent Chinese middle class. Despite their localised salaries, the general public believes in the Americanised images of the middle class. Stereotypical media images or commercial advertisements aimed at the middle class depict them as living in mid- to high-end residential areas, driving niche-branded vehicles, wearing designer clothing, and having the ability to afford luxurious and frequent vacations (Li, 2010). However, people

[103] According to (Brodsgaard, 2009), there are three types of *bianzhi*: 1) administrative *bianzhi* pertains to the number of governmental administrative organisations and the number of personnel; 2) enterprise *bianzhi* only applies to state economic enterprises; 3) service organisations *bianzhi* indicates the number of established positions in service organisations.

whose lifestyles reflect these images are not exactly in the middle of the socioeconomic spectrum in a developing country like China; they conform rather to what sociologists would identify as an established upper-middle class that constitutes less than 10% of the population (*ibid.*) The contradiction here is that the public have every confidence in the Westernised images of the middle class which are omnipresent in their daily media consumption, but they are sceptical of the occupational classification of social class. Also, the Chinese new media or WeMedia (*zi mei ti*) has been awash with articles whose titles highlight the anxiety of the Chinese middle class[104], which in turn questions sociologists' definitions of middle class.

As a result, there is a distinct possibility that people doing a typical middle-class job do not count themselves as middle class, because they have not achieved the other requirements that are usually associated with middle class lifestyles (e.g. the values of house property, time freedom and consumption behaviour). Such individuals prefer to use the term '*bei zhong chan'* ('not really middle class') to describe themselves. For example, Annie (female, middle-aged), whose personal income the previous year was more than 190,000 *yuan* (equivalent to 21,500 Pounds Sterling) was a lecturer in a specialised college and owned 5 properties in Guangzhou. However, she insisted she was 'just lower-middle' class, explaining this by reference to the media portrayal of the 'true' middle-class:

> …I read some…Well, a middle-class must have a net worth of at least 10 million *yuan*. But as you can see, the property prices have been rising so rapidly, which means that most house-owners in the Big-4 cities with 2 or 3 properties are multi-millionaires. This is illusionary. Having 10 million is far from being truly middle class… Although I have a number of fixed assets, my current disposable wealth is… [sigh] The true middle class is definitely not the salariat class (*gongxin jieji*) like me, is it?

[104] The barrage of these articles could raise the sense of anxiety in their middle-class readers. However, some self-media accounts deliberately exaggerate the anxieties experienced by the middle class, and the anxious middle-class life, in order to increase their website traffic. The protagonists in these articles might not be just in the middle stratum of the social hierarchy; in other words, they were higher than the middle class. The stories of their conspiracy consumption were mostly associated with house-buying behaviours, which rendered the vast majority anxious, especially those who barely qualified as middle class in terms of their objective socioeconomic status.
(See https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1745645 [Accessed in April 2020])

As indicated by Miao (2017, p.29) in her research exploring the identities of the Chinese middle class, the middle class who prefer to use the term ‘salaried class (*gongxin jieji*)’ to distinguish themselves from the middle class, in fact determine their identities through means of exclusion ('what they believe they are not’) rather than inclusion (‘what they believed they are’). To Annie, it felt more comfortable to describe herself as a member of the ‘salaried class’, which, according to her, was distinguished from the ‘true middle class’ by greater disposable income and spending power. She associated what a middle-class person should be with images she had seen in digital media, and took such representations as points of reference to make a judgement on whether or not her financial situation was sufficiently middle-class. Annie concluded that she was still far from her image of the ‘true middle class’, and this was the reason for her sense of relative deprivation.

The case of Haoran (male, young), the head of his department in an IT service company, provides another example of how media representations of what constitutes the real middle class might prevent individuals identifying as middle-class. In this case, middle-class status relates to the projected ability of middle-class parents to ensure the best educational opportunities for their children. Real estate agencies exploit this desire on the part of parents by hiring people of authority to post articles to advertise the value of ‘*xue qu fang*’[105] (moving into a neighbourhood with better schools) in children’s education through their guaranteed admission into their school of choice. These articles may fabricate miserable stories of how a child whose parents do not have the required economic and social capital to afford to live in a district with excellent schools starts life with a disadvantage and has to try much harder than his/her peers in order to be successful in future study. This creates the illusion that

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[105] In January of 2014, the office of the Ministry of Education in China promulgated the policy of ‘nearby enrolment without examination’ in 19 cities.
(See: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5148/201404/t20140402_166582.html [Assessed in April 2020])
Since all kinds of entrance examination in screening potential students has been abandoned, children are selected automatically based on their residency registration. The major social consequence related to the implement of this policy is an unprecedented rise in the prices of houses surrounded by a higher education quality.
(See: https://www.sohu.com/a/214796312_109524 [Accessed in April 2020]).

owning a house in a district with good schools is the norm among the real middle class[106]. This is reflected in Haoran's statement that 'the middle-class people should live in a middle-class complex that is advantageous for their children's education' and their sense that because they did not live in such a place, they were not middle class despite their occupational status. Haoran expressed anxiety about whether he would be able to afford to move into a neighbourhood with better schools before his son reached school age. People who are interested in acquiring property located in neighbourhoods with better schools are also expected to mobilise their capital and resources to invest in their children's cultural capital or *suzhi*. *Suzhi* not only differentiates class status (e.g. between urban middle-class children and the children of rural migrants), but provides a channel for the reproduction of middle-class status (Anagnost, 2004; Ponzini, 2020). Accordingly, owning a house with good schools nearby reflects the capacity to reproduce middleclassness. To Haoran, his lack of capacity to live up to the way in which the media represents class prevented him from identifying as middle class despite his objectively (occupationally) defined middle class status.

Others, however, mobilised non-economic measures of class (e.g. cultural capital) in their subjective class identification as middle class. Spencer (male, young), who had a master's degree and used his knowledge and expertise to start his own business, considered himself 'in the middle of society'. When asked for the reasons for his self-identified class, he said that this was not based on his relative economic situation but rather a reflection of a more comprehensive assessment. When I asked him to elaborate on what this meant, he did not answer my question directly, but started, rather, to question popular definitions of social class that he saw as being focused on economic criteria. He suggested that one's financial situation only partially revealed one's social class and illustrated this with the case of expropriated urban village residents ('*chaiqian hu* [107]') who had received considerable monetary compensation due to land expropriation for the regeneration of the urban village:

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[106] Other domestic studies on the identities of the Chinese middle class have observed the importance of housing consumption in developing middle-class identities (e.g., Tang, 2013; Zhang, 2010). Owning a house located in an area with a good school nearby contributes to their middle-class identity (Tang, 2013).

[107] Urban villages, literally meaning 'villages in the city', are the result of China's rapid urbanisation process leading to the encroachment of cities into surrounding villages since the 1990s (Liu and He, 2010). In recent years, policymakers have paid attention to the problems urban villages have created for urban upgrading, and proposed transforming the 'dirty', 'chaotic', and 'deteriorating' conditions of urban villages through demolition and relocation, see: http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2005-04-11/06555613089s.shtml [Accessed in November 2020].

> I heard a joke. A company faced a difficult situation. The manager was worrying and trying to contact all his business allies to see who would possibly be interested in financing the rescue of his company. The cleaner saw the upset face of the manager and asked, 'how much money do you need?' The manager answered, 'ten million *yuan*'. Then the cleaner said, 'give me your bank account – I will send that amount to you' [laughs]. I know it is a joke, but it reflects something out there in our society. There are many locals in first-tier cities who do not have any skills but have received a huge amount of compensation due to housing demolition. They had once been listed in the low income and low education group. But now their lives have been completely changed. I could say many of us cannot earn that much in this life. They are the luckiest beneficiaries of the urbanisation policy […] However, the question is, where would you put them in the social hierarchy. I'm not being cynical, I'm just considering the complexity of social class in today's China.

According to Spencer, if one was measuring class as a completely economic construct, this newly rich group were highly likely to be placed in a higher class position as they undoubtedly possessed a greater level of economic capital and purchasing power than an average middle class person. However, their lack of cultural capital or *suzhi* might make them 'unsuited' to others in the same economic class. In fact, Spencer did not just criticise the purely economic measure of social class, but implied a limitation of occupational class per se. With reference to Li's (2010; 2011) revision of Goldthorpe's class scheme, the affluent urban village residents who had been expropriated would be categorised in the working class due to the fact that they were engaged in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations heavily reliant on physical strength. It is also likely that they might leave their jobs, given that they no longer needed to work for wages to meet their basic economic security and needs. In such cases, these people would be omitted from the occupational structure, since Goldthorpe's occupational class scheme is based on the occupation of the individual (i.e. wage-earner) and they are not in salaried work and so are economically inactive.

To summarise, the differences in self-appraisals among the service class participants are the result of the use of different reference group standards. Middle-class identifiers saw

themselves as being ‘in the middle’ after drawing relational comparisons with the richer and the poorer within their social networks. For example, Yuanchao associated himself with the middle class due to his middling sort of position in the social stratification in relation to the upper class and the lower class, and this was a common explanation used by most service class interviewees. Lower-middle-class identifiers referred to the standards of those who were wealthier, more privileged, and had greater opportunities during China’s social transition than they had themselves, and this resulted in disappointment and increased their sense of relative deprivation. In one extreme case of such upward comparison, Annie, who was definitely middle class based on her occupational status, and owned five properties, did not consider herself to be truly middle class. A large body of empirical study has indicated an inverse association between feelings of relative deprivation (although usually associated with low socioeconomic status) and individual self-reported happiness (e.g. Chen, 2015; Clack and Oswald, 1996; D'Ambrosio and Frick, 2004). This raises the question as to whether there was a similar relationship between status and happiness among my service class interviewees, who shared a more or less similar socioeconomic situation but differed in their identification as either middle-class or lower-middle class. Moreover, if a middle-class individual viewed themselves as lower-middle class, did their experience of happiness conform to those who were objectively lower middle-class? Since these questions could not be answered by means of a descriptive analysis (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3) of the relationship between occupational class and self-reported happiness using survey data (as reported in Table 4.5), they are pursued below by drawing on the qualitative data collected. In the following sections, the interview data are used to provide insight into what lies behind the relationships identified in survey data between class and reported happiness.

6.2 Happiness is classed, but why?

Both Western-based studies and domestic studies in China have indicated that happiness has a classed nature, conditioned by a person’s socioeconomic status, which can be operationalised by three common indicators – income, educational achievement and occupational prestige. The quantitative findings from the CGSS discussed in Chapter 4.3

demonstrated that even within the middle class, patterns in reporting happiness were 'classed'. As demonstrated in Table 4.5, the service class consistently reported more happiness than the other two groups between 2003 and 2015, while levels of happiness among the self-employed/small employer and the marginal middle class were around the same.

The qualitative interviews corroborated the pattern of a happier service class. However, in contrast to the quantitative results, the self-employed, the majority of whom had achieved a relatively high standard of living, reported a level of happiness which was comparable to that of the service class. The marginal middle class appeared to be more anxious and stressed due to their lower sense of stability in their current lives. Besides, the considerable economic gains received by the service class and the self-employed/small employer made them more likely to report higher satisfaction with their current job. The marginal middle class, on the contrary, used rhetoric intended to communicate their exploited position in the work environment and their passive and unenthusiastic attitudes towards work – for example, 'I'm just working for my boss' (*wo zhishi ge dagong de*). Due to lower economic situations, most of the marginal middle class, especially those who were dependent on themselves and received no financial assistance from their parents, considered their lives to be 'adrift' and 'not stable yet', and so were more anxious. In contrast, most of the service class and the self-employed expressed attitudes of satisfaction regarding their life-as-a-whole. According to their own accounts, one important reason for this was their relatively 'stable status of living' (*wendingde shenghuo*). In order to understand what stable means and why it is important to the middle class's happiness, it is essential to clarify what *not* being stable means, and the marginal middle class provided answers to this.

The 12 respondents belonging to the marginal middle-class in this study were technicians or rank-and-file service workers from private companies, state enterprises, primary-level administrative bodies and service organisations. Their unsatisfying financial situation posed difficulties for them in planning and managing the necessities for major life transitions such as acquiring a house, either by themselves or with their marriage partner; deciding to start a family; paying for childcare, and for the child's upbringing and education; and finding the resources to cope with unexpected life crises, such as medical problems on the part either of

members of the nuclear family, or parents and in-laws. To them, a stable life situation meant having the minimum resources, primarily economic, to mitigate or handle the stresses and anxieties engendered by such crucial life events. Meanwhile, stability was a frequently mentioned term characterising how, in their minds, an ideal or established middle class person should be and should live. It was the gap between their desire to achieve middle-class lifestyles and their temporary unsatisfactory financial status which reduced their sense of happiness. They might deliberately decide to postpone life transitions which would require more resources than they currently possessed. For example, Evelyn (female, young), a young female routine clerical worker, recently married to another marginal middle-class respondent who was a technician, told me that she had had to delay childbearing despite pressure from her mother-in-law: '…she doesn't know how hard it will be to raise a child in contemporary society. We are not stable at the moment…So when we become stable, I will think about it'.

These qualitative findings reflect the unique but essential function of subjectively measured self-appraisal in examining the subjective world of personal experience. Given that my qualitative data showed inconsistency between objectively and subjectively measured class, using objective class as the sole indicator of social class might indicate an overly simplified relationship between social class and happiness. In the following section, I will unpack the role of subjective class identification in the relationship between objective class and happiness.

6.3 Is subjective class a better predictor of self-reported happiness?

Individuals who have achieved the greatest economic gains in developing economies and transitional market economies, but who have not declared a positive change in their self-assessed well-being, might be referred to as 'frustrated achievers' (Graham and Pettinato, 2002). Graham and Pettinato's (2002) study appear to confirm the Easterlin paradox (1974; 2010) this points to the fact that within a country, people's happiness is dictated more by how much they earn in relation to others (relative income differences), than their absolute income level. Earning the same amount of annual salary may have different implications for different

individuals, thus producing different effects on individuals' own satisfaction with life. One limitation of using objective, or absolute measures of one's socioeconomic status, as pointed out by Kraus et al. (2009), is that it overlooks the unique explanatory power of people's relative standing vis-à-vis others, or their perceived sense of control and dependence, in determining the effect of social class on people's psychological well-being. As shown in the qualitative findings discussed in this chapter, self-perceived class status, or how one actually experiences social class, is relative, reflecting how one's evaluation of life is shaped by the perception of one's own environmental circumstances in relation to other subjects.

Subjective class identification or relative social position provide valuable supplementary insights when addressing why people with a higher social class experience a lower sense of happiness. Regarding my service-class and self-employed interviewees, not all of them evaluated their jobs and their current life situations in a positive way. Those who reported being less happy shared the same perception that their socioeconomic status did not position them as middle class. Rather, they stated that they were still striving towards a stable and secure life, which was their characterisation of the middle-class way of living. Their perspectives regarding a stable and secure life were different from those of the objectively lower middle-class interviewees who were struggling to attain basic economic securities. These service class people had achieved the economic resources to manage negative life events, which had considerably lowered the possibility of being stuck in a state of helplessness. However, they were not satisfied with their life-as-a-whole; they wanted more from their lives, and the lives they wanted to live were deeply influenced by media images that associated middle-class status with financial capacity. As the cases of Annie and Haoran showed earlier, they did not consider their socioeconomic situations to 'match' those of the so-called middle class, and felt they were closer to those of the lower middle class. Annie expected a substantial increase in her disposable income, whereas Haoran wished to move into a neighbourhood providing better educational resources for his son. It is clear that the gaps between their unfulfilled expectations and current life status had a negative impact on their individual happiness. For them, perceived socioeconomic standing was an important determinant of their sense of happiness.

Objective indicators of social class often merely stress the gradient stratification of these indicators and fail to capture the variation within the same stratified category (Cohen et al., 2008). For example, a person's educational level is usually measured by the number of years they have had of education, rather than the quality of the education and the privilege or rank of the institution. Also, occupation-based socioeconomic status, as used in both the quantitative and qualitative part of my study, underestimates the structural inequalities that have shaped the lives of different people with the same occupation, which might give rise to a consistency between class awareness and objective social position. This has been discussed in Section 6.1 on the relationship between subjective and objective social class. A few of my service class interview respondents considered that the classification system within both education and healthcare sectors in China produced further stratification among people who were employed in schools or hospitals with different ranks, and that this kept them from developing a middle-class identity. Lei, a physician working in a community-based care centre (1A hospital), perceived himself as lower-middle class and revealed the same 'worries' – 'I have not yet achieved a life considered stable' – that would decrease his satisfaction with life and bring it down to the level of other routine non-manual workers. Therefore, a subjective measure of social class offers a valuable explanation as to why a middle-class individual – as defined according to widely proven and used theoretical standpoints – might report an unexpectedly lower happiness level compared to their middle-class peers.

A person's perceived material situation could be of value in teasing out the 'outliers' that fell outside the overall pattern of association between social class and self-rated happiness. The term 'outliers' refers to those interviewees who reported happiness differently to others of the same social group. For example, Lei, a medical doctor, whose job was objectively classified as a service class occupation, did not express as much happiness as his peers in the same social category. Indeed, he reported struggling with similar negative experiences as people conducting non-manual routine jobs. Interviewees cognitively locating themselves lower than their objective class position were inclined to specify the obstacles and stresses they had been struggling with and which decreased their satisfaction with life.

