

# **Life satisfaction in Eastern Asian countries**

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Abstract: Using Asia Barometer survey data, this paper intend to describe life satisfaction in Asian countries, especially Eastern Asian countries. By comparing the life satisfaction of the Eastern Asian countries and non- Eastern Asian countries, this research found that Confucian culture is important impact on the factors of life satisfaction which calculate by EFA method. Considered there are two waves of survey in both China and Japan, it is reliable to do comparative study between them, found that Chinese's life satisfaction is lower than Japanese's, the life satisfaction of the Chinese young is lower than other age groups.

Keywords: life satisfaction, Eastern Asian countries

## **1 Introduction**

Life satisfaction is an import universal objective measurement of the quality of life, when a person gives conscious evaluative judgments about his or her satisfaction with life as a whole, or evaluative judgments about specific aspects of his or her life such as recreation, such as: satisfaction of housing, satisfaction of neighbors.

Since the 1980s, there has been a dramatic increase in research on life satisfaction, which most researchers were agreeing it is a cognitive-evaluative factor. More specifically, life satisfaction studies are particularly dependent on social comparisons with other important reference groups, for example: cross-culture comparison or different age groups. Although life satisfaction is only in recent years that it has been measured and studied in a systematic way, self-report questions about

life satisfaction are commonly included in surveys and used as indicators in large cross-culture surveys including World Values Survey.

Domain Satisfaction Approach is the most popular method to measure the life satisfaction, it assumed that overall satisfaction relate to specific satisfaction associated with a person's job, marriage, income, family, leisure activities, and the like. So some researchers are intent on examining the relationship between domain satisfaction and satisfaction with life as a whole (Andrews and Withey 1976; Argyle 1989; Vermunt et al. 1989; Veenhoven 1996a; Kousha and Mohseni 1997). The effects of individual characteristics are significant factors in those studies. (Tsou and Liu 2001).

Some researchers focus on cross-culture or cross-national differences of life satisfaction. Economic and cultural factors are important variables, different economic and cultural living conditions would conduce the diversity of life satisfaction. Especially the studies of countries in transition discovered relations between economic prosperity, culture and life satisfaction. That means macroeconomic movements have strong effects on the life satisfaction of nations in total.

Besides macroeconomic movements, microeconomic factor is another usual cause, such as socioeconomic status, employment, income, which is clearly associated with life satisfaction. Additionally, a large set of personal characteristics are investigated in studies to examine the relationship, for instance, gender, income, age, religion and educational levels, as well as the effect of the level of inequality in society on life satisfaction is also strong. Generally speaking, life satisfaction and its determinants have been discussed in the cross-field studies and systematic investigations.

A lot of studies analyzing life satisfaction have been focusing on the determinants or correlates of

developed countries, or comparative researches within developed countries, till the late 1990s. It is only recently years that life satisfaction in developing countries has been studied as well. This paper aims to investigate diversity of life satisfaction between Asian countries, which including developed countries and developing countries, capitalist countries and socialist countries, market-economy countries and non-market-economy countries, and so on. Considering the above conditions, it would be an exhilarating to do a comparative study on life satisfaction between Asian countries. Especially, this research will focus on the comparing China and Japan, the former is continuing its path of modernization, and the later had completed this mission. The youth group who is less than 35 years old, will be selected to examine the changes by macroeconomic movement effect, and examine the correlation between socio-economic status and life satisfaction.

## **2 Data**

In the survey data of Asia Barometer, there are 16 items of the satisfaction which including housing, friendships, marriage, standard of living, household income, health, education, job, neighbors, public safety, the condition of environment, social welfare system, the democratic system, family life, leisure and spiritual life. Also, there is a general item: satisfaction of life as a whole.

Before my cross-culture comparative study on life satisfaction, the data should get a exploratory analysis. firstly, there are 17,460 samples have completed all the 16 aspects of the satisfaction which are distributed over 28 countries or regions, including USA, Russia and Taiwan District, through 2005 to 2008. So those samples are all selected from the dataset to get an integrated dataset. Secondly, by using EFA(exploratory factor analysis), 3 component indicators are extracted

from 16 items of satisfaction. Given satisfaction of marriage is a selective item, to avoid the specification error of sample selection bias; it should be taken out in the process of factor analysis.

It is vital to know the accurate components of each indicator which are presented in the following diagram. The analysis of factor loading indicates that all 15 aspects of domain satisfaction belong in three classes. Factor1 consists of 6 aspects of domain satisfaction, including housing, standard of living, household income, health, education and job. This shows that Factor1 represents the social-economic status. Factor2 consists of 4 aspects of domain satisfaction, including public safety, the condition of environment, social welfare system, the democratic system. This shows that Factor1 represents their living conditions, especially concerning on the social system. Factor3 consists of 5 aspects of domain satisfaction, including friendships, neighbors, family life, leisure, spiritual life. Given the impact of the social network, this lay stress on the importance of individual life.

Variable	FACTOR1	FACTOR2	FACTOR3	Uniqueness
satisfaction - housing	0.5358	0.1411	0.3123	0.5954
satisfaction - friendships	0.2416	0.0449	0.6610	0.5027
satisfaction - standard of living	0.7560	0.1727	0.2337	0.3441
satisfaction - household income	0.8093	0.1787	0.1347	0.2950
satisfaction - health	0.5159	0.1865	0.3107	0.6025
satisfaction - education	0.6247	0.1547	0.2386	0.5290
satisfaction - job	0.6834	0.1684	0.1758	0.4737
satisfaction - neighbors	0.0979	0.2224	0.6525	0.5152
satisfaction - public safety	0.1060	0.7264	0.2370	0.4050
satisfaction - the condition of the environment	0.0875	0.7704	0.1689	0.3703
satisfaction - social welfare system	0.2713	0.7773	0.0706	0.3171
satisfaction - the democratic system	0.1740	0.7214	0.1098	0.4372
satisfaction - family life	0.3068	0.1545	0.6361	0.4774
satisfaction - leisure	0.3351	0.2676	0.5819	0.4775
satisfaction - spiritual life	0.2532	0.2603	0.6506	0.4448

According to the results, three factors explain 54.75% variance cumulatively. The eigenvalues of each factor is larger than 1.

Factor	Variance	Difference	Proportion	Cumulative
Factor1	3.09826	0.46885	0.2066	0.2066
Factor2	2.62941	0.14395	0.1753	0.3818
Factor3	2.48545		0.1657	0.5475

After orthogonal rotations after factor analysis, three factors is independent each other, and the scores of each sample is calculate by regression method, then each country get a mean of scores of three factors as following chart. The value of three factors is from range of -1 to 1, which mean of each factor is 0. When the value is closer to -1, it means a higher satisfaction. In contrast, when the value is closer to 1, it means a lower satisfaction.

China, Japan and India have the three largest countries of the sample size, just because these three counties had two waves of surveys. Both China and Japan, the waves of survey had been conducted in 2006 and 2008, even the data set is not a panel, but two separate cross-sections, it still provide a reliable data basis for subsequent comparative analysis between China and Japan.

country	FACTOR1	FACTOR2	FACTOR3	N	HDI
afghanistan	-0.1081	-0.1211	-0.4173	699	.40
australia	-0.3226	0.1458	-0.3578	832	.93
bangladesh	-0.0252	-0.2609	-0.0631	603	.50
bhutan	-0.4643	-0.5942	-0.3245	543	.52
cambodia	-0.0165	-0.0970	0.4794	988	.52
china	0.3189	0.2204	0.4903	2812	.69
hong kong	0.2427	-0.1934	0.7431	962	.90
india	-0.6609	0.0294	-0.1639	1587	.55
indonesia	0.3423	-0.9288	-0.7191	923	.62
japan	0.1045	-0.1294	0.2315	1798	.90
kazakhstan	0.2180	0.2175	-0.2044	605	.75
kyrgyzstan	0.4446	0.5652	-0.4972	576	.62

malaysia	-0.1874	-0.3905	-0.2039	808	.76
maldives	-0.7612	-0.5394	-0.4974	523	.66
mongolia	0.5495	0.6288	-0.2549	587	.65
nepal	-0.3053	0.8577	-0.0418	510	.46
pakistