

Quality of Life of Chinese People in a Changing World

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Running Head: Chinese QOL

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The concept of quality of life (QOL) has attracted much research attention of researchers in different disciplines. Using “quality of life” as the search term, computer search conducted in July 2009 showed that there were 7,972 citations in PsycINFO, 6,383 citations in Sociological Abstracts, 766 citations in Social Work Abstracts, 4,151 citations in ERIC, 12,671 citations in MEDLINE, and 12,738 citations in CINAHL. In contrast, using “quality of life” and “Chinese” as search terms, identical search showed that there were 58, 1, 8, 46, 1,018 and 28 citations in PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, ERIC, MEDLINE and CINAHL, respectively. These figures clearly suggest that existing research studies on quality of life are predominantly conducted in the West and there is a strong need to conduct quality of life research in different Chinese communities (Shek, Lee & Chan, 2005b).

Besides the observation that the number of Chinese quality of life studies is on the low side, there are other reasons why more attention should be devoted to QOL research based on Chinese people. First, because culture plays an important role in the conceptualization and experience of quality of life, the predominance of studies based on non-Chinese participants limits our understanding of the related phenomena in the Chinese culture (Shek, 2002; Shek, Chan & Lee, 2005a). For example, while happiness and satisfaction are important components of quality of life in the Western culture, Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism emphasize forbearance, endurance and humility. Regarding family quality of life, while communication and emotional expressiveness are strongly emphasized in the West, roles, duties and self-suppression (particularly among the junior members in the family) and interpersonal harmony are virtues upheld in Chinese families. As such, it is important to conduct more QOL studies in the Chinese culture to understand quality of

life and its manifestation in a cross-cultural context.

In addition, the size of Chinese population warrants research attention. The World Population Clock (2009) showed that the population of China was 1,338,612,968, which was roughly one-fifth of the world's population in 2009. Obviously, data from Chinese people must be collected if any theory is claimed to be universally applicable. This point is important because many Chinese QOL researchers actually borrow Western QOL theoretical frameworks to understand the quality of life of Chinese people based on the assumption that these theories are universally applicable.

Finally, the changing socio-economic and political circumstances of China also suggest the importance of understanding the quality of life of Chinese people. With reference to mainland China, adoption of the open door policy and economic reforms in China since late 1970s has led to fundamental changes in the quality of life of Chinese people. For Hong Kong and Macau, they were returned to China in 1997 and 1999 respectively under the political framework of "one country, two systems". In Taiwan, democratization in the past two decades has fueled the quest for individual freedom and rights particularly among Taiwanese adolescents. In view of such changing socio-economic and political circumstances, it would be important to examine the quality of life of Chinese people in different Chinese contexts.

In their review of quality of life research in the global, Western and Chinese contexts, Shek, Chan and Lee (2005a) pointed out that despite the abundance of research in the study of quality of life in the global context, several missing gaps and research directions were identified in the existing QOL literature. First, a more holistic understanding of the concept of quality of life with reference to different ecological systems, particularly the family system, should be attempted. Second, in contrast to the vast number of studies on the quality of life of adults with and without special needs,

there are comparatively fewer research studies on the quality of life of children and adolescents. Third, comparatively fewer studies have examined the quality of life of persons experiencing economic disadvantage. Fourth, while researchers in different disciplines in different places have examined the concept of quality of life, dialogues among researchers across different professions and places are not widespread. Finally, the debate surrounding whether objective indicators (such as official statistics) or subjective indicators (such as opinion surveys) are sensitive indicators of quality of life still existed.

Against the above background, it is indeed an exciting task for me to serve as the guest editor for this special issue of *Social Indicators Research* entitled “Quality of Life of Chinese People in a Changing World”. Most of the papers in this special issue are based on the papers presented at the International Conference on “Human Development and the Environment: Advances in Quality of Life Studies” jointly organized by the Social Welfare Practice and Research Centre and Centre for Quality of Life, Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong to commemorate the 60th anniversary of New Asia College.

The first two articles of this special issue are studies on Chinese family quality of life involving different members within a family. In the first article by Yuk King Lau, the impact of work and family conflicts on father-child interactional quality in 556 pairs of working fathers and their school-aged children was examined. The findings showed that fathers’ work-to-family conflict was negatively related to the quality of father-child interactions, which in turn adversely affected children’s self-esteem. Because quality of father-child interaction has been rarely examined in the Chinese QOL studies, this is a pioneering addition to the literature. In the next paper, Vivian Lou examined the relationship between life satisfaction of older adults and social support from

grandchildren in 215 older people in Hong Kong. Results showed that support provided by grandchildren significantly predicted elderly quality of life indexed by life satisfaction after controlling background demographic factors and psychological factors such as attitude towards Chinese tradition and self-rated health status. These two papers clearly illustrate how factors in different systems, particularly family factors, influence individual quality of life. These studies are constructive response to the comment of Shek, Chan and Lee (2005b) that there are few studies studying Chinese family quality of life.

With reference to the lack of research on Chinese adolescent quality of life, several papers are included in this special issue. In the paper written by Siu and Shek, a series of studies on social problem solving are presented. These studies clearly showed that the Chinese version of the Social Problem-Solving Inventory Revised (C-SPSI-R) demonstrated very good psychometric properties. Results also showed that social problem solving was closely linked to measures of individual quality of life indexed by depression and anxiety as well as family quality of life (overall family functioning and parent-adolescent conflicts). With reference to the comment that there are few Chinese quality of life measures (Shek, 2002), this paper is a constructive response.

In the next paper by Lai and Shek, personal (hopelessness, social problem solving, emotional competence) and family (parent-adolescent communication, family functioning) quality of life correlates related to adolescent suicidal ideation were examined in 5,557 Secondary 1 to Secondary 4 students in Hong Kong. Results showed that suicidal ideation was positively related to adolescent hopelessness but negatively related to emotional competence, social problem solving, father-adolescent communication, mother-adolescent communication and family functioning. Again, this paper underscores the intimate relationship between quality of family life and

individual quality of life.

In the next paper by Hsi Sheng Wei and Ji Kang Chen, individual, peer and teacher predictors of attachment of students to schools were examined based on data collected from 720 students and 24 teachers. Based on hierarchical linear modeling, findings showed that school grade, peer support, peer victimization, and job satisfaction of the homeroom teachers were related to students' attachment to school. In the next paper, Lee and his associates examined the influence of resilience-related beliefs on children's development in a longitudinal study with three waves of data collection. The study showed that children's resilience beliefs predicted positive child development and the relationship was stronger with growing adversities in children's life.

There are two other papers on adolescent quality of life based on data collected from intervention studies. As the relationships amongst life satisfaction, positive youth development and problem behaviour are under-researched in the existing literature, Rachel Sun and Daniel Shek examined a series of models using structural equation modelling in 7,975 Secondary 1 students. The findings showed that a non-recursive model was found to best fit the data, which suggests that adolescents having higher levels of positive youth development are more satisfied with life and have fewer problem behaviour, with life satisfaction and problem behaviour negatively reinforcing each other. Based on three studies, Daniel Shek examined the perceptions and feelings of students participating in the Project P.A.T.H.S. regarding the program and the perceived benefits of the program via reflective journals in the form of weekly diaries. Results generally showed that the respondents had positive views on the program as well as the instructors and they perceived that they had acquired competencies at the societal, familial, interpersonal and personal levels and their quality of life was promoted after joining the program. The qualitative findings generally suggest that the

Project P.A.T.H.S. promotes quality of life amongst the program participants.

In addition to papers on adolescent quality of life, there are three other papers on the quality of life in Chinese adults. In the study by Luk and his associates, responses of 138 teachers in Macau to the Chinese Maslach Burnout Inventory, Chinese Social Problem Solving Inventory and the Body-Mind-Spirit Well-Being Inventory were examined. Results showed that there were significant demographic correlates of burnout, including age, marital status, teaching experiences, education background and satisfaction with income. Besides, social problem solving and body-mind-spirit well-being were negatively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and positively correlated with personal achievement. As no systematic study of teacher burnout has been conducted in Macau, this is a pioneer attempt.

In the paper by Phoenix Mo and Winnie Mak, the patterns of health promoting behaviors of the general public in Hong Kong was examined in 941 community adults randomly selected via household survey. Results revealed that the respondents adopted healthy life styles, although there were gender and educational differences in different health practices. Results further revealed that stress management and social relations significantly predicted better quality of life for both male and female participants, and preventive health behaviors was a significant predictor of quality of life for female participants only.

In another study, Chak Kie Wong and Vivian Lou examined the welfare recipients' experiences of and attitudes toward the welfare benefit system in Hong Kong using a qualitative methodology based on 19 welfare recipients. The study revealed that welfare recipients showed strong aspirations to exit the welfare benefit system. Unfortunately, they generally had poor quality of life in the process of receiving

welfare, with the welfare application process perceived to be painful and strongly stigmatized. In the final study by Chua, Wong and Shek, quality of life in Hong Kong assessed by the Social Development Index (SDI) was described. The current state of social development in Hong Kong based on the SDI-2008 was summarized and the major social, political and economic challenges that were confronted by Hong Kong were identified. The article illustrates the utility of social indicators research such as the SDI in assessing quality of life and assisting related social planning initiatives in Asian communities such as Hong Kong.

With reference to the developments and missing gaps in the QOL literature highlighted in Shek, Chan and Lee (2005b), this special issue has several unique responses. First, papers examining quality of life with respect to the macro societal conditions (paper by Chua, Wong and Shek), family quality of life (papers by Yuk King Lau and Vivian Lou) and individual quality of life (e.g., papers by Sun and Shek as well as Mo and Mak) are included. The second unique feature of this special issue is that in response to the lack of adolescent quality of life (e.g. Shek & Lee, 2007), several related papers (papers by Siu and Shek, Lai and Shek, Sun and Shek, Shek, and Wei and Chen) are included in this special issue. Third, to clarify our understanding of the linkage between quality of life and economic disadvantage, the paper by Wong and Lou examines the struggles and experiences of welfare recipients. Fourth, papers adopting different methodologies are included in this special collection, including secondary data analyses (paper of Chua, Wong and Shek), survey research (Mo and Mak), weekly diaries (Shek) and focus group methods (Wong and Lou).

As there are several papers authored or co-authored by myself, I have invited several Action Editors to independently handle those papers to uphold the integrity of the peer review system of the journal. These Action Editors included Ching Man Lam,

Tak Yan Lee, Andrew Siu, Rachel Sun, Chak Kie Wong and Sheng Quan Ye. One forceful evidence supporting the integrity of the peer review process is that one paper submitted by my former PhD student (with myself as a co-author) was rejected by an Action Editor.

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