Comparatively, interviewees whose subjective class identity was higher than that of their objective class position, for example, marginal middle-class respondents who adopted a

middle-class identity, were more satisfied with their life than their peers who considered themselves lower middle class. Yayun (female, middle-aged) and Meimei (female, young) were two female clerks responsible for routine tasks, and they themselves acknowledged their lower pay grades and status roles. They did not declare a marginal middle-class identity in accordance with their occupational status, instead regarding themselves as middle class. Rather than referring to their personal class position, they used the economic situations of their families; in other words, their husbands had made a greater contribution to their evaluation of their subjective class than they had. As Yayun expressed it: 'my social class has been inflated by the other half of our family'. Hence they did not perceive their lives in the same way as other marginal middle class who had less resources and were more apprehensive about unexpected or upcoming life events.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the interplay of objectively and subjectively measured social class in assessing self-reported happiness. First, I distinguished the two different forms of social class – subjective and objective class – and discovered some inconsistencies between these two measures. According to the quantitative findings of the CGSS 2006, the service class were more likely than the self-employed/small employer and the marginal middle class (the routine non-manual) to identify as being middle class. However, the service class still had lower perceptions of their class position. Qualitative findings from interviews corroborated the survey findings and were helpful in shedding light on why the middle class in China choose to either embrace or avoid middle-class labels. Identifying with the middle class does not necessarily mean an awareness or formation of a culturally distinguishable middle-class identity. One's reference group influences how the Chinese middle class perceive their social standings. Most middle-class identifiers in my interviews positioned themselves in the context of the people they knew personally, seeing themselves somewhere in the middle of this range, and hence highlighted their middlingness. The evident inconsistency between objective and subjective class identities might also be explained by one or more of the following reasons. Firstly, people may feel more connected to their kin, or others sharing the

same work experiences, when they think about their own social class. That is, they may self-identify like others they feel akin to rather than by objective measures of their status. Secondly, the hierarchical classification of the education and healthcare industries, as well as the *bianzhi* system, may lead those who work in lower level institutions, or do not hold a *bianzhi,* to feel a sense of relative deprivation. This may lead them to self-identify with a lower class status than might be objectively determined. Lastly, people's understanding of what the middle class 'looks like' may be strongly framed by the mass media's representations of them. This, in turn, shapes how they understand their own class positions.

The survey results indicated the classed nature of happiness, as the service class tended to report a higher level of happiness than the self-employed/small employer and the routine non-manual employees. Qualitative interviews further elaborated on why different sub-classes of the middle class reported happiness differently. Individuals who do not identify with their objective socioeconomic status may not experience a similar sense of happiness as those in the same class group. Instead, their feeling of happiness might be more associated with their subjectively identified class. This is why objective class may not always be the most helpful tool in predicting happiness. Accordingly, this chapter concludes that using subjective measures of class alongside objective measures allows a fuller understanding of how people evaluate and narrate their happiness.

Chapter 7 Contextualising happiness: why life stage and gender matter

In Chapter 4 we reviewed the general trends and patterns in the level of happiness of the Chinese urban middle class between 2003 and 2015. The meaning of happiness and its conceptual structure were explored in Chapter 5, while differences in individual levels of happiness between sub-groups within the middle class were identified in Chapter 6. In addition to these sub-class differences in happiness, the descriptive analysis based on the CGSS survey identified a number of other interesting findings which linked levels of happiness to particular intersections of class with other socio-demographic variables. This chapter continues the discussion on variation within the urban middle class by looking at how other individual attributes – age, gender, ethnicity[108], marital and parenthood status – affect self-reported happiness.

The quantitative survey research identified a number of trends and patterns in the relationship between socio-demographic variables and levels of happiness that warrant further attention. The first is that within the middle class, the elderly were more likely to report a higher level of happiness than the young and the middle-aged, and that the middle-aged were the unhappiest of the three age groups. The second is that only minimal difference was found in happiness between male and female survey participants. However, when looking at gender differences in happiness within these three age groups, while there was no gendered difference in happiness in the young age group, among the middle-aged and elderly age groups, female respondents reported a lower level of happiness than their male counterparts.[109] Thirdly, married respondents were more likely to report a higher level of

[108] One key finding from the survey data was that the frequency of reporting a higher level of happiness in the Han Chinese was higher than that in the non-Han. However, the proportion of non-Han compared to Han in the survey sample was very small and the site of qualitative research – Guangzhou – also has a population that is 97.92% Han Chinese (see footnote 71) and only two ethnic minority interviewees were recruited. For these reasons the relationship between ethnicity and happiness is not pursued further in this chapter on the contextualisation of happiness.

[109] Although gender is a key theme of this chapter, since life stage expectations and gender identities seemed to shape the experiences of all participants, the interview data discussed in this chapter does not allow further exploration of the specific intervening role of age in the gender difference in happiness.

happiness than both the unmarried and the separated/divorced/widowed. Fourthly, survey participants with children reported slightly higher levels of happiness than the childless.

While quantitative survey research allowed us to identify these trends and patterns in the relationship between socio-demographic variables and levels of happiness, its ability to explain them proved to be limited. Thus, in this chapter, findings that emerged from the analysis of semi-structured interview data are explored with the aim of generating potential explanations for the differences in happiness between, and within, different socio-demographic groups. The interpretation of these findings points to the importance of role expectations in shaping the experiences of happiness recounted by interviewees; role expectations associated, firstly, with different life stages and, secondly, with gender. Specifically, the analysis suggests that the young (from 18-39), middle-aged (from 40-59), and older (60 years and above) Chinese middle class had different expectations of 'a happy life' and that their feelings of happiness or unhappiness were related to the extent to which they had fulfilled these role transitions. In addition, due to the different socially ascribed gender roles of men and women, male interviewees were found to be significantly less emotionally expressive. This, it is suggested, inhibits their readiness to talk about emotions and affects their narrativisation of happiness (or unhappiness). Gender roles were found to be important not only in shaping individuals' reporting of happiness but also as they intersected with marital life. Specifically, gendered expectations of emotional reciprocity and the division of domestic labour within marriage were found to shape how people evaluated their satisfaction with life.

The prominence of these themes in the qualitative data suggests that life stage and gender are crucial factors in contextualising the narration of happiness and thus provide the focus of this chapter, which is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on the young – those respondents making the transition to adulthood and independence. It considers the influence which the expectation that they would marry at this life stage has on shaping their experience of happiness. The second section interrogates the possible reasons for survey data that show that those who are married report a higher level of happiness than both the unmarried and the separated/divorced/widowed. It explores what it is about marriage that makes it a source of happiness for interviewees. These factors include satisfaction at having achieved the

socially approved status of being married and the fact that children follow from marriage and are a source of happiness. It also considers the importance of emotional support and equitable household division of labour for happiness in marriage. The third section seeks to flesh out the survey finding noted above, that middle-age represents the low point for happiness. It asks what role the high expectations for achievement in middle age, as well as the heavy burden of care (for both children and elderly parents), play in the dip in happiness experienced by this age group. It also considers whether the dissociation of happiness from career ambitions among the elderly (and late middle aged) releases this older age group from the pressure of expectation leading to higher levels of happiness. Finally, in the fourth section, I reflect on the different patterns of expressiveness between women and men in narrating happiness. I suggest that, despite the fact that the survey data show little overall gender difference in levels of reported happiness, happiness is, in practice, gendered.

7.1 'Standing on your own two feet': Social expectations of the under thirties

The achievement of age-associated expectations are seen as a source of happiness across the life cycle, although these expectations differ at each stage. For the under thirties, they revolve around marriage. Marriage is regarded as an essential (and even obligatory) life choice in China. Although the average age at first marriage for both sexes has risen from 22.97 years in 1990 to 24.85 years in 2010, the proportion of the population who have 'never married' remains low (Lu and Wang, 2013). In 2010, the proportion of 'never married' women in the age groups 30-34 years and 35-39 years were 5.35% and 1.76% respectively, compared to 12.62% and 6.44% for men in these two age groups (*ibid*.) This means that in 2010 94.65 % of the female population and 87.38% of the male population were married by the age of 30.

In order to understand why such a high proportion of Chinese people marry before they are 30, we need to consider traditional expectations of this age group. According to the Analects of Confucius (*Lun Yu*), people at the age of thirty should be independent and morally steadfast

(*san shi er li*)[110]; to have learned to stand on their own two feet. However, in Chinese folk tradition, the idiom of '*san shi er li*' has become somewhat reduced to a sense of doing what it takes to achieve the state of 'being solid' (*li*) – that is, being an upstanding and independent individual. Thus, despite the emphasis of Confucius himself (in a later passage of *Lun Yu*) on the importance of the individual's moral development in the cultivation of morality in society as a whole ('*bu xue li wu yi li*')[111], in popular belief, solid virtues (*li shen*) have come to incorporate the social expectation that people have achieved a solid career (*li ye*) and solid marriage (*li jia*)[112] by the time they enter their thirties.

Among this young age group, then, we might expect variation in happiness experiences to be related to the extent to which individuals had met these strong age-related expectations. Failing to get married by the age of thirty[113], for example, might be expected to lead to stress and anxiety[114].

Among my interviewees, Ningning (female, young), who was around age thirty, exemplifies this. She was distressed at being labelled 'left on the shelf' ('*shengnü*'), and was sometimes annoyed by the constant pressure from her parents and other relatives. However, she also described herself as being 'a bit afraid of getting married', because being married might bring accompanying burdens which might negatively impact on happiness, as expressed below:

> People will have different kinds of happiness at different life stages. Nothing is perfect, you have to pay for your happiness. I don't know if this is the appropriate word, but you get what I mean? The sacrifices… Yes. I am nervous about getting

[110] See footnote 25.
[111] This means that one's personal character cannot be fully established until appropriate social and moral behaviours have been learned, see p.53, 16-13: http://www.camcc.org/_media/reading-group/lunyu/lunyu-en.pdf [accessed in December 2019]
[112] Indeed, people rarely pay much attention to the moral aspect of *li*, devoting themselves rather to the pursuit of career and marriage.
(From *XinhuaNet*: http://m.xinhuanet.com/2017-08/03/c_136493364.htm [accessed in December 2019])
[113] In recent years, there has been a rise in the age of first marriage in major cities in China. For example, in 2018, the average age at which Guangzhou residents married for the first time was 30.8. (From Sina News: https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2019-03-22/doc-ihsxncvh4619256.shtml [accessed in December 2020]) Therefore, it might be expected that the 'normative' age for entering into matrimony will be rising.
[114] This also helps us to understand why marriage contributes to happiness. This will be explored in detail in the section on marriage (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.1)

married, not only because I am unmarried and don't have a boyfriend at this age, but also the fact that marital life may not turn out the way you expect.

The positive effect of marriage and parenting on happiness has been widely acknowledged in research on happiness (e.g., Hoffman et al., 1978; Joung et al., 1997; Mookherjee, 1997; Proulx et al., 2007; Stack and Eshleman, 1998). According to Ningning, however, marriage as such did not automatically increase people's happiness; only a good quality, satisfying marital life did this[115]. 'Risks' were associated with all potential sources of happiness, and so more sources of happiness led to more stress if they did 'not turn out the way you expect' (Ningning). Indeed, married young participants appeared to be more anxious about the responsibilities of managing a home (e.g. mortgage and child-raising issues) than the unmarried when talking about their state of happiness. For them, happiness was tied up with both material and psychological issues related to maintaining or improving the life quality of other household members. Unmarried young participants, in contrast, tended to report having much less responsibility than the married, which resulted in a more light-hearted and idealistic attitude towards life.

Leo (male, young) and Carl (male, young), both of whom had graduated from university 1-2 years previously, were the two youngest participants in my research. For Leo, freedom was a key ingredient of happiness. Since freedom is always constrained to some extent by prevailing social norms and rules, Leo explained that freedom to him meant the ability to decline his parents' supervision and protection and to organise his life according to his own expectations – to be 'as free as a bird'. This, he said, was why he considered his current stage of life the most satisfying to date. Happiness, from his perspective, was found in the avoidance of constraints imposed by others; this was an unrealistic proposition for the married, who often subordinated self-interest to family interest.

The less burdensome and exacting lives of young, unmarried participants was reflected in the apparently less complex constitution of happiness among them than among their married

[115] This view that it was the quality of the marriage rather than marriage itself that was positively related to happiness is discussed in more detail in Section 7.2.

counterparts. For the worry-free and stress-free young, unmarried participants, happiness could be found, or unhappiness relieved, in simple ways, such as going out and getting drunk:

> We [meaning with his male friends] might go out, hang out together for the whole day. During that day, we would focus on playing, on the things that make us happy. [We] don't even think about our worries, upsets, unhappiness [*bu kuaile*]. Or we might get drunk [laugh]. When I sober up, usually the next day, I feel refreshed and what was bothering me is shaken off. (Carl)

Carl used the term '*bu kuaile'* (the opposite of *kuaile*), hinting at the negative affect he associated with 'feeling low' when he talked about 'unhappiness' at the workplace. As indicated in Chapter 5, happiness can be conceived of either affectively (*kuaile*) or cognitively (*xingfu*) or both. As illustrated in Chapter 5, Section 5.3.4, Carl distinguished *xingfu* – entailing relationship harmony with those with whom you share warm interaction (e.g. a family relationship) – from *kuaile,* which might be considered an autonomous emotional reaction resulting from something one achieved oneself, hence which, was, in practice, ego-driven. Thus, *kuaile* was more easily achievable and manageable. Carl revealed that achievement and success at work was the single factor driving his evaluation of his current state of happiness. In Carl's case the social expectation to 'be solid' was thus focused on being solid in his career aims, and this brought satisfaction but also 'unhappiness' when things at his workplace were not going well. The married respondents, however, had additional foci in life, since they had to attend to everyday practicalities (e.g. mortgage payments) and ensure a happy family, which could generate distress and lower their satisfaction with life. Since the determinants of happiness were more limited for unmarried young participants, they seemed also better able to manage negative moments or the times when they felt depressed.

Although young married participants, particularly those with children, talked more frequently than their unmarried peers about the stresses they faced[116], greater stress does not necessarily mean less happiness. Arguably, since those who are married have multiple

[116] It is important to note that we cannot really know the relative levels of stress, but only the differences in how much stress respondents refer to in interviews.

sources of happiness, it is more likely that they will be dissatisfied with one or more aspects of their lives where reality falls short of their expectations. However, more sources of happiness also imply a higher chance of experiencing positive feelings and achievement. For example, Ying (female, young) explained that her marriage had not been smooth sailing, leading to a period of separation in the first couple of years. However, even though she still occasionally felt fatigued by conflicts deeply rooted in her marital life, she claimed that her current life was more satisfying than ever before. Ying believed the pursuit of happiness was commonly accompanied by emotional suffering, but she had come to think of this as just part of the life course, as expressed below:

> I feel that, at different stages [of life], we have a different understanding of happiness. Like when I graduated, my concerns were, firstly, trying to find a good job, right? Then I needed to figure out where to live. Yeah, I moved a lot. At that time, all I hoped was to be able to settle in the city and have my own little family – to end this wandering state, you know. I thought if I made that happen, I would definitely be a very happy person. Now, I am married with a child. Things have been actually more complex than I imagined. Conflicts are unavoidable, don't be disillusioned [laughs]! I felt tired, kind of emotionally exhausted every time the same issue came up again. You know, it can be quite painful when you deal with family conflicts. Then I started to miss the old days when I was alone. However, after calming down and really thinking about it, I would say my life has been better now than in the past. I have experienced more happiness since I have fulfilled more desires. And, most importantly, the life that I dreamed about has become part of what I am experiencing.

It is interesting to see that Ying felt 'emotionally exhausted' from constantly dealing with conflicts and issues arising from her marital life, but still felt that her life was better than when she was unmarried. The explanation she provided was that she had achieved the kind of life she had imagined – through socialisation – that she would be living at this stage of her life. It is impossible to know whether Ying's belief that she was happier had been secured at least in part by the emotion work she performed. What is clear is how the two different denotations of the term 'happiness' – appraisal of emotional feelings (affective component) as well as

current life (cognitive component) – play out in her case. For Ying, happiness was associated primarily with its cognitive component and evaluated by comparing the life she had achieved and the life she was expected to achieve. Since she defined happiness in this cognitive way, the negative emotional feelings she experienced did not affect her self-reported happiness and she was able to consider her life as 'happy' (*xingfu*) although not emotionally satisfying (*kuaile*).

To sum up, the meanings attached to happiness as well as the principal sources of happiness shift and evolve through our lives. For the youngest cohort of interviewees in this study, the social expectation that they would have learnt to 'stand on their own two feet' as they entered their thirties shaped how they evaluated their happiness. In interview narratives it was the expectation, and realisation, of getting married by the time you were thirty that appeared most salient in their discussion of happiness. However, there was not a straight line from fulfilling this social expectation to happiness. Although, compared to those who remained unmarried, the married young had more sources of happiness emanating from marriage (and children if they had become parents), they tended to report greater responsibility and stress as they constantly strove to maintain a happy marriage and a warm and harmonious family life. As Ningning suggested, all expectations are fraught with the potential for disappointment leading to upset or unhappiness. In the next section, we consider in more depth people's expectations of a happy marriage, and why those who are married see marriage as contributing to their sense of happiness.

7.2 Marriage brings happiness, but why?

The evidence from the qualitative interviews conducted for this study is that marriage contributes to the reported happiness of individuals. While the secondary analysis of survey data reported on in Chapter 4 charted the relationship between marriage and happiness at the population level, it could not provide insights into why married people are more likely to report being happy than the unmarried (both those who never married and those who were separated, divorced or widowed). Analysis of the qualitative data revealed that marriage

helped interviewees to fulfil social expectations as well as to satisfy their personal emotional needs. Marriage is still a universal and hence normative practice in today's China. Even the unmarried interviewees revealed, without exception, their expectation that they would get married some day; the conformity to socially expected behaviour seems to be one important reason why Chinese people marry or yearn for marriage. However, conformity to social norms is a somewhat limited explanation of the positive effect of marriage on individual happiness. No married interviewee referred only to traditional or normative concerns when reflecting on the relationship between happiness and marriage. Drawing on their personal experience, all married interviewees stressed the importance of high-quality married life to their individual happiness[117]. To them, a high-quality marriage was an emotionally satisfying relationship, where this emotional satisfaction was understood as the degree to which their emotional needs were fulfilled. Four emotional elements that were regarded as 'necessary' for a happy marriage were identified: the experience of childbearing or the value of parenthood; mutual support and companionship; satisfaction with the division of domestic labour; and timely and effective conflict resolution. Thus, it is the quality of the marriage rather than the marriage itself that determines individual happiness. Both male and female interviewees placed emphasis on affective or meaningful interaction between the couple as the greatest contribution to their marital happiness. However, of the nine interviewees who discussed problems they had encountered in their marriage, six were female and only three were male. This might be partly attributed to the kind of 'relational deficit' (Bernard, 1976) to which men were exposed, but it might also be a result of a greater tendency on the part of women to discuss these emotional issues.

Additionally, I found that people's level of happiness did not necessarily decline significantly, nor undergo a long-term negative effect, if they experienced a change in marital status, for example from married to divorced, separated or widowed. There are individual differences in how people respond to this life change. People who react strongly to marital breakdown or

[117] Again, there were gendered differences in the ways in which male and female interviewees expressed how marriage brought them a greater sense of happiness, with male interviewees tending to talk much less about this than their female peers.

loss of spouse may find it difficult to return to a state very close to their former level of life satisfaction (Lucas, 2007).

In my respondent set, there was one divorced interviewee (Kathleen) and two widowed interviewees (Yun and Fang). All were female. Kathleen and Fang were middle-aged while Yun was elderly. In the case of the divorcee, Kathleen was convinced that terminating an unsatisfying union was the way to reembrace happiness. As she said: '…to most of us, they might have an unhappy marriage and have to end it, but they will soon adapt to the new life. They step out of the unhappiness, they will only be happier, if they can move on, I mean'. In the two cases of widowhood, individual differences appeared regarding the nature of the cause of death. Yun's husband had suffered from a long-term cardiac dysfunction and his death, in his seventies, was considered 'natural' for an elderly person who had such a medical condition. According to Yun, she had 'prepared' for her loss: '…I have been gradually adjusting myself. I think I have got through. I have to, this is life. Otherwise, my children and grandchildren would be worrying. What can I say? He had been sick for so long, and I had been mentally prepared for the worst'. In contrast, Fang experienced the passing of her husband at a young age as a 'tragedy' causing 'irremediable emotional suffering', and this had a lifelong influence on her sense of happiness, regardless of how comforting other domains of life (her son and her work) were. Her husband's passing, she said, 'still affects me. I still miss him; I am still mourning for him. I don't think I will ever be happy again like I used to be. He brought me a memory of intense love and care, and made me realise what a happy life should have been. However, this is the cause of my devastation'. She reacted strongly to the loss of her husband, and she found it difficult to return to her former level of happiness.

Although these findings are interesting and show variability in those interviewed, it is not possible, on the basis of this very small sample size, to compare levels of happiness between the divorced/separated/widowed and the married. Thus, this section can be said to provide some insight into why marriage adds to people's happiness rather than drawing any firm conclusions on whether the dissolution of marriage ruins people's happiness and, if so, why.

7.2.1 A normative stage of life

> 'a man should get married at coming of age, and so should a woman ('*nan da dang hun, nü da dang jia*')' (Chinese proverb)

As discussed in Section 7.1, marriage remains almost universal in today's China. Of the 13 (out of 51) interviewees in my study who disclosed that they were 'never married', all were from the youngest age cohort (18- 39 years). Of these 13, only three were aged over 30 at the time of interview, and they revealed that they were in stable relationships and expected to marry in the foreseeable future. One of them was a 30-year-old woman (Audery) who said that she was cohabitating with her boyfriend and that they were engaged. This is the only case in my sample where a respondent was in a common-law marriage rather than legally registered marriage. Living together before marriage is still a rather contentious issue in contemporary China and those who accept it are primarily highly educated and more in touch with Western culture (Yu and Xie, 2015). Indeed, Audery had spent about two years in a Western country while pursuing postgraduate study and thus was more accepting of Westernised lifestyles. Moreover, the ten never married interviewees below the age of 30 all expressed positive or anticipatory feelings towards their future marriage even though some of them were not in a relationship at the time. Given that marriage, or a preference for getting married before turning 30, was observed to be a near-universal pattern for this sample, we might conclude that the Chinese urban middle class is more inclined to internalise norm-abiding behaviours than to challenge the norms.

According to my interviewees, marriage is a socially approved and expected behaviour that every individual has learnt and internalised through socialisation. This means that interviewees anticipated psychological benefits to follow the achievement of married status, such as confidence and a feeling of contentment. As Spencer stated:

> Well, I was looking for a relationship that could lead to marriage. I was expecting a home of my own and to have children. These are what we expect in our society, don't we? At least I felt happiness when I realised that I had not disappointed

> these expectations…what I am trying to say is that you have already got used to the normality of it (marriage), and thus you will probably think, yes, this is the right thing that I have to do. And once you have done it, of course you will feel satisfied and fortunate…

Furthermore, most of them held the belief that getting married was their admission ticket to a settled (*wending*) life. This resonates with the concept of *li*, suggesting that marriage is necessary for being in a properly settled state. Compared with those who remained single, the married respondents stated that marriage had fulfilled their expected images of what a stable life comprised and had introduced a positive psychological experience associated with 'settling down'. This is how Mengting (female, young) put it:

> It [marriage] settled my mind. You know, it put everything in place, and I could devote more time and energy to other things. It made me realise what I really needed to do, instead of being confused about what I wanted to do, which was, yes, impractical [laughs].

To Mengting, marriage was the foundation of a stable life, since it 'put everything in place'. Moreover, to her, this norm-compliant behaviour had swept away confusion and other problematic feelings associated with other behaviours that were unrealistic, which, in the end, guaranteed a life of stability. One important characteristic of a social norm is that it prevails in the absence of social sanctions for behaviours that are seen to diverge from those norms (Brauer and Chekroun, 2006; Kitsuse, 1962). As pointed out by Gibbs (1965, p.589), a social norm is not only 'a collective evaluation' of how things should be and 'a collective expectation' of what it will be, but also a system of social control. This means individuals enacting behaviours deemed unacceptable or contradictory to established social norms might receive informal punishment through the expression of disapproval by others (Brauer and Chekroun, 2005). For instance, Jun (male, middle-aged) indicated that people might communicate their disapproval or criticism to individuals who departed from marriage norms (e.g. who remained unmarried by a certain age): 'The others will treat you differently…you will always receive a peculiar look from them. They are like, why, why have you not married yet? What happened to you [laughs]? This remains the reality in today's China'. (Jun)

In this way, norm violators might suffer psychological pressure initiated by third-parties which are usually expressed in the form of doubt, a lack of understanding, or attempts at persuasion. Ningning, a single woman turning 30, stated that her concern was mainly due to the constant pressure from people around her, although she had not initially felt any discomfort from ‘breaking the norms’:

> [Sighs] It is not anxiety. I don’t think I am worrying. What really bothers me is the way others are pushing me to believe in the goodness of marriage and then make me go to blind dates arranged by them. It seems that they are the ones who are eager and anxious. I know they care about me, but I feel exhausted… I am starting to believe that my life would surely look more promising and my happiness would be given a boost if I was with a suitable partner or had already settled down…

In contrast to Spencer, whose happiness increased as a result of the psychological benefits associated with his fulfilment of a perceived social norm that specified universal marriage and the appropriate timing of marriage, Ningning experienced emotional stress resulting from social pressure, and this impacted negatively on her happiness. This serves to offer one explanation as to why the married were more likely to report greater happiness than the unmarried. Moreover, none of the unmarried interviewees showed any interest in unconventional living arrangements such as remaining single or being child-free, which suggested that my middle-class informants were prone to norm-driven behaviours even when they were critical of the social norm that dictated that people should get married by a certain age.

7.2.2 The mediating role of children

A substantial number of studies (e.g. Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Pimentel 2000; White et al., 1986) show the negative effect of children on their parents’ marital happiness. In contrast, the interview data in this study suggest that having children acts as a mediating factor strengthening the relationship between marriage and individual happiness. All interviewees

envisaged children as a part of marriage. Out of 38 married interviewees, 35 had children, while the three non-parents said they had put this on their future agenda and expected to become parents.

Childbearing thus seems to be a norm followed once people get married. Several interviewees pointed out that matrimony and parenthood complement each other, since getting married is the basic and traditional way to create a family[118], and the decision to have children is a natural process for expanding and strengthening the family. In other words, respondents saw the same ultimate purpose in both parenting and partnering roles; to sustain a vigorous and healthy family, which in turn boosts the wellbeing of its family members. They regarded children as a natural and inseparable component of their marriage, such that the well-being of their children was an influential factor determining their marital happiness. This is how Spencer expressed it: ‘I think marital happiness includes at least two things. It has changed, and may still be changing, I don’t know. So, I added one more element, I included my son as part of my marital life, he has increased the likelihood of experiencing happiness’.

According to Spencer, marital happiness is not only about the harmonious interaction between couples. It is an evolving process as more elements associated with satisfaction in marriage, such as children, become included in the equation. In this sense, the expansion of one’s parental role does not always accompany the contraction of one’s role as partner, as long as the birth of children is considered to contribute to a successful marriage. Indeed, Annie (female, middle-aged) regarded children as the ‘stabiliser’ of long-term marriage in which both parties experienced a gradual fading away of passionate love. As Ying reflected on her own experience: ‘the birth of my child really united and brought me and my husband together. It led us to take a really close look at ourselves and our relationship. We sorted ourselves out. And we worked together to try and make things better’.

[118] According to the definition of family used by the Office for National Statistics in the UK: “a family is a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent, with at least one child, who live at the same address. Children may be dependent or non-dependent.”
(From:https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2018 [Accessed in January 2019])

This seems to run counter to arguments that increased marital conflict evidenced in Western societies during transition to parenthood is the result of role conflicts between the parent aspect of self and the partner/lover aspect (Cowan and Cowan, 1986). On the basis of this small sample, in which there were only a few ‘new parents’, it is not possible to make generalised conclusions. It is possible, for example, that the age of the children, or the experience of parenthood, might have an impact on the relationship between the presence of children and the parents’ marital happiness. We also know that these early days of parenthood are associated with greater vulnerability to marital conflict over the division of childcare and early education. It usually takes many years for parents to realise the advantages of having children, who are ‘an investment in their future well-being’ (Shields and Wooden, 2003, p.15). These factors might account for the overwhelmingly positive picture of having children in relation to individual happiness illustrated by the interview findings. It is also possible that the centrality of children to happiness among interviewees is related to the deep-rooted meanings they attached to happiness. As discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.1.1). when interviewees reflected on the meaning of happiness, they understood happiness as pertaining to the happiness of the whole family, not just their own happiness. Based on the narratives of all interviewees with children, the arrival of a child had made their family whole. Childbearing is considered a natural, normative and inevitable part of marriage by all interviewees, including the young unmarried. No interviewees expressed unconventional, childfree attitudes when answering the questions about their anticipation of future family size.

In fact, only one participant – Miles, who was a young father of an eight-month old baby boy – reported noticing a drifting apart between him and his wife after the birth of his son:

> …after my child was born, things have changed. I diverted nearly all my attention to him. He is the centre of our family. My wife thinks the same way, I think. We are busy with the grind of taking care of him every day when we are both at home. Basically, the real communication with my wife, I mean about us, instead of our child, only happens on WeChat when I am out at work [laugh]. At home, I spend every possible minute around my child. Childcare is a draining project; I haven’t got enough time left to think about and talk about other things…

I then asked him if he thought that the prioritisation of his child would have an impact on marital relations. He shook his head, and stated that child-centred marriage or lack of communication with one's partner did not necessarily produce emotional distance between them, as expressed below:

> …at this stage, I feel the relationship between me and my wife is fairly okay (*haixing*), which is good…The feeling between two people is not words, it is what you do, isn't it? She understands what I intend to do next and how I feel now through my body movement, or through just looking at my eyes… what we talk about is not deep and meaningful, it is just blah blah blah, making her laugh, you know…

Whether or not Miles' neglect of his identity as 'husband' after becoming a father had resulted in any impact on his married life was impossible to verify without having access to his wife's experience of the transformation in their marriage from marriage-centric to child-centric. However, if his wife regards children as an essential constituent of her marriage, she may not consider the gradually diminishing aspect of both her and her husband's partner self as a threat to their marital happiness. The expression Miles used – *haixing* (fairly okay) – is far from strongly positive, but also avoids evaluating the situation between him and his wife as 'bad'. However, it is not possible to know if his insistence that his relationship with his wife was as close as it was before their marriage shifted to a child-centric one was achieved through emotion work performed to convince himself of this fact.

Having children not only influences parents' marital happiness, but it can also affect their individual life-as-a-whole. For my participants who had children, parenthood provided them with a lifelong emotional connection. Once a child was born, the love and affection the parents felt towards him or her might automatically enhance their individual happiness. Children gave them someone to love and care for, and the unconditional emotional investment was not one-sided; children were expected to love and care for their parents in return. The parent-child bond was sometimes expressed as something rooted in biology; as a couple of participants put it, 'the child is a part of me'. In this way they expressed their sense

of the naturalness of their affective feelings towards, and attachment to, their children. The notion that interacting with their children had brought positive emotions and meaning to their lives was made explicit. Bringing up children was not just a matter of developing or cultivating them, but was an experience of 'growing together' for both parents and children. As Byron (male, middle-aged) explained, 'we are not only father and son, but also friends. When I tutor him, he is also enlightening me'. For parents, the mutual enrichment between them and their children was in itself a thrilling learning experience, undergoing constant changes, and inspiring and stimulating them.

A number of female interviewees[119] complained that having small children[120] had resulted in excessively busy lives, and that this was inclined to make them feel anxious or irritated. However, their complaints were balanced by affection and solicitude, as they appreciated the rewards of parenting and claimed that bringing up children had contributed enormously to their lifelong happiness. As defined in Chapter 5, happiness includes two different but interrelated components, the affective and the cognitive. Angeles's (2010) study finds that the different ways in which happiness is measured can yield contrasting results about the effects children have on their parents' well-being. I did not intend to use two different questions in order to capture the different meanings of the concept of 'happiness'. I simply asked, 'do you think that having children contributes to your happiness (*xingfu*), and why?'. Yet it seemed that the respondents were aware of the complexities of happiness. Their immediate reaction – that having small children caused them to experience a greater frequency of negative emotions – indicated that the presence of small children drained them of energy and time and so 'ruined' their good mood or *kuaile*, which related to the affective component of happiness. Nonetheless, they also assessed the impact of childrearing from a more cognitive perspective; that is, on their long-term, overall evaluation of life. It seems that the positive outcomes of parenting were much greater than negative ones.

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[119] The gender difference noted here may be due to the fact that women in general invested more time and sacrificed more personal development opportunities for their children in comparison with their male counterparts.

[120] By this I mean children who were still at school (usually under the age of 18) and less independent, and so needed more attention and support from their parents.

New challenges but also new joys were encountered as children grew up. Several interviewees proudly expressed their sense of achievement, because they considered that their children had turned out well. This appears to confirm Hoffman et al.'s (1978, p.100) claim that parents experience 'vicarious achievement satisfaction' through the rearing of a successful and thriving child; although, in this study, what was considered a well-brought up child varied according to the interviewees' subjective expectations regarding health, psychological well-being, academic or professional attainment and moral character. Thus, the level of achievement experienced by the parents depends on the child's ability to meet these expectations. Moreover, Jun and Xiulan noted the importance of social comparison in appraising their children, using others' (usually relatives', colleagues' and friends') children as a reference point to judge how their own children had turned out. Their feelings of achievement were enhanced if their children had outperformed their comparators. Jun felt proud and experienced a heightened level of happiness as a result of having raised three successful children who had all been outstanding academic achievers in comparison with others' children. Xiulan, meanwhile, expressed her enjoyment of the 'green-eyes' of others when they learnt that both her children had gained admission to universities, which was rare in the 1980s. As she put it, '…they were envious, looking at me, you know. How fortunate I am to have such wonderful children! That made the hard work worth it. That's where most of my happiness comes from'.

7.2.3 Companionate marriage and emotional reciprocity

Seeking, receiving, and giving support that alleviates or manages negative life occurrences plays an important role in marital satisfaction. This is also the theme most commonly referred to when married participants talked about the ways in which married life had boosted their sense of happiness. Classical research on marital happiness conducted in Western societies has suggested that women encounter more emotional problems and stress in marriage than men (Bernard, 1972; Gove and Tudor, 1973; Gurin et al., 1960). This is attributed to the distinctive socially expected roles ascribed to men and women (Gove, 1972; Gove and Tudor, 1973; Gove, 1978) and the 'relational deficit' associated with the socialising process of internalising masculinity, leading, according to these authors, to men's failure to provide for

their wives sufficient emotional satisfaction and security. However, most female interviewees in my research regarded the emotional support they received during their marriage as reciprocal, believing it to be a shared experience for both parties. This was evident in the way they chose to express the love, companionship and support found in marriage as something mutual, referring to it, for example, as 'mutual respect and mutual love (*hujing hu'ai*)', 'mutual tolerance (*huxiang baorong*)', and 'mutual understanding and sympathy (*huxiang tiliang*)'. It could hence be inferred that a wife's happiness is greater when her husband does not suffer from, or is able to cope with, 'relational deficit' and is able to be understanding and supportive in marriage. Female participants stated that what they gained most from their marriage was empathy and consideration from their husbands, as expressed below:

> …it is like a person truly being a part of my life, isn't it? A person I can always count on. We rely on each other, support each other… (Haoran, male, young)

> …My husband makes me feel that I can always count on his support. Whenever I need [it], he is just there… (Hongmei)

> I found someone to rely on, someone taking on all my worries. I didn't need to stand on my own anymore. (Lacey, female, young)

Confirming Williams's (1988) research findings, women who report that they feel emotionally supported by a spouse are more likely to also report higher satisfaction with life, whereas those who do not feel they have sufficient support are more likely to report that they experience emotional deprivation and dissatisfaction. There was also was a counter example which illustrated how a husband's 'relational deficit' or his negligence in satisfying his wife's emotional needs resulted in a long-term negative impact on his wife's sense of happiness. Xiulan, born in the 1930s, put her marital dissatisfaction down to the absence of care and support from her husband, who had thrown himself into work for the revolution and neglected both the emotional and companionship needs of his wife and children, and the maintenance of their home. She gave the example of going alone to the hospital in tremendous pain to deliver her first child, and the baby was six months old before her husband finally had the chance to visit them. She seemed agitated and was adamant that her

marriage had been the only disappointment in her whole life, and that she would have divorced her 'undutiful husband' forty years ago if divorce had been easier to attain in the political situation at that time.

This case reflects the prevailing symbolic representation of conjugal relations during the Mao era (1949-1976) as 'revolutionary comrades' (Zuo, 2003) for whom the priority was to shoulder the social responsibility for strengthening the newly-built communist nation, rather than just to promote the well-being of their own families. Marriage was, hence, redefined – it was no longer a search for individual happiness, but an irreproachable political mission for every individual (Croll, 1981). The communist state intervened in the process of mate selection, obligating young people to give careful consideration to each other's political status and personal history of revolutionary activities, which marginalised the need for romance (Yang and Yan, 2017). Following the Anti-Rightist campaigns launched from 1957, more and more people were convinced that individuals who advocated romantic love and affection-based marriage, or who sought divorce due to a breakdown or absence of emotional love, should be criticised or even persecuted for the alleged 'reproduction of capitalist ideology'[121] (Zhang, 2008, p.9).

While in contemporary China the government does not dictate what marriage should be based on, happiness remains within the realm of the political, as is evident from campaigns to promote happiness and thereby build a happier and better society. This is to be achieved through spirit (*jingshen*) – that is, the adjustment of one's emotion or feeling to align with the correct beliefs and values as declared by the CCP. This process of adjustment might be seen as not dissimilar from the concept of emotion work (Wielander, 2018).

When Xiulan started her marital life in the 1960s, the 'correct' spirit was revolutionary spirit – the spirit or emotion work which was valued, encouraged, and demanded for revolutionary

[121] In the cold war period, socialist activists in China worked hard to demonise the west and all elements under the system of capitalism. According to Zhang (2008), they even used the divorce rate as one indicator in assessing whether the country's political economy system was superior. They argued that socialism or communism was far more advanced than capitalism given that America had a higher divorce rate than China. Extensive propaganda started to portray countries with a high divorce rate as amoral and degenerate, which was accompanied by the suppression of divorce in China.

purposes – which emphasised the prioritisation of national, collective interest for the reconstruction of a new, prosperous China over individual interest. In embracing this spirit, Xiulan had to suppress emotional needs which conflicted with the revolutionary spirit and resign herself to a 'revolutionary' marriage that lacked an affectionate or emotional base. However, the 'correct' way of mobilising one's emotional life is not fixed; rather, it is constructed and reshaped in line with the changing social and cultural norms. Xiulan grew up in a social context where political marriage was the mainstream pattern in terms of choice of a partner as well as routine interactions between couples. Nonetheless, the drastic social and cultural changes taking place in the last few decades and its accompanying transformation of the meaning of marriage had reshaped her attitudes toward marriage.

With the initiation of political and economic reforms after Chair Mao's death in 1976, Chinese society has undergone radical transition, undermining the justification of political marriage (Yang and Yan, 2017). This released individuals who had sacrificed their expectations of marriage and been forced to sustain a dead marriage due to political and ideological constraints, and eventually led to a surge in divorce (Chen and Lim, 2012; Jankowiak and Moore, 2017; Zhang, 2008). The Revised Marriage Law of 1981 allowed the breakdown of affection (*qinggan polie*) to be legitimate grounds for initiating divorce proceedings (Chen and Lim, 2012). This was followed by a transformative shift in normative consensus that endorsed the pursuit and appreciation of an 'emotionally egalitarian marriage' (Jankowiak and Li, 2017) .

The transition from institutional to companionate marriage took on a different cultural meaning in Chinese society than in the West, where the less authoritarian family tradition meant that the rise of companionate marriage was not as controversial or striking as it was for their Chinese counterparts (Jankowiak and Moore, 2017). In public discourse across the West, there was a rethinking of the meaning of marriage as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. American sociologist Ernest Burgess, in his 1945 book '*The Family from Institution to Companionship*', presents an elaboration of this change. Burgess (1945) argues that urbanisation and industrialisation gave rise to a new pattern of family behaviour based on intimacy, on mutually communicative and affective bonds, and on the consensus of its members, substituting the former conception of family or marriage as an institution that had been deeply rooted in social norms, expectations, and laws. By the end of the twentieth

century, the growing trends of childbearing outside marriage, non-marital cohabitation, and homosexual marriage suggest a continuing decline in the influence of social norms on individual behaviour and the deinstitutionalisation of the concept of marriage, leading to a transition from companionate marriage to individualised marriage (Cherlin, 2004). In contrast, the dominant, and indeed the only legalised, form of marriage in China is heterosexual marriage, while alternatives to marriage (e.g. cohabitation and having a child without being married) remain less socially acceptable. In this sense, changing attitudes towards marriage in China are reminiscent of the first change in the meaning of marriage in Western societies.

When political marriage was no longer the norm, Xiulan re-evaluated her 'miserable union', and realised that mutual support and companionship should be given more emphasis than other institutional (political) bases for married life. As she stated:

> …that was really tough when I was young. I had been trapped by a dual burden of working and childrearing. All by myself, you know. The circumstances didn't allow me to think too much. But now, I have been thinking about why my marriage was just so unhappy, and certainly regrettable [sighs]

This account, once again, demonstrates that the relationship between happiness and marriage is substantively determined by the quality of marital relationships. A troubled married life, such as Xiulan experienced, can cause emotional strain (Carr et al., 2014; Proulx et al., 2007; Williams, 1988).

The transition to a companionate marriage also encouraged a desire for the enrichment of marriage through the ability of married couples to understand and communicate with each other. Hence, it is not surprising that most participants pointed to the importance of healthy communication to their marital happiness. They argued that interpersonal conflicts were common in married life on a daily basis, and poor communication led to the exaggeration of negative emotions (e.g. disappointment and anger) provoked by unresolved conflicts. However, the majority of participants reported that they had not encountered particular interpersonal communication issues in their marriages, which was one reason why they felt their marriages were satisfying and successful and brought them happiness. Others felt that

disagreements or fights between couples over trivial matters were inevitable – a normal part of the lived experience of marriage – and, as such, 'not a big deal' (Yuanchao, male, elderly). Even Ying, who had initiated a temporary separation from her husband when he did not side with her when dealing with conflict between her and her mother-in-law, did not think that marital conflict had ruined her marriage. She stated that conflicts, or more precisely, an effective resolution to conflicts, had made their relationship closer and stronger. As Ying said, '…marriage is about mutual accommodation… of course you will experience lots of unbearable moments that drive you insane… but after conquering the difficulty, we have achieved a deeper, more solid, more intimate version of us'.

7.2.4 Happiness and the division of domestic labour

In this section, I consider the question of how the division of domestic labour between married couples impacts on happiness. Some females considered equal responsibility for housework to be necessary for their marital happiness. Moreover, these women clearly saw themselves as fortunate and praised their family-oriented (*gujia*) husbands, who had taken their share of domestic work resulting in a satisfying married life for them both. As Hongmei put it:

> It happens that my husband is an especially family-oriented man. He took great care of me, you know, he knew what was best for me, when we were childless. He is often willing to take on all the kitchen tasks and cleaning. Not like other men who don't show up until bedtime or leave all the domestic work to their wives, claiming 'I am busy with work'. My husband is obviously not that kind. After our child was born, he was more engaged in our family…So, I think this may be a source of happiness. Because housework itself is a never-ending project, and this is why so many women easily lose their temper at home [laughs]. Actually, you cannot blame women for their failure to control their emotions. Because they are just exhausted, you know. If she has a relaxed life and has the freedom to enjoy herself, why would she get moody? She definitely will be sweet-tempered. However, the situation is that most women work hard during the daytime, and

> are drained of energy. When she is home, she has to cook, wash the dishes, and look after kids. How could she possibly always be sweet-tempered?

As Hongmei's account indicates, most married men were perceived to be taking their wives' role as principal caregiver for granted and being unwilling to support their wives and help with domestic chores, leading to negative emotions (such as discontent and grievance) in their wives. Hongmei felt that the widely held expectation that women took on the role of caregivers in the family was unfair and thus was grateful that she had found a husband who took an active part in household tasks, and this had increased her sense of happiness in their marriage. Hongmei was supportive of egalitarian gender ideology; this was a framing rule for her that helped to define the 'right' way to manage the household division of labour. She was satisfied due to the fact that the share of household work between her and her husband was relatively equal. However, if Hongmei's husband was not supportive of egalitarian gender ideology, and refused or avoided helping her with household chores, she would feel that this was unreasonable and unfair, which might lead her to experience distress and 'easily lose her temper' like many other women who suffered from the 'dual burden' of employment and household chores.

Not all wives (in dual-earner families) evaluated the gendered distribution of domestic labour in the same way as Hongmei. Others appeared to adopt a more 'transitional gender ideology' (Hochschild, 1989), which meant that although their identities were formed in relation to both their working and home lives, they believed that it was their responsibility to undertake a larger proportion of the housework. They provided justifications for accepting their husbands' lesser contribution to domestic labour and considered it to be the 'norm', as Annie stated:

> …we are deeply influenced by the tradition, according to which a husband is normally career-centred and pays little attention to his family. There has to be someone to take on the responsibility for domestic stuff. This role is always played by women. If she refuses, then the family will split up.

Thus, the unequal division of housework did not necessarily create a sense of unfairness among female respondents. Annie, for example, argued that it was a wife's duty to take on the bulk of domestic work. This may reflect what Zuo and Bian (2001) call 'gendered resources'. This refers to the power which may attach to the fulfilment of gender-role expectations in relation to domestic labour and obscure the inequity of the division of labour[122]. Even Annie, who brought home income from paid employment as well as performing the bulk of household labour, neither complained that this was unfair nor suggested that it negatively affected her marital happiness. In this sense, only when housework division was viewed as inequitable by female respondents did it give rise to negative feelings. As Ahmed (2010, p.86) argues, 'you can cause unhappiness merely by noticing something'. At least according to what these female interviewees disclosed, it seems that their consciousness of seeking transitional gender ideology had not been raised to the extent that they became frustrated by the 'double burden' that fell on them; rather, they believed bearing this burden was the right way of achieving marital happiness. The available evidence does not allow us to determine whether or not they employed a 'faking' emotional strategy (Yang 2013) to mask the unequal division of household labour or to deceive themselves that this was the norm. However, we can conclude that they chose not to notice the unfair and rigid gendered division of labour placed upon them and, therefore, did not recognise this as an experience of unhappiness.

To sum up, this section sheds light on three explanations for the positive effect of marriage on happiness. Firstly, marriage is considered a normal stage of life, a rite of passage, the accomplishment of which brings contentment. The second benefit of marriage for individual happiness is that marriage is associated with the arrival of children, which is anticipated as something bringing additional satisfaction to married life. Thirdly, marriage provides emotional support and companionship. In addition, for married, employed women who

[122] It was still uncertain why the notion of gendered resources did not apply to Hongmei, who was in her 50s, while other married female interviewees in the same age group did not carry out egalitarian gender ideology in terms of division of labour. What differentiates Hongmei from the others was that she had a higher income than her husband, while the incomes of the other interviewees were either lower than or in the same category with those of their husbands. Note that although I did not directly ask about participants' income during the interview, after each interview was completed, participants were asked to fill in a form related to their socio-demographic attributes which took both their personal income and their household income into account. This showed, in the vast majority of households, that the husband's income was higher than his wife's.

suffer from the 'dual burden' of paid employment and unpaid domestic labour, their feelings of happiness were closely linked to their framing rules or gender ideologies. For those who held a non-egalitarian gender ideology, it might feel 'normal' to carry the dual burden without complaint. However, marriage and parenthood, perceived by interviewees as contributing to happiness, also bring with them responsibilities and challenges that have to be borne or met in order to sustain and promote the happiness of their families. Supporting the conclusions in Chapter 5 about the family-oriented understanding of happiness among the Chinese urban middle class, interviewees prioritised the role of family in narrating what happiness was for them. It seems that, for these interviewees, 'sacrificing' individual happiness and bearing considerable levels of stress were acceptable if it brought a more satisfying life to their families. In the next section, we will see how these stresses and sacrifices are reflected in lower levels of reported happiness, in particular, among the middle-aged Chinese urban middle class.

7.3 Social expectations and happiness in mid- and later life: explaining the U-shaped curve

Interviewees' narrativisations of happiness were consistent with the survey findings of a 'U-shaped' pattern in the relationship between age and happiness. This means that it was amongst the middle-aged (aged between 40 and 59) that the level of reported happiness dipped to its lowest. Nonetheless, my qualitative interviews revealed intra-group differences in the happiness of this middle-aged group. Interviewees in their 40s indeed reported a lower level of happiness. This appears, in their narratives, to be due to their dual burden of care for both their own children and their aging parents (and parents-in-law). At the same time, mid-life brought the social expectation of professional success and achievement of status and prestige, which led the middle-aged to develop higher work-related aspirations. However, in some cases, individuals were able to adapt to the stressful environment and/or lowered their aspirations from around the age of fifty. This was seen to result in a higher reported happiness.

7.3.1 Mid-life 'blues': the same for everyone?

Interviews with participants in this study who were middle-aged suggested that they perceived, and faced, more stress in their lives than both the younger and the older participants. This stress could be overwhelming and threatened to undermine their happiness. The stress was associated with the constant effort they invested at both work and home to protect their family from any dramatic financial changes or crises. Moreover, these burdens appeared to be doubled since, as the 'sandwich generation' (Miller, 1981), they bore responsibility for providing financial and emotional care to both their physically frail parents and their dependent children. Thus, even those with the best financial situations – such as Liu, who was a vice CEO of a large state-operated corporation – responded to the question about his state of psychological well-being by asking, 'how could I, or any middle-aged male, be very happy?'. Liu hastened to explain that he was the sole financial provider for his family since his wife was not in paid employment; this was a rare case in my sample, as other participants all lived in dual-income households. Demands on him came not only from his wife and children, but also from his elderly parents:

> I think this applies to everyone of my age in this society. Men, of course, are under more stress regardless of how much money you earn. Because you are the mainstay of your family, you take care of the elderly and the minors. You cannot get sick, you must not fail, right? If you fail, the whole family collapses, because you are the tower of strength. A stressed-out middle-aged man, how could he be very happy? Not only in China – I believe in other countries the middle-aged won't be the happiest group… (Liu)

Liu's account gave the most vivid portrayal of the sandwich generation, drained because of simultaneously caring for children and elderly parents. However, not every middle-aged interviewee was caught in the same position as Liu. The middle-aged in my sample were born in the 1960s and 1970s, when the one-child policy had not been strictly implemented. This meant that many of them had siblings who shared the responsibility for providing care to their elderly parents. However, when respondents talked about how this responsibility was

shared between siblings, it transpired that there was often a principal caregiver – usually the one financially best off or who lived in the more developed geographical area with better healthcare and/or the one with whom the parents felt more emotional attachment. The other(s) acted as 'back-up', visiting occasionally (mostly on public holidays) and providing emotional and financial support if necessary. These non-principal caregivers, who were expected to look after only their own nuclear family, may have experienced less responsibility or stress than the principal caregivers.

Liu felt that he 'could not get sick and must not fail', because he was the sole financial provider for his nuclear family, while at the same time, his aging parents depended on him. In order to fulfil his role expectation as the backbone of his nuclear family as well as to improve the well-being of his parents, he 'sacrificed' his own happiness and worked longer, harder, and more energetically than he would otherwise have done. The over-demanding obligations he had to fulfil 'pushed' him on to be successful; even though, as a vice-CEO, he had already achieved high status and prestige, he constantly strived for more. The roles he took on as a dutiful son and a responsible father and husband encouraged him to have higher aspirations for professional achievement, which would secure and improve the financial stability and provide the basis for a higher level of well-being for his family.

The middle period of adulthood is generally referred to as the 'age of success', and the middle-aged interviewees were indeed aware of the age-related expectation to be successful. Although the definition of 'success' is subjective and each participant might have identified different criteria in evaluating whether or not a middle-aged person was considered successful, they appeared to share the same kinds of ambition and aspiration when they turned 40. Achieving those aspirations for success in their own careers, however, often proved difficult. One reason for this was the responsibilities or burdens at home. As Yayun (female, middle-aged) expressed it:

> My head was full of thoughts and worries when I moved into so-called middle age. I was thinking of what I had. You know, as a middle-aged person, I should have at least a successful career. But, obviously, I didn't… I started to think, well, I won't have a promising future since, at 40, I was stuck with a tiresome job. I was

> dissatisfied with my job and expected something to change. However, the most upsetting thing was that I no longer had the passion to fight as I had had in my twenties or thirties. I couldn't see my future but it would also have been hard, and a big risk, to try to make a difference. What if I strived but failed? I would…you know, I couldn't only think about myself. Many reasons kept me from it. I was like a boiled frog [laughs]! At the start, the water was lukewarm, and I was kind of thinking a lot. Then the water temperature gradually rose and I ended up stuck and unable to jump out of the situation. I was frustrated…

Yayun used the metaphor of a 'boiled frog' to describe her sense of being trapped at the start of her transition to midlife. The frustration Yayun felt initially came from the gap between the expectation of being successful in midlife in the work domain and her actual accomplishment. She became plagued with self-doubt and was negative about herself. She had wanted to make a change – to jump out of the current situation in which she was dissatisfied – but her other role as caregiver for her family[123] had claimed her attention and held her back from self-actualisation. She no longer viewed life as she had when she was in her twenties or thirties, living on her own with no dependents and able to focus on pursuing her self-achievement. At the age of 40, she had to reassess her expectations – whether or not it was too risky to make a change now (i.e. with her employment) – and the hesitation left her frustration unresolved and ongoing. When I met Yayun, she was in her fifties and she told me that she had long since recovered from this emotional downturn in her early forties. The frustration had 'disappeared', she said, because although she had not chosen it, she had adapted to this career-related disappointment. She explained that since she was preparing to retire at 55,[124] career promotion no longer mattered. This also suggests that as people relinquish, or lower, their aspirations, they may report being more content with their lives.

[123] There might be a gendered difference in terms of the responsibility the middle-aged carried on their shoulders. Although, with the exception of Liu, all participants in my interviews were from dual-income couples (in other words, they all undertook 'breadwinner' roles), women might experience greater caregiver burdens than men. This might be inferred from the fact that most female interviewees reported doing a greater share of domestic chores than their husbands. However, further research is needed to explore whether or not middle-aged women faced more stress than their male peers.

[124] According to the *State Council Temporary Measures on Arrangements for Aged, Weak, Ill, and Disabled Cadres* in 1978 and the *State Council Temporary Measures on Worker Retirement* in 1978, in State-owned enterprises and undertakings, Party and government institutions, and mass organisations, the retirement age is 60 for male

As Yayun's story illustrates, perceived happiness appears to change over the course of middle age; differences were identified between participants who had just transitioned from early to middle adulthood and those who had already dealt with midlife setbacks and disappointments and had become resigned to career frustrations. Thus, interviewees in early midlife (aged 40-50) remained ambitious and associated happiness with the achievement of the goals they had set themselves. In contrast, interviewees who were in late midlife (aged 50-59), and approaching retirement (usually around mid-50s to 60), reported that their sense of happiness had increased as they relinquished their ambitions and lowered some of their career expectations.

Middle-aged people are expected to have a higher level of status and prestige and greater satisfaction with their financial situation compared with other age groups (Easterlin, 2006). In this study, however, only the later middle-aged interviewees reported relative satisfaction with their life circumstances and, as discussed above, this was due in part to having lowered their aspirations as they anticipated retirement. In this way, participants in their fifties started to take pleasure in what they had accomplished, rather than being obsessed with what they had not achieved relative to social expectations or in comparison with others they had known in their forties who had gone on to do better than them. Moving into later midlife was characterised, it seems, by the replacement of redundant aspirations (that might induce disappointment and negative emotional experiences) with fresh reflection on, and appreciation of, what they now had. This is consistent with Blanchflower and Oswald (2004)'s hypothesis that a process of adaptation to circumstances takes place among people after their forties, as they tend to lower or forego some of their aspirations and enjoy life more. This is expressed by two respondents in the following ways:

> I am fairly okay, at the moment. I am turning 51 this year, wow, more than half a hundred [laughs]! What was substantial has become trivial, and I now have far fewer demands. It is about how I deal with the negativity, the gloomy moods and

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workers/officials, 55 for female officials and 50 for female workers. Since Yayun was a civil servant working at the neighbourhood level, the official retirement age for her was 55.

> how I reorient myself… Remembering things that make me happy. What is the point of focusing on things that can only bring confusion and distraction? (Hongmei, female, middle-aged)

> […] even though life is still the same, I have learned the importance of being happy. I don't think as much as I used to do. I was always thinking about trying hard, striving – but now I don't, I feel that time flies. I should have accepted sooner that it was not possible to chase so many life goals. I feel relieved now that I have no pressure, or any life burdens… My only wish is to stay healthy and to look after my family. (Weiguo, male, middle-aged)

As Hongmei and Weiguo looked towards entering elderhood, associated with retirement around the age of 60, they experienced a gradual shift in age-related expectations – from the stress of achieving success to relaxation and the contemplation of the meaning of life. Lowering their demands or aspirations became an effective strategy to manage their emotions in order to reduce negativity and increase their sense of happiness. This process appears to illustrate Hochschild's (1979) suggestion that the 'framing rules' which give meaning to situations change along with the situations people face. Thus, in the case of Weiguo, the meanings he ascribed to career achievement shifted from earlier midlife, when he was preoccupied with 'making great efforts' in his career because he was expected to be successful and provide financial support for his daughter and his aging parents, to later midlife, when he began to question whether it was worth sacrificing happiness in pursuit of success. Having decided that happiness was more important, he deliberately lowered his achievement aspirations. Again this reflects what Hochschild (*ibid*.) sees as the way in which feeling rules are deployed to manage the fits and misfits between feeling and situation. In the case of Yayun, in earlier midlife, the prevailing feeling rules led her to feel 'frustrated' by the gap between her expectation of herself and her actual achievement. In her fifties, however, the feeling rules which applied to her changed. As she started counting the days to retirement age, and achievement was no longer expected of her, she no longer considered those unfulfilled expectations as having a negative impact on her sense of happiness.

Those in later middle-aged were very much in transition. They were moving out of the most stressful period of midlife associated with overwhelming responsibilities and high expectations but had not yet entered the 'age of relaxation', either physically or emotionally. Their aspiration for professional achievement lessened, but they still needed to attain certain goals as they remained in paid employment. Similarly, while they felt less responsibility for their children, who had grown up and were either pursuing higher education at university or starting their own careers, those children had become more concerned about their parents' health. Deteriorating health was a commonly mentioned source of unhappiness during late middle adulthood.

7.3.2 Elderhood or 'the age of relaxation'

Elderhood is often characterised as the passage into 'the age of relaxation'. This is because it is perceived as a transition from the stress and frustration experienced in midlife to a state of complete relief from that pressure. This is expressed by Zhongwei and Xiulan below:

> When I was still at work in past days, I always found myself frustrated, as my career didn't go very smoothly. But now, look at me, I'm retired! I have been relieved from that situation [laugh]. I have been able, finally, to find some peace of mind.
>
> (Zhongwei, male, elderly)

> Now I'm busy with nothing. I don't need to bother with anything. I was obsessed with insignificant problems when I was young, you know. Now I finally do not need to bother anymore. The most important thing in our life, and it is the thing we can manage ourselves, is our emotions…
>
> (Xiulan, female, elderly)

The age of relaxation is not always a natural progression out of the responsible, anxious stage of midlife, however. Its achievement may require active emotion management. As Xiulan

stated, this meant turning her back on unachievable expectations that resulted in a negative impact on her happiness in favour of focusing on enjoying life.

Nonetheless, this transition into a new life stage may serve to explain why the elderly tend to report higher levels of happiness. All six elderly participants in my sample appraised their happiness positively. The only thing that resulted in vexation now was age-associated health concerns. However, they were all in a relatively good state of health at the time of the interviews and regarded declining health to be a normal part of life for an older person. This also implies that different life stages carry different sources of happiness as well as unhappiness.

7.3.3 Filial expectations and happiness in later life

Of the six elderly interviewees, two of them were in their early sixties at the time of the interview, and they lived in their own house or apartment together with their spouses. The other four, in their late seventies or early eighties, were more physically debilitated and required more attention and care from others, and so were living with their children. The older of these elderly participants were born between the 1930s and 1940s, and when they married, there was no birth control policy in place to restrict the number of children a family was allowed to have. This meant that they generally had more than one child and now lived with the one to whom they were more emotionally attached and who had the time and resources to look after them. Two of them had chosen to live with their daughters, the other two with their sons. They were profuse in their praise for the thoughtfulness of their children. They associated their higher satisfaction with the fact that they had raised dutiful children who were happy to readjust their busy schedules and provide their parents with tender care at home.

The younger of the elderly participants had just retired, were living just with their spouses, and were still physically fit and self-supporting. They were born around the mid-1950s, and married in the early 1980s. Due to the one-child policy which had been implemented in the late 1970s, as urban dwellers they were only allowed to have one child. Although they had

not identified how they would resolve eldercare at the time of interviewing, they revealed to me that their preference was to stay in their own homes, because they had different living habits from their children. Living together, they felt, might give rise to tensions that would have a negative impact on happiness for both parties. As Rose elaborated:

> She [her daughter] is occupied and has a life of her own. I won't even bother her. We all have different ways of living. Her husband is also the only child in his family. Shall we, four old people, move into her home altogether? That's impossible! The good thing is that we now live a rather short distance from each other - less than ten minutes' walk. If I get ill or something, it will be easier for her to come to look after me.

The different attitudes between the older and younger of the elderly participants reflects how social policy has shaped or constructed personal life. The one-child policy had a significant impact on Rose's options in later life since the traditional way of eldercare – three generations under one roof[125] – was rendered impossible. Her only child (a daughter) had married another only child. However, not living with her daughter did not mean that Rose felt she had neglected her or been unfilial. It was not the physical but emotional proximity that mattered to Rose; her daughter's willingness to provide companionship and emotional support was more important for ensuring a happy life in old age. Besides, given that young people lead busy lives outside home and that the different living habits of parents and children might trigger misunderstandings and quarrels, Rose was convinced that the happy and harmonious picture of two or three generations living under one roof would not work for her. Recent studies demonstrating the negative effects of intergenerational co-residence on the happiness of the elderly in China (Chyi and Mao, 2011; Xiong, 2018) suggest that Rose's apprehension was not misplaced.

It is important not to draw general conclusions from my study, which is geographically limited and focused on the urban middle-class. The six elderly adults I interviewed had all achieved

[125] Traditionally, an ideal Chinese home is three generation (grandparents, parents, and children) living together under one roof. The Chinese phrase describing this is '*san dai tong tang*'.

economic security; they had at least one property, lifetime savings, monthly pensions and comprehensive healthcare insurance[126]. They had considerable resources, then, which guaranteed a prosperous and stable life in retirement, whether they stayed in their own homes with their partners, went to live with their children, or moved into luxurious care institutions. Nonetheless, within this group there was evidence that different preferences for living arrangements - living with or living apart from children – had formed between older and younger cohorts within this elder group as a result of the impact of the introduction of the one-child policy. Accordingly, the relationship between different living arrangements and happiness among the elderly may be cohort-specific.

To sum up, the U-shaped happiness curve identified in the analysis of survey data is confirmed by the qualitative data gathered for this study. However, the narratives of interviewees point to the importance of age role expectations in shaping the happiness experienced and reported at different life stages. The middle-aged were expected to be at the height of their career success, while simultaneously bearing the highest burden as caregivers, being responsible for both their elderly parents and their children. This, it seems, led to high levels of stress and frustration. The older middle-aged, in contrast, as they moved towards, and then into, retirement began to lower their aspirations and recalibrate the importance they attached to the enjoyment of life. In addition, for older interviewees, how their children reciprocated or repaid them with elder care was important to their later satisfaction with life. This reflects the traditional Chinese belief, captured in the Confucian saying, 'the purpose of raising children is to assure life in old age' ('*yang er fang lao*'). Traditionally in China, elderly parents have depended on their children mainly for economic reasons, because children are the only source of retirement pension which enables their parents to secure a decent quality of life (Knapp, 2005). Among the elderly (or older) middle-class interviewees who received monthly pensions and were therefore financially self-reliant, the notion of '*yang er fang lao*' did not retain its resonance.

[126] All of these six elderly interviewees benefitted from the urban employee-based basic medical insurance (UEBMI). There are two other social health insurance schemes widely applied in the cities, which are the urban resident-based basic medical insurance (URBMI) for urban unemployed or self-employed residents and the new rural-cooperative medical scheme (NRCMS) for rural residents. The UEBMI has a much higher reimbursement rate and more comprehensive coverage of outpatient and inpatient services than the URBMI and the NRCMS (Su et al, 2018).

7.4 The gendered presentation of emotions – the 'iron-hearted' man

Thus far, we have considered what the qualitative data tell us about how life stage situations (e.g. marriage, parenthood, mid-life and old age) shape the ways in which the Chinese middle class perceive and narrate happiness. This discussion has also revealed the influence of the 'relational deficit' experienced by men and the unfair gendered division of labour in marriage on the happiness reported by married women (see Section 7.2.3 and 7.2.4). This section extends the discussion of the role of gender in shaping happiness beyond its intersection with marital life. It suggests that gender has a consistent shaping impact on how people express emotions and report their happiness.

The survey data analysed in Chapter 4 demonstrated that the reported levels of happiness between men and women were similar. However, these quantitative data allow only the comparison of reported happiness between women and men, not other ways in which happiness might be gendered even if the overall level of happiness or unhappiness was similar. In this section of the chapter, I explore one such finding concerning the gendered nature of happiness that manifested itself in the qualitative data. This relates to evidence that the expectation that women will display a greater emotional expressiveness than men impacts on their narrativisation of happiness (Grossman and Wood, 1993; Wood et al., 1989).

During the interviews, I found that the presentation of emotions is gendered in social discourse or when interacting with other persons[127]. All female participants were happy to share their emotional lives or meta-emotion, that is, reflections on their own emotional feelings, as well as their awareness of the emotions of others. In contrast, some of their male counterparts were tentative or disinclined to disclose their emotional world to me. For example, at the start of each interview session, I asked my interviewees to recall a recent

[127] One of the disadvantages of face-to-face interviews is the potential for creating an interviewer effect. Reflecting on my own positionality in relation to male respondents, I was a female interviewer in my mid-20s. It was possible that some of these male interviewees, therefore, might simply have preferred not to talk about their intimate, emotional life with me (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.2). However, it was never possible to examine whether or not such an interviewer effect had played a role in their responses and I rely here on evidence from interviewees (both male and female) that this reluctance to talk about happiness went beyond the interviewer.

happy (*kuaile*)/unhappy (*bu kuaile*) event which might help them discern and talk about any differences they identified between 'feeling happy' and 'being happy'. A few of the male participants, especially those in middle age, politely avoided answering this question by referring to the mundaneness of their everyday lives – for example, 'I don't have a particularly happy or unhappy memory based on recent experiences, because every day seems exactly the same to me' (Daxing, male, middle-aged). This reluctance to recall or narrate their emotions or inner feelings – known as the 'deficit model of male expressiveness' (Fabes and Martin, 1991) – created an impression in the data that male participants had a different or less rich experience of happiness, or understood happiness less well, than their female peers.

The tendency of male interviewees to avoid talking about topics that might provide insight into their emotional lives is illuminated by an understanding of the role of emotion work in gender identities. Male participants acknowledged that men were less willing to discuss issues related to familial and emotional lives – including happiness – not only with a researcher but also with friends or relatives. One male interviewee, Spencer (male, young), stated that most Chinese men relentlessly complied with the hyper-masculine image of the 'iron-hearted' man who would rarely reveal his innermost feelings:

> In China, I don't think we would talk about such topics (happiness). If anyone has told you that he discusses his emotional world with others, he was definitely having you on. When we men are out, our conversations are normally about beer and skittles, and the funny stuff that has happened. We rarely expose our innermost feelings or talk about anything sentimental. It is too embarrassing.

Gender is performed 'on the surface of the body' (Butler, 1999, p.173) in everyday discourse. There are 'expression rules' guiding people to appear to feel appropriately and 'feeling rules' directing how they ought to feel (Hochschild, 1979; 1990) consistent with their gender identity. These rules are ways of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and thereby reinforcing the differences between men and women constructed by society. There are widespread restrictions persisting within the society that prevent the enactment of inappropriate and unacceptable behaviours that contravene assigned gender identities. People who fail to perform their gender 'correctly' may be stigmatised, marginalised or even

punished in mainstream culture (Butler, 1995). If they realise that they have not conformed to the expected gendered way of behaving, this may result in anxiety. Being a man requires not only performance on the surface, but also depends on 'deep acting' in how a man attempts to feel inside. This act of moulding emotions or feelings in degree or quality is referred to as 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979, p.561). According to Hochschild (1979), there are two general strategies for doing emotion work: generating a desired feeling that is not present initially (evocation), and suppressing undesired feelings that emerge spontaneously (suppression). This act of suppression was mentioned directly by Spencer, who suggested that being masculine means suppressing the display of emotions and avoiding any emotion-evoking topics in social interactions. Displaying greater emotional expressiveness violated the prevailing norms of masculinity, and hence would cause 'embarrassment'. The man then had to control or manage the inconsistency between his feeling ('what he feels and thinks') and socially determined feeling rules ('what he should feel and think') in order to prevent or counteract these negative emotions.

Nonetheless, showing little or no emotion in front of others (*external*) does not imply the absence of such emotions (*internal*). The observation that male participants tended not to talk about private or emotional lives in public does not demonstrate that men are insensitive or uncaring. Yinghua (female, young), for example, described contradictory self-presentations of her husband when he was in the public sphere with his colleagues and friends, and when he was in the private sphere with her:

> […] talking about familial matters is too intimate, which may leave an impression of being small-minded and irrational, which runs counter to traditional masculine characteristics. That matters to my husband. But I can tell you, I think from the bottom of most men's hearts, they give priority to family. Like my husband, he calls me numerous times from work. He cares about what I am doing, even though he already knows my daily routine…Yes, he thinks about me and our child all day along. However, when he is with his male friends, has he ever talked about his attachment to our small home and how happy and grateful he felt? I don't think so. They will probably not initiate the topic of family happiness, in order to avoid sounding petty and small-minded (*xiao du ji chang*).

It is clear that Yinghua's husband had managed his emotions in order to avoid leaving the impression of being irrational and 'petty and small-minded'. This resonates with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory which sheds light on how gender identity, or more specifically, maleness is 'performed'[128] in order to have a favourable impression on other people when exposed to their scrutiny. Yinghua's husband performed or solidified his 'iron-hearted' gender image only when he interacted with people who were outside his intimate circle. These outsiders thus became audiences of his meticulously designed role play. His play of self was not totally individualistic; he had a script that was based on predominant gender images produced by society. However, he was not as 'iron-hearted' as he appeared. As Goffman (1959, p.45) points out, actors' management of self-impression in their immediate presence before others 'will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as a whole.' In other words, in performance, Yinghua's husband presented himself as more 'socially appropriate' than he really was. Once he was off the scene and away from his audience, he started to unwind because he did not need to be concerned whether others would appreciate his performance and how they would respond to it. That is, he could talk intimately and passionately with his wife, in defiance of his 'script', and was no longer anxious about whether or not he acted as 'petty and small-minded'. In the backstage setting, he was able to open up fully; his wife (Yinghua) insisted he was not at all the iron-hearted male figure he acted out while socialising with his male friends.

The case of Yinghua's husband serves as an illustration of the complexity of understanding the level of consciousness and unconsciousness with which gender identities are formed and performed. Rather than arguing that the backstage setting evoked his authentic self, as Goffman (1959) might, I would say instead that Yinghua's husband was actively engaging with gendered feeling rules. He knew where and when he needed to perform emotion work on

[128] For Goffman (1959, p.246), the performed character is 'nothing real or actual'. Performance – 'what one tries to appear to feel' – is purely 'surface acting' in a world in which, according to Gouldner (1970, p.383), morality is no longer 'a deeply internalised feeling of duty' but merely a set of 'conventional rules required to sustain interaction'. In an attempt to bridge this sense of separation between the authentic and performed self in Goffman's dramaturgy, Raffel (2013) argues that backstage behaviours with one's intimates and front behaviours in the presence of others are both parts of the actual or true self; the degree of exposure reflects the types of relationship with present or potential audiences. This seems to capture the actions of Yinghua's husband, for whom the self performed to his male friends did not contradict his true self (i.e. his masculine identity) but reflected a choice about what to reveal and conceal to particular audiences.

himself to 'evoke' the feelings identifying the 'iron-hearted' man and 'suppress' the feelings that made him too emotional, and thus, not masculine enough. In this sense Yinghua's husband's emotion work allows us to see how individuals neither consciously perform what is expected of them, as Goffman (1959) might lead us to believe, nor are mere 'puppets' who have no choice but to act out structurally embedded gender norms, as Butler's (1988) theory might suggest. Yinghua's husband appeared to walk the tightrope between structure and agency, whereby he knew full well his script – the ideal manhood constructed by Chinese society[129] – but was able also to make sense of masculinity for himself. The outcome was that he accentuated masculine-related aspects of his self-image in the presence of male friends while acting differently with those with whom he was intimate (his wife).

To sum up, due to the different gender roles men and women are expected to fulfil, there are different sets of feeling rules for men and women. Emotional expressiveness is guided by gendered feeling rules and can be controlled or managed through emotion work. The image of the iron-hearted man, who intentionally avoids being (over) emotional, is considered a typical feeling rule associated with the prevailing norms of masculinity in China. This leads to a reticence to talk about emotions, including happiness, in interview, even if they report similar levels of happiness to women in surveys such as that reported on in Chapter 4.

[129] In Li and Jankowiak's (2014) study discussing the ways contemporary Chinese men make sense of and negotiate the masculinity norms that apply to being a good father, the authors argue that the traditional two-dimensional image of masculinity – *wen* and *wu* – still holds, and depending on the context, men can choose which masculine traits they would like to present or express. *Wu* traits emphasising bravery and boldness are usually expressed in the public sphere when men are involved in business competition, whilst the personas of *wen*, on the contrary, are associated with softness and warmth, which are highly engaged in the private sphere especially during men's interaction with their spouses and children (Li and Jankowiak, 2014, p.188). Although my research did not consider the *wen* and *wu* typology specifically or how it may relate to the presentation or management of emotions by men in today's China, the *wen*/*wu* distinction resonates with the front stage and back stage behaviours in men's presentation of masculinities, and this could be of interest, as a starting point, for exploring gendered emotions in future studies.

7.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, a distinctive contribution to the sociological study of happiness is its capacity to recognise and understand how differences in the reporting of happiness among individuals may be shaped by culturally embedded role expectations. In this chapter, we have considered how this manifests itself in the interviewees in this study in relation to life-stage and gender role expectations.

The U-shaped age-happiness relationship identified from the survey analysis captures general patterns and correlations in survey data and is generally borne out in the narratives of interviewees. However, it fails to capture the subjective experiences of individuals and the differences in the reporting and narrativisation of happiness among the young as well as the two distinct sub-groups of the middle-aged. Within the young group, the married and the unmarried did not experience happiness equally, and nor did all middle-aged interviewees report being equally 'unhappy'. The qualitative data also revealed the complicated and ambivalent feelings people have about their experience of happiness, and how several socio-demographic factors affected this in different ways.

On the one hand, marriage was perceived as a source of happiness. Through interviewees' subjective experiences of marriage, three explanations for the positive effects of marriage on individual happiness were found. Firstly, given that marriage is an expected and normative behaviour in China, getting married is expected to bring psychological benefits. Second, childbearing and matrimony complement each other in enhancing one's satisfaction with life. Parenthood offers lifelong emotional satisfaction, mutual enrichment, and can even be used as a reference for social comparison if one's child outperforms others' in terms of personal (usually academic-associated) achievements. The third gain from marriage comes from mutual support and emotional reciprocity. The transition from institutional to companionate marriage in contemporary China emphasises the importance of the quality of marriage, and a higher level of marital quality is associated with a higher sense of happiness. Thus, it seems that it is the quality of marriage, rather than the marriage *per se,* that enhances individual happiness. Finally, different gendered role expectations between men and women lead to

their different experience of marital happiness, either in their expectations of intimate interpersonal exchange or of household division of labour. On the other hand, there is no direct line between marriage and happiness. The contributing role of marriage to happiness, for example, does not mean that the married young necessarily feel greater happiness than the unmarried young. As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.1.1), Chinese individuals tend to think about happiness in terms of happiness of the family, not only of the individual. Thus, married interviewees experienced not only joy from family life but also the responsibility and stress of preserving or promoting the happiness of the family.

The experience of life stress heightens in mid-life. The middle-aged interviewees reported a lower sense of happiness than the young and the older interviewees. This, it is suggested here, is due to the fact that, on the one hand, as the 'sandwich generation', the middle-aged are expected to fulfil their dual responsibilities as care providers for both elderly parents and teenage children. On the other hand, the middle-aged developed higher career aspirations in order to achieve and improve financial stability that could ensure a higher level of well-being for their families. Although the definition of 'success' is subjective, to be successful was a common ambition and aspiration shared by these middle-aged interviewees when they turned 40. Thus, an emergent gap between their aspirations for success in their careers and the realities of their lives led to frustration and a lower sense of happiness. However, as they grew closer to the age of retirement (usually around mid-50s to 60), they no longer linked their happiness so much to career ambitions, and so their sense of happiness rose again. Accordingly, the late middle-aged became happier as they 'prepared' to enter the period of elderhood, which was also referred to as 'the age of relaxation'. The elderly interviewees felt relieved from the burdens of stressful and frustrated mid-life, and gained a more positive perspective on life. Having dutiful or responsible children also contributed to a happy old age.

I have suggested that the apparent similarity between men and women in their levels of self-reported happiness, as outlined in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3), obscures the gendered reporting of happiness. Since the survey design of the CGSS is detached from the gendered subjectivities of the individuals who report it and the performance of emotion work that accompanies it, survey data fail to acknowledge or explain *how* happiness is articulated. When they talked in qualitative interviews about the happiness they experienced, it was

evident that men and women displayed different levels of emotional expressiveness. This, I suggest, stems from the very different social roles into which men and women are socialised, resulting in them adopting different sets of expression and feeling rules, which consequently led to a gendered reporting of happiness.

It became clear from middle-class individuals' narrativisations of happiness that life-stage and gender role expectations are important factors in our understanding of the differences in people's reporting and narrating of happiness. It could also be evidence that happiness is a socially constructed experience.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

Central to the developmental goal of building an all-round *xiaokang* society is to expand the middle-class population. As the major beneficiary of China's socioeconomic transition, the middle class play an incomparably important role in every aspect of Chinese society. Understanding the perceptions and experience of happiness among the expanding middle class may thus provide insight into the lived experience of those in whose name a *xiaokang* society is being pursued. This thesis adopts a sociological approach to explore how the Chinese urban middle class understands and reports happiness. Through an integration of quantitative survey analysis and qualitative semi-structured interviews, this thesis has addressed four research sub-questions: 1) What are the trends or patterns in happiness among the urban middle class?; 2) What does happiness mean for Chinese middle-class individuals and how can our understanding of this inform the conceptualisation of happiness?; 3) Do the middle class - as defined by socioeconomic status - subjectively identify themselves as 'middle class'?; 4) How do the experience, as well as the narration, of happiness differ in accordance with individuals' socio-demographic attributes (i.e. class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parental status)? This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I provide a review of the empirical findings on the research questions this thesis has sought to answer. Second, I discuss the key theoretical contributions the thesis makes by considering happiness through a sociological lens. Finally, by reflecting on the limitations of this study, I propose promising directions for future research.

8.1 Summary of the empirical findings

This section reviews the key findings of the four empirical chapters (Chapter 4 to Chapter 7). Chapter 4 followed a mixed-methods approach to examine the trends and patterns in happiness among the urban middle class. It drew on survey data from the CGSS between 2003 and 2015 to explore and describe trends of self-reported happiness for the Chinese urban middle class, and used 51 qualitative interviews to gain insights into how Chinese middle-class

individuals themselves perceived and understood the changes in societal-level happiness over the past decade as reported in survey findings. Chapter 4 also used the survey data to highlight how levels of happiness differ by socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. sub-class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parental status). Chapter 5 presented qualitative findings from the interviews addressing what 'happiness' means for the Chinese middle class. Drawing on their understandings, the conceptual framework of happiness, or its Chinese equivalent *xingfu*, was found to be composed of an affective component, which was described by the term *kuaile*, and a cognitive component. Chapter 6 used both quantitative and qualitative data to explore how the Chinese urban middle class – ascribed as such on the basis of Goldthorpe's occupational categories – identified with their assigned social status. This chapter also explored and provided suggestions as to which type of measures of social class – objective socioeconomic status or subjective identification – might more meaningfully predict and explain differences between individuals in terms of happiness. Based on interview data, Chapter 7 uncovered how life stage and gender shape people's reporting, and narrativisation, of happiness and, in light of this, reconsiders some of the relationships between age, gender, and marital and parental status, and their influence on reported happiness as identified in the survey data analysis.

8.1.1 How do we make sense of the happiness trends?

Secondary analysis of CGSS data revealed a fluctuating upward trend in happiness among the urban middle class between 2003 and 2015 (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.1). Analysis of the qualitative interviews conducted in Guangzhou was then carried out in order to understand how and why societal-level happiness has shifted over the past decade. Over half of my Chinese middle-class interviewees (35 out of 51) perceived the upward trend in reported happiness to reflect reality. Reflections on this trend in the interview narratives suggested three main social forces shaping individual happiness. Firstly, interviewees suggested that increasing globalisation and openness led to greater levels of happiness experienced at the individual level. Secondly, people's happiness, or, more specifically, personal material well-being, was positively associated with the rapid economic growth over the last decade. Additionally, along with accelerated economic development, the development of science and

technology, particularly the unique and convenient experience of the internet, has contributed to an improved quality of life. Lastly, the massive anti-corruption campaign led by Xi Jinping in recent years has had a discernible effect on people's satisfaction with life. This supports previous studies (Bjornskov et al., 2010; Tay et al., 2014; Wu and Zhu, 2015; Di Tella et al., 2008) which point to the negative effect of corrupt behaviour on national happiness. However, these national developments did not always translate into individual happiness. Twenty-six interviewees noted some negative side-effects of China's fast-growing economy, including income polarisation, life stress, the inadequate social safety net and food or drug safety scandals. These interviewees concluded that the level of happiness of the Chinese population as a whole had, in fact, decreased, or at best been stagnant, over the last decade. There are also differences regarding age, gender and class in people's attitudes and responses to the upward happiness trend, with the elderly, women and the service class more likely to agree that there was an increase in happiness. This reaffirms the subjective nature of understanding happiness.

A further finding from the survey data analysis was the identification of a marked increase in happiness in 2008 (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.1). Reflecting on the possible reasons for this, I proposed two explanations. The first was that the year 2008 was experienced as a key moment in China's achievement of global power status, marked symbolically by Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games. To test this proposed explanation, I used interview data to explore how individuals perceived the impact of the Olympics on individual happiness (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2). This analysis demonstrated that less than half (24 out of 51) of the interviewees felt that the Olympics had contributed to their happiness. Those who did feel that the Olympics had a positive effect on their individual happiness referred to intangible, emotional satisfaction (e.g. a sense of nationalism and togetherness) as well as the tangible legacy of the Olympics (e.g. a reduction in traffic congestion and an improvement in the living environment). For the 37 interviewees who did not think that the Olympics had any effect on their sense of happiness, their pre-defined factors in the attainment of happiness were directly related to their lives, careers and families. These respondents suggested that 'only things that are directly related to my daily life can affect my happiness' (Weiguo, male, middle-aged), and, since they felt very distant or remote from the Games, either geographically or emotionally, the Olympics did not impact on their happiness level. We might

interpret this as an indication that individual subjectivity can prevail over collective subjectivity. It is important to remember that my interviewees were neither a sub-sample of the 2008 CGSS survey, nor nationally representative, and thus their reflections on the possible effect of the Olympics on their own individual level of happiness cannot be taken as 'evidence' as to whether hosting the Olympics in 2008 had resulted in a marked upturn in the happiness trend line.

The second potential reason that might account for this rise in reported happiness was that the question wording of the 2008 questionnaire was different from other years. In 2008, the happiness question was 'are you happy or not?' and used the Chinese expression '*kuaile*' while for other years questions (both prior to and after 2008 – see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3 on the outcome variable), the term used was '*xingfu*'. Chapter 5, using data from qualitative interviews, shows that, as a rule, these terms are understood differently. When asked to reflect on the term 'happiness (*xingfu*)', most of my urban middle-class interviewees understood this as associated with their achievement of a better, happier life, which included family and work domains. People's perceptions of happiness (*xingfu*) thus appeared to be understood as having 'a good life' and to be shaped, to some extent at least, by social expectations of what a good life should be. My qualitative findings, thus, support Hsu's (2019a) study, on the basis of which it is proposed that the concept of happiness, in contemporary China, can be constructed as a morally good life. Most of my interviewees associated happiness, or a morally good life, with a healthy and/or harmonious family and career achievement. They seemed to strive for satisfaction in both family and work domains, or to use Hsu's (2019b) expression, they wished to 'have it all'. They considered family happiness to be fundamental to the individual pursuit of happiness, suggesting that the cultural value of family-centrism continues to be the dominating force shaping how the Chinese individual perceives and evaluates happiness in today's China. Only a few interviewees equated happiness with their feelings of positive emotions which could be expressed by the Chinese term '*kuaile*'. This suggests that when Chinese people saw or heard the word happiness (*xingfu*), they might have been more likely to associate it with a state of 'being' after a thoughtful reflection on their lives, rather than an elusive 'feeling' of positive emotion (*kuaile*).

Although *kuaile* and *xingfu* may be, and are, used interchangeably in everyday life, the vast majority of my interviewees (47 out of 51) distinguished between *kuaile* and *xingfu* by suggesting that *kuaile* is more individual-oriented and could be automatically evoked by the minutiae of life without, or with limited, thinking activity, and thus could come and go easily. *Xingfu*, however, is highly family-orientated and requires a more conscious and longer-term evaluation of one's current life with reference to defined standards of what a good life is (e.g. a successful career, familial harmony). in addition to these distinctions, interview accounts also clarified the relationship between *kuaile* and *xingfu*. These revealed that, on the one hand, *xingfu* and *kuaile* are connected. Thus, a higher level of *xingfu* or a good life may be accompanied by a higher level of *kuaile* or feeling happy. On the other hand, *kuaile* is found in the small things in life, while *xingfu*, or the evaluation of life-as-a-whole, depends on more important factors which are the standards of what is considered to be a good life. This suggests that *xingfu* may operate at a higher, reflective level, and people's sense of *xingfu* may be able to shape their feelings of *kuaile*. However, *kuaile* is experienced or not experienced independently without affecting the level of *xingfu*.

These findings led me to draw the conclusion that the structure of *xingfu* is comparable to that of happiness as understood in Veenhoven's (1984) framework, in that it consists of two components: affect and contentment. *Kuaile*, it has been argued, is thus best understood as the affective component of the broader concept of happiness (*xingfu*), which is consistent with Hsu et al.'s (2017) study. The differences between these two concepts outlined above, moreover, means *kuaile* could be easily and automatically triggered without any cognitive association. This led me to conclude that *kuaile* is not transformed into *xingfu* through a cumulative process, as suggested in Madsen's (2019a) understanding of happiness. The finding from the interview component of my study that urban middle-class interviewees most frequently interpreted *xingfu* in terms of its cognitive nature alone, and clearly distinguished it from *kuaile*, has important implications for future survey data collection and analysis. It suggests that in order to ensure the validity of the survey, it is important to choose the most appropriate word depending on whether the aim is to measure overall happiness or one of its dimensions. In the CGSS 2008, survey respondents were asked to report their level of *kuaile*, while the term used in other years' questions (both prior to and after 2008) was *xingfu*. According to interviewees' reflections on these different happiness questions, most

interviewees argued that the question in 2008 was a completely different one, appraising only short-term based individual emotional experiences. Questions that asked about the level of *xingfu* were understood, in contrast, as a long-term assessment of people's satisfaction with life-as-a-whole. I have concluded that the inconsistency of the wording used in the survey questions raises issues in terms of comparability for any trend analysis.

8.1.2 How does happiness differ within the middle class?

The CGSS survey data revealed intra-group differences in self-reported happiness within the Chinese middle class (Chapter 4, Section 4.3), which were explored both through secondary analysis of the survey data and, where possible, in the qualitative interview data. From the analysis of the survey data it was determined that respondents' levels of happiness varied by the socio-demographic attributes of sub-class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parental status. To recapitulate, in this study the middle class is operationalised as a category that comprises 3 sub-classes: the service class, the self-employed/small employers, and the marginal middle class (the routine non-manual). The service class was more likely to report being happy than the self-employed and the marginal middle class. This suggests that the higher the socioeconomic status of an individual within the middle class, the more likely they are to report a high level of happiness. In contrast, the age-happiness relationship is not linear but U-shaped, as the middle-aged middle class reported being the least happy, which supports the findings in other happiness studies (e.g. Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008; Xing and Huang, 2014). Only minor differences were found between men's and women's self-reported happiness. However, within gender categories, age makes a difference. Young women reported being as happy as their male counterparts while middle-aged and elderly women seemed to be slightly unhappier than men in these age groups. Looking at ethnic differentiation, Han Chinese were happier than the non-Han, although these findings need to be treated with caution due to the small number of ethnic minorities included in the CGSS samples. Regarding marital and parenthood status, the married were more likely to report being happy than the never married and the separated/divorced/widowed. This is consistent with a substantial number of research studies on marriage and happiness (e.g. Joung et al., 1997; Mookherjee, 1997; Proulx et al., 2007; Stack and Eshleman, 1998). Respondents with

children also appeared to be happier than the childless, which refutes the prevailing argument about the negative relationship, or the lack of a relationship, between having children and individual happiness (e.g. Cowan and Cowan, 1986; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Pimentel, 2000; and White et al., 1986). However, it is important to note that a simple descriptive analysis cannot, and should not, be generalised to a wider population, and particular care needs to be taken in interpretation where the numbers in the groups are small. Besides, the quantitative approach itself has limited capacity to explain why a certain social group is more likely to report a higher level of happiness than the other(s), and qualitative data is needed to offer an in-depth exploration into the intra-class difference on happiness, as well as how the individual experience of happiness differs in accordance with age, gender, class, ethnicity, and marital and parental status.

Before considering whether and why happiness is class-differentiated even within the urban middle class, it is important first to establish whether respondents recognised themselves as appropriate 'middle class' subjects of this research. To explore this, I used both survey and interview data. As survey data based on categorical socioeconomic classification, which asked respondents to rate their status by selecting one of five hierarchical social strata (the upper, the upper middle, the middle, the lower middle and the lower), was only available for a single year, 2006, in the CGSS I used this year to explore the relationship between the objective and subjective social status. A crosstabulation analysis indicated that objective class position did not automatically correspond with consistent subjective class identification. The service class was more likely to identify with the upper middle class and the middle class than were the self-employed and the marginal middle class (see Chapter 6, Table 6.3). However, more than half of the service class identified with the lower-middle and lower class, and thus had a lower perception of their objective class position.

In my qualitative study, the same question on self-rated class from the CGSS 2006 was used to elicit interviewees' awareness and reflections on class identity. What might account for the lack of congruence between objective and subjective class? Why might the Chinese middle class avoid or refute middle-class labels? Qualitative findings suggested three reasons. The first is that people may self-identify like others (e.g. their kin, or others sharing the same work experiences) they feel close to, rather than by objective measures of their own status.

Secondly, the hierarchical classification of the education and healthcare industries, as well as the *bianzhi* system, leads to systematic social inequalities. It is likely that people working in lower level institutions, or without a *bianzhi*, experience a sense of relative deprivation, and thus develop a lower class subjective identification. Lastly, the images of what the middle class should be in people's minds could be constructed by the mass media's representations of them. Moreover, sometimes these stereotypic media images of the middle class are, in fact, Americanised, leading Chinese middle-class individuals to compare themselves to the images of the American middle class and conclude that they do not belong to the so-called 'middle class'. Even those who recognised their middle-class social standing did not necessarily see themselves as part of a culturally distinguishable middle class. Reference group theory is useful to explain this pattern of identification. Most of those who identified with the middle class themselves in the context of the people they knew personally, saw themselves as somewhere in the middle of this range, and therefore, stressed their middlingness.

As discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3), the CGSS data suggests that the reporting of happiness is 'classed' since the objective service class was more likely to report a higher level of happiness than the self-employed/small employer and the marginal middle class. However, this tendency is not uniform across these subgroups; some members of the service-class experience a lower sense of happiness than others in the same group, while some routine non-manuals report a higher level of happiness than their counterparts. Qualitative interviews indicated that this might be due in part to the inconsistency between objective and subjective class identification. For the individuals who do not identify with their objective socioeconomic status, their sense of happiness may not be comparable with those in the same class group. Rather, their happiness is likely to be comparable with that of the class with which they subjectively identify. In this sense, the subjective class measure may be considered as a supplementary but more meaningful predictor of self-reported happiness than using the objective measure of class alone.

Happiness is dynamic and shifts across different stages of one's life. Consistent with the survey findings, the age-happiness pattern among interviewees also appeared to be U-shaped. However, intra-group differences in happiness were found among both the young interviewees as well as the middle-aged group. Role expectation is useful to interpret these

variations. Within the young group, the meanings of happiness as well as the sources of happiness appeared to be different for the married and the unmarried. The young married had at least two more factors that affect happiness – marriage and parenthood – than the unmarried. Therefore the married, and those married with children, appeared more likely to find and experience positive feelings and a sense of achievement. However, at the same time, sources of happiness have to be constantly maintained to ensure congruence between reality and expectation. The married, who had to provide the essentials (e.g. mortgage payments) for a happy family, tended to report facing much greater responsibility and life stress than their unmarried peers. Moreover, not all middle-aged interviewees reported being 'unhappy'.

In explaining the positive effect of marriage on individual happiness as elucidated from the quantitative data, qualitative analysis suggested that the increased happiness was associated with the fulfilment of social expectations, but also with parenthood and the satisfaction of personal emotional needs which was experienced in marital life. Marriage remains a universal and normative practice in today's China. However, marriage is considered a source of happiness not only because it signals the successful fulfilment of social expectations. Interview data revealed that it is the *quality* of the marriage, rather than the marriage itself, that contributes to individual happiness. Interviewees with children also talked about the psychological satisfaction brought about by parenthood, including emotional support and mutual enrichment from parenthood, as well as a sense of achievement (especially if their children appeared to have turned out well compared to those of others). Having small children, particularly for women, might result in the experience of more negative emotions and a lower sense of affective happiness. However, happiness is a composite of affective and cognitive components. When shifting to a cognitive perspective, these female interviewees started to affirm the positive outcomes of parenting for their long-term, overall evaluations of life. Finally, a high-quality marriage was described as an emotionally satisfying one that might be associated with the experience of childbearing and the value of parenthood but also with mutual support and companionship, satisfaction with family-work division, or timely and effective conflict resolution. Because I approached interviewees based on occupational class, all female interviewees in this sample were from 'dual-income' families, i.e. both they and their husbands were employed. Most of these female interviewees took up the lion's share of parenting and domestic work. However, they did not perceive their dual burden as

undermining their individual happiness. This might be explained by a prevailing transitional gender ideology, which meant that women forged their identities both through work and home while believing that it was the 'norm', or their responsibility, to undertake a large proportion of housework. They, therefore, did not recognise this as an experience of unhappiness. Only in the conditions of an egalitarian gender ideology in terms of division of labour might the 'dual burden' of employment and domestic labour placed upon working women become perceived as unreasonable and unfair.

Although the whole of the middle-aged group in my interview sample might be considered to represent the 'sandwich generation' (Miller, 1981) who bear the burden of providing financial and emotional care for both elderly parents and teenage children, the later middle-aged (50-59) perceived happiness in a different way from the early middle-aged (40-49). While most interviewees in the study associated happiness with how far they had achieved the goals they set themselves (see Chapter 5), it was in middle age that the achievement of these goals was anticipated. The middle-aged interviewees appeared to be more ambitious in their early midlife and, due to these higher aspirations, they were more likely to report experiencing disappointments and dissatisfaction. As they approached retirement age, however, the later middle-aged interviewees began to disassociate their happiness from career ambitions, leading to an increase in their sense of happiness. In this sense this group was preparing to enter the period of elderhood, characterised by elderly interviewees as 'the age of relaxation', in which they could enjoy life again after being relieved from the stresses and frustrations of mid-life. For older interviewees, how their children reciprocated care-giving also mattered to their happiness. However, the younger and older cohorts of this group differed in terms of whether they chose to live with their children or not in later years and thus in their perceptions of the dutiful child. This difference appears to be associated with the one child policy, which undermined the traditional form of eldercare through multi-generational households. The older cohort of elderly interviewees (born between the 1930s and 1940s) had more than one child and it was possible for their children (or at least one of them) to adjust their busy schedule and care for their parents at home. This was often not possible for the younger cohort (born around the mid-1950s) who had been allowed to have only one child. The younger cohort expressed an understanding that their employed and married children might find it difficult to provide proper care for them at home. Although they did not

live together, they still expected their children to provide companionship and emotional support, and this was important for a happy life in old age.

Quantitative analysis (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3) indicated that the levels of self-reported happiness between male and female respondents are similar. However, the qualitative interviews, which allowed an insight into how happiness was talked about as well as how it was evaluated, found gender differences in emotional expressiveness. Men and women tended to adopt different sets of expression and feeling rules, which, it is argued, was due to the very different social roles into which they had been socialised. Men appeared to be the less emotionally expressive gender and were more reluctant to recall or narrate their inner feelings. This, I have suggested, is because they had been socialised to see themselves as 'iron-hearted' men. The performability of gender or 'doing gender' also suggests that appropriate sets of 'expression rules' guide people to appear to feel appropriately, while 'feeling rules' direct how they ought to feel. For a man, displaying greater emotional expressiveness would violate the prevailing norms of masculinity and generate embarrassed and uncomfortable feelings. He would then have to carry out emotion work to control or manage the inconsistency between his feeling ('what he feels and thinks') and socially determined feeling rules ('what he should feel and think'). Not talking about private or emotional lives in public does not mean, however, that one is insensitive or uncaring. The interview data suggested that a man could choose to accentuate masculine-related aspects of his self-image in public ('frontstage'). However, when he is at home or with his intimate circle (e.g., wife) he could be willing to express his inner emotions intimately and passionately and be his true self.

The relationship between ethnicity and happiness was not pursued at length in this thesis because the qualitative fieldwork was undertaken in Guangzhou, a city whose population is 98.32% Han Chinese, so encountering non-Han people is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, the two non-Han participants I interviewed had adopted different strategies from each other in adapting to the new culture of Guangzhou. Although I suggested that this loss of ethnic identity had some relevance to their happiness, the data from two respondents does not allow further elucidation of the survey findings. Therefore, the question of the relationship between ethnicity and self-reported happiness was not pursued further.

8.2 Contributions to knowledge

A major contribution of this thesis is that it has bridged the research gap between sociological concepts of happiness and the lived experience of happiness among a specific social group in a non-Western cultural context – the urban middle class in China. It makes a contribution to our knowledge in four distinct ways.

Firstly, relatively sparse attention has hitherto been paid to happiness within the discipline of sociology. According to Veenhoven (2008, p.44), the study of happiness has not become a major theme within sociology for a combination of pragmatic, ideological, and theoretical reasons (see Chapter 2). This thesis has confirmed that sociology has a unique contribution to make to the study of happiness by shifting the focus from happiness as an inherently individual, subjective and psychological phenomenon to questions of how it is socially shaped, patterned and experienced.

Secondly, the thesis has illuminated how understandings of happiness are culturally inflected. Cross-cultural research on happiness (e.g. Christopher, 1999; Lu et al., 2001; Lu and Gilmour, 2004; Suh and Oishi, 2002) has found that for East-Asians, happiness is heavily influenced by in-group collectivistic cultural values, and hence is socially-oriented. This contrasts with findings from studies in western societies that suggest happiness is predominantly individually oriented. This thesis uncovers how Chinese individuals – the urban middle class in China – report and narrate happiness, and found that they construct their meanings of happiness in relation to their families. This is consistent with Hsu's (2019b) research emphasising the family-centric perspective towards individual happiness. This is not to suggest that there is no in-group differentiation, or that all Chinese experience happiness in the same way. Another contribution made by this study is its exploration – on the basis of both survey and interview data – of the differences in levels of self-reported happiness within the Chinese middle class according to sub-class, age, gender, ethnicity, and marital and parenthood status. Drawing on qualitative data, which allowed deeper insight into the patterns regarding socio-demographic differences in self-reported happiness, Chapter 6, exploring the relationship between social class and happiness, revealed that a person's

socioeconomic position (objective and subjective) in the social structure led to varying abilities to cope with negative or unexpected life events and that this impacted on satisfaction with their life. Also, as discussed in Chapter 7, different social and cultural norms and role expectations associated with age, gender, and marital and parenthood status could explain the differences in happiness between individuals.

Thirdly, the thesis has made a novel contribution to the existing literature on the meaning of happiness (*xingfu*) in the Chinese cultural context through its qualitatively-driven mixed methods research design. The qualitative dimension to the study allowed, in particular, the exploration of the appropriateness of models of happiness constructed by Western scholars, which distinguish between affective (hedonic) and cognitive components (see, for example, Veenhoven, 1984). It found that, at least for the Chinese urban middle class, happiness (*xingfu*) was understood primarily in relation to its cognitive component. *Kuaile*, a popular synonym for *xingfu*, was considered the affective component of overall happiness (*xingfu*). Given that *xingfu* is found to be distinguishable from *kuaile* in daily discourse, social surveys intending to measure happiness should be attentive to the wording used to constitute the meaning of happiness in order to ensure the validity of the survey results. The consistency of wording is important not only to within-country research examining happiness trends over time, but also to cross-national research and comparisons of happiness across nations. For example, the English word 'happiness' may be translated into the Chinese expression '*xingfu*' or '*kuaile*'. If a cross-national survey aims to capture and compare people's level of overall happiness (which consists of the affective component and the cognitive component) in different nations, whilst the Chinese version of the questionnaire uses '*kuaile*' rather than '*xingfu*', then comparability of the findings on levels of happiness in China and countries using the English version of the questionnaire[130] may be compromised.

[130] One example of an ongoing cross-national survey project that includes happiness or well-being is the World Value Survey (WVS). With reference to the most recent wave 7 (2017-2020), the questionnaires (both in English and Chinese) have distinguished the affective and the cognitive components of happiness *Yukuai* is considered a synonym to '*kuaile*' in daily usage. *Manyi*, which denotes the meaning of 'satisfied', has been proposed in footnote 94 as one example of measuring the cognitive component of happiness in the Chinese language. According to my qualitative findings in this happiness research in China, the Chinese are able to make clear differentiation between the affective and cognitive components of happiness

Finally, the research findings on class identity and its relationship with happiness (Chapter 6) contribute insights to the current literature exploring the nuances of subjective class. This research focusing on a specific social group – the middle class in China – confirms studies on subjective identities of the middle class in other parts of the world in relation to the effect of comparing with others when individuals evaluate their position in the social strata, as well as on the importance of parental socioeconomic status (or the economic situation one was born into) for how people perceive their class position (See Chapter 6, Section 6.1.2). This may suggest that some of the tendencies or explanations behind the inconsistency between objective and subjective class, at least regarding the influence of social comparison and social status of the parents on individual class identity, are shared across different countries (or cultures). However, at the same time, we should note that since self-identifying class is socially constructed, it also reveals the importance of cultural context. In this thesis, the significance of the *bianzhi* system as well as the deeply hierarchical educational and medical system in contemporary China are interesting examples of how we need to be alert to the cultural context of subjective class identification.

8.3 Limitations and future research agenda

In focusing on the question at the heart of this study - how the middle class in urban China report, understand and narrate their experience of happiness - some important issues have remained beyond the scope of the thesis. In this final section, therefore, attention turns to elaborating some of the limitations of the thesis as well as suggestions for the direction of future research drawing on its findings.

8.3.1 Limitations

The first limitation relates to the quantitative data (CGSS) which I used, which is based on repeated cross-sectional data sampling, and so respondents sampled in any one survey are different to those in prior or subsequent surveys. As a consequence, I was not able to fully

investigate period and cohort effects, and so I was provided with limited insights into processes of social change. Since the CGSS survey respondents participating in the CGSS in each year are different from their predecessors and successors, it is difficult to know why a high proportion of survey respondents chose the middle answer category in 2003, 2005, and 2006, and why this proportion dropped dramatically in 2008, although this thesis has offered some insight into these changes. To tackle cohort effects reflecting differences among young, middle-aged and elderly respondents in terms of their tendencies to report a higher level of happiness, panel data are needed, to explain their shared temporal experiences in the specific historical context in which they have lived (see Section 8.3.2).

Secondly, although Veenhoven (1984) suggests that affective and cognitive components of happiness are being assessed by different mechanisms, he does not clarify the relationship between these two components. In his later co-authored works (e.g. Brulé and Veenhoven, 2015; Rojas and Veenhoven, 2013), he stresses the domination of affect over contentment, which leads him to rule out the co-existence of low affect and high contentment in the experience of happiness. However, he still does not provide a satisfactory account of how affect and cognition are interrelated when the bottom line of affect – having one's wants fulfilled – is met. How do these two concepts relate to each other in the Chinese cultural context? Or are they two completely separate components of happiness? In this study, as noted in Chapter 3, the preliminary survey data analysis was used as a means of informing and initiating the qualitative interview schedule. I paid particular attention to the change in the wording used to convey the meaning of happiness, and was interested in how *kuaile* might differ from *xingfu*. Hence the qualitative interviews allowed the space to compare and distinguish the meaning between these two concepts and I found that while *xingfu* represented overall happiness, *kuaile* should be interpreted as the affective component. This meant that the relationship between the affective and cognitive components was not given sufficient attention in my study.

8.3.2 Future research

In light of these limitations, and building on the findings in this thesis, several possible directions for future research appear promising. Firstly, this study is based on cross-sectional data rather than panel data. Panel data has the capacity to look into the changes of a phenomenon at both the societal and individual level. If new, high quality panel data, which are based on repeated samples over time and thus allow a 'tracking' of the survey respondents, were to be available for conducting longitudinal analysis for at least a decade, it would be worth re-examining the trends of self-reported happiness of the middle class in China, which would allow us to consider the period and cohort effects systematically. A second avenue for further study could be an analysis of how dimensions of happiness relate to each other, given that happiness is viewed as an umbrella structure including both affective and cognitive dimensions. It would be meaningful to carry out a cross-cultural comparative analysis between countries in the West and China in terms of the structure of happiness and the relationship between affect and cognition. A qualitative approach may be more desirable to understand how people themselves perceive and understand the relationship of these two components. Thirdly, as the middle-class population is expanding, which is of great importance to the future of China, it would be interesting to explore whether people are increasingly subjectively identifying with the middle class, by using survey data with consistent questions on subjective class identification (as in 2006) that allow a comparison with the occupational categories. Lastly, my study draws only on the urban middle class in Guangzhou, and so the conclusions cannot be generalised to the whole of the middle class in other parts of China. A more holistic picture of happiness among the middle class might be generated by extending the qualitative study of the narrativisation of happiness among the middle class to other, second or third tier, cities. Future research could be extended also to compare the urban and rural middle class. Do urban and rural middle class populations conceptualise and report happiness differently? Are rural people more family-oriented than urban people?

Moreover, since subjective class is suggested in this study as a more meaningful predictor in explaining individual happiness, it would be worth studying whether and how different

question formats or wordings affect people's responses to class identification. As indicated in Chapter 6, since the CGSS 2006 is the only dataset assessing respondents' subjective class based on categorical classification, I used this dataset to examine the relationship between objective and subjective social status in order to ensure consistency with the occupational class categories. How the survey question is structured and asked is important, because it may shape respondents' responses. A number of studies drawing on large-scale social surveys in the West have found a quite interesting response tendency in relation to the wording adopted in questions for self-selecting socioeconomic position. For example, Adair (2001) has found that the vast majority of survey respondents identify with 'the middle class' when asked to choose between upper, middle and lower class, but when they were offered an additional choice of 'working class', around half of the respondents chose this category. Adair (2001) explains that this could be attributed to the negative connotations attached to the labels 'upper' and 'lower', leading respondents to avoid such unfavourable identities. In light of Adair's findings, it could be argued that the high proportion of respondents with middle class identity may just be an artefact of the survey design. Respondents may not actually have developed a robust and culturally meaningful class identity of either middle class or working class; they chose it in the social survey in order to avoid what is perceived as an extreme or antagonistic descriptor. Unfortunately the CGSS survey design did not allow an evaluation of how changes in wording or format of the question affected respondents' self-ranked class position.

In addition, there are a couple of interesting issues raised during my qualitative interviews which are worthy of future exploration. The first is that there might be a gendered difference in terms of the responsibilities borne by the middle-aged which affects happiness. Although, with the exception of one middle-aged man, all participants in my interviews were from dual-income couples, women might experience greater caregiver burdens than men, which was inferred by the fact that most female interviewees reported taking on a greater share of domestic chores than their husbands. Further research is needed to explore how dual-income couples balance family and work, and whether or not middle-aged women face more stresses than their male peers because of this. Another promising direction could be to explore how the ideal images of being a woman or man influence our understanding and evaluation of happiness, as well as how age intersects with gender in shaping people's experience of

happiness, since these have not been explored fully in this study. Moreover, given that happiness (*xingfu*) is considered a composite of two components (i.e. affect or *kuaile*; and contentment), and given the complexity of the operationalisation of the concept of happiness, it remains unclear whether there are gender differences in which components of happiness prevail when individuals report happiness. In light of the emphasis on emotional experience in female gender role socialisation, is it possible that women are more likely to think of happiness in terms of its affective dimension while men are more likely to think of it in terms of its cognitive component? The CGSS dataset, which I used for the quantitative part of this study, includes only one measure of happiness (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3 for a full list of questions) and thus does not allow a further exploration of this. In contrast, qualitative interviews, drawing on individuals' accounts of happiness experience, may offer the opportunity to study whether men and women have different emphases in their evaluation of happiness. Moreover, due to the smaller number of the elderly participating in my interviews, it is difficult to draw conclusions on individual differences in the preferred or expected approaches to eldercare and how different living arrangements affect the happiness level of the Chinese middle-class elderly. If drawing on a larger, nationally representative survey scale, it would be possible to determine if there were any individual differences, for example, between those who were bound by the single child policy at the time they were forming their families, and those who had more than one child, in terms of preferred ways of eldercare. This is worth further exploration, as China's rapidly aging population has created serious challenges for eldercare and the health system in China (Feng et al., 2013). It would also be interesting to take a different angle, and to find out how caring for elderly parents affects an only child's happiness. Although in China caring for one's elderly parents is not only an agreed moral expectation but a legal responsibility, the shrinking family size as a result of the one-child policy has created challenges for only children to directly provide quality care for their elderly parents at home. How do only children deal with the dilemma balancing parenting, work and taking care of their parents? It would also be of great interest to explore gender difference in happiness within the only child group.

Given the importance of the Chinese middle class for a strong and harmonious nation and global economy, the happiness of the urban middle class in China provides immense

opportunity for future research. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to the growing interest in this field.

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Appendices

A – A list of socio-demographic variables of happiness in the CGSS (2003-2015)

Socio-demographic variables of happiness (CGSS 2003-2015)

Variable name	**Available each year**	**Related survey questions**	**Recoding variables**
Age	Yes	*Your date of birth: (Enter the year and month directly)*	The respondents' age could not be directly derived through the variable as it captured the year when the respondent was born. A new age variable was generated to indicate the age of survey respondents at the time of data collection. This variable was recoded into three age groups: the young (18-39), the middle-aged (40-59), and the elderly (60+).
Gender	Yes	*Sex: 1) Male 2) Female*	This variable did not need to be recoded.
Ethnicity	Yes	*Ethnicity: 1) Han 2) Mongolian 3) Manchu 4) Hui 5) Tibetan 6) Zhuang 7) Uygur 8) Other (specify: ___)*	This was recoded into a new binary variable with response categories 'Han' or 'non-Han ethnic minority'.
Marital Status	No	2003-2005: *Your current marital status is: 1) Not yet married 2) Married 3) Divorced 4) Remarried after divorce 5) Widowed 6) Remarried after widowhood b) No answer* 2006-2015: *Your current marital status is 1)*	This was recoded into three categories: never married; married; and divorced/widowed/separated.

		Unmarried 2) Cohabiting 3) Married, with a spouse 4) Remarried, with a spouse 5) Separate 6) Divorce 7) Widowed	
Children	No	There were no questions regarding whether respondents had children and how many children in year 2003 and 2005. 2006: *How many children (biological) have you had (including the deceased)? Daughters ( ) Sons ( )* 2008: *How many children have you had? Have ( ) sons, their ages for each are ___ respectively; have ( ) daughters, their ages for each are ___ respectively* 2010-2015: *How many children have you had (including stepchildren, adopted children, please write '00' if none)? Daughters ( ) Sons ( )*	This[131] was recoded into a binary variable to indicate whether respondents' parenthood status.

[131] Note that the question concerning the children variable at each survey year was not consistent. In 2006 it asked respondents to write down the number of only their biological children. Therefore, the survey respondents could not take their stepchildren and/or adopted children into account. However, in 2008 the question did not specify whether the children were biological. From 2010 onwards, the question included non-biological children (stepchildren and adopted children).

B – Qualitative inquiry following from quantitative findings

Research objectives	**Survey limitations prompting further exploration**	**Topics for further exploration in qualitative interviews**
The trends of happiness of the Chinese middle class	The survey did not shed light on potential explanations for the change in people's level of happiness over the past ten years.	Do interviewees recognise the happiness trend line which was identified on the basis of the survey data over the past decade? What do they make of it? Do they think this reflects how people feel now and how they felt a decade ago, and why?
Understanding of the meaning of happiness	The survey did not allow respondents to articulate what meaning they attached to the notion of 'happiness'. Moreover, the survey used two different wordings – *xingfu* and *kuaile* - in assessing happiness.	What does happiness mean for these interviewees in relation to their day-to-day experiences? How do they distinguish *xingfu* and *kuaile*, and are these two concepts considered interchangeable or as having distinct and different meanings?
Subjective class identification and its relationship to happiness	The CGSS 2006, for which data was collected over a decade ago, is the only dataset that measured respondents' subjective class based on an objective classification. Again, the survey left the 'why' questions unasked. The survey data suggested that happiness is classed but not how or why.	Would interviewees recognise themselves as 'middle class' subjects of this research? What are the implications of the answer to this question for the survey findings in terms of the relationship between class and happiness? Is subjective class identification a better predictor of individual happiness than objective class measures, as suggested by a considerable number of recent studies

		(Adler et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2008; Islam et al., 2009)?
The relationship between happiness and socio-demographic characteristics	The quantitative data analysis has limited ability to generate possible explanations for the correlations identified.	Drawing on the life experiences of members of the Chinese middle class, how do age, gender, ethnicity, marriage, and parenthood status affect happiness?

C – Interview Guide Questions (in Chinese)

中国中产阶级的自述幸福感 —— 基于混合方法的研究

访谈提纲

（在每次访谈前，应先知晓受访者的年龄、具体职业、户口状况、性别、婚姻状况、孩子个数、民族和政治面貌）

通用问题：

1. 当你听到"幸福"二字，你脑海里会想到什么？
2. 你能告诉我"幸福"跟"快乐"之间的区别吗？你是如何理解二者的呢？
3. 到目前为止，你今天觉得快乐吗？那昨天呢？同样的感受吗？
4. 你是否发现自己的幸福或不幸福感受并不稳定？即每天或每周都不相同？
5. 在生活中，我们会在不同时刻感到不同程度的快乐？你能回忆起近期以来经历的一个快乐的时刻和一个不快乐的时刻吗？为什么你觉得那时自己感到快乐或不快乐呢？
6. 总体而言，你认为自己的生活是否幸福？为什么？
7. 对你而言，最幸福的事情是什么呢？（当别人问你是否幸福时，在回答时，你认为什么事情起着最关键的作用呢？）为什么？
   你认为这些起着关键作用的因素是否跟你同龄的其他男/女性一样呢？当你和你的女性（男性，如果受访者为男性）朋友及亲戚讨论到当前状况与人生幸福时，你们通常会谈到什么话题？

   你认为什么事情可能会极大地损害自己的幸福感呢？为什么？
8. 阶级是一个日常用语，你平时有留意过关于"阶级"的新闻报道或者谈及它的书籍杂志吗？
   如果我让你把社会上的人划分出不同阶级，你脑海里有大致的划分标准吗？
   一般来说，我们可将社会上的人根据他们的社会经济地位（由职业、收入、受教育程度、和职业声誉等决定）将他们划分为不同的人群，您认为自己属于下列哪个阶级呢：上等阶级，中上等阶级，中等阶级，中下等阶级和工人阶级？
   为什么呢？
9. 既然你将自己划分到这个阶级，那么关于其他阶级，你有认识的朋友属于其中一员吗？你为什么将他们划分到这一阶级里呢？你的依据是什么呢？
   中等阶级中又被细分出三个阶级，你是如何区别这三者的呢？是否相较于工人阶级，中等阶级较难定义呢？
10. 我们现在来谈谈你的当前工作。你能描述下自己在工作时具体做些什么事情吗？你对自己当前工作是否满意呢？你是如何评价这份工作的呢？这份工作有带来幸福感吗？如果可以选择，你最想做的工作是什么呢？为什么呢？

11. （让受访者在每一项问题中选取自己的答案，就如同他们在填写 CGSS 调查问卷般，然后回顾：）
    总体而言，您对自己所过的生活的感觉是怎么样的呢？您
    感觉您的生活是：
    1） 非常不幸福
    2） 不幸福
    3） 一般
    4） 幸福
    5） 非常幸福
    整体来说，您觉得您快不快乐？
    1） 很快乐
    2） 还算快乐
    3） 普通
    4） 不太快乐
    5） 很不快乐
    总的来说，您认为您的生活是否幸福？
    1） 很不幸福
    2） 比较不幸福
    3） 居于幸福与不幸福之间
    4） 比较幸福
    5） 完全幸福
    你在回答时，是否感到这两种问题是不一样的呢？“快乐”与“幸福”这两种不同的用词是否影响了你的思考？
    （若他们选取了“说不上幸福还是不幸福”这一类居中的答案，问他们：）
    为什么你觉得自己很难用一个相对清晰的答案（幸福/不幸福）来回答呢？你是如何看待幸福感问题中的中立答案呢？
12. 最新出版的全球幸福报告，在 141 个国家中，中国人的幸福指数仅排在第 86 位。但是，在幸福水平变化方面，2008 至 2010 与 2015 至 2017 两个期间的分析结果显示，中国幸福指数增长排名是排在第 20 位的。你是如何看待这一事实的呢？你能想到任何可以解释从 2008 年到现在，中国居民幸福感增长的原因吗？
13. 你理想中的家庭规模是怎样的呢？你现有多少个孩子呢？
    （有什么原因导致这一差距的吗？）
    你认为自己对于生养孩子的想法/经历与身边其他人一样还是不一样呢？
14. 与过去相比较，你是否感到更快乐了呢？在哪些方面呢？
    你是否有把自己的生活跟同龄人相比较？若有，一般是什么样的人会作为参照物呢？为什么呢？当你跟他人做比较时，你是否会感到更快乐了呢？

基于量化分析后的特定问题：

1. （针对青年受访者：）
   跟以前（小时候）相比，您对幸福的感受程度和理解是否发生了改变呢？为什么？

（针对中年受访者：）
回想过去，跟较年轻时候（40 岁之前）相比，您对幸福的感受程度和理解是否发生了改变呢？为什么？

（针对老年受访者：）
纵观一路人生，您对幸福的感受程度和理解是否发生了改变呢？在哪个年龄段，您觉得自己是最幸福的？为什么？

2. 您还记得 08 年举办奥运会时自己的心情吗？激动吗？您觉得举办举国盛事是否有助于国民幸福感的提升呢？那你自己当时的感受呢？

3. （针对已婚受访者：）
你是如何看待幸福感跟婚姻生活二者之间的关系呢？可使用你的自身经历或你周围朋友的例子进行叙述。
总的而言，婚姻是否增进了你的幸福感？以何种方式呢？对于你丈夫/妻子，他们是否也这样觉得的呢？

4. （针对有孩子的受访者：）
在你生育第一个（/以及之后）的孩子后，你的生活是如何产生变化的呢？这是否影响到了你与丈夫/妻子之间的关系呢？你是否感到更幸福呢？
你是否发现自己的婚姻生活遭遇了些小困难？当你不能为孩子提供更多时，你是否会感到失望？

5. （针对少数民族受访者：）
你是否收到过政府提供的各项少数民族福利呢？你认为这些福利是否有助于增进自己的幸福感？
作为一名少数民族，你在生活中曾遇到过歧视或者他人对自己不理解的情况吗？你觉得这些遭遇是否对自己的幸福感产生了负面影响？

个人特征记录表

个人特征	**画圈 或直接填写**
工作所在区域	___________
目前具体年龄	___________
性别	• 男 • 女

获得的最高教育程度：	• 高中 • 大专文凭或大学本科 • 硕士研究生 • 博士研究生 • 其他（请填写）____________
就业状况：	• 全职就业 • 半职就业 • 失业 • 非经济活动人口(照料家人、操持家务) • 退休
政治面貌：	• 中国共产党 • 其他（请填写）____________
婚姻状况：	• 未婚 • 已婚 • 同居中 • 离婚 • 已婚后再婚 • 丧偶 • 丧偶后再婚
子女人数：	• 一孩 • 超过一孩，请问具体________个 • 未生育子女
民族：	• 汉族 • 其他（请填写）____________
户口状况：	• 城市户口 • 农村户口

户口所在地：	• 广州 • 其他城市/地区（请填写）___________
个人上年工资总收入：	• 低于38,000元 • 38,000元到76,000元之间 • 76,000元到19,0000元之间 • 高于19,0000元
家庭上年工资总收入：	• 低于68,000元 • 68,000元到136,000元之间 • 136,000元到340,000元之间 • 高于340,000元
当前房产状况：	• 租房住 • 已拥有至少一套房子的产权，请问你有几套房子：___________ • 住在集体宿舍 • 与朋友或亲戚同住（他们拥有产权） • 其他（请填写）___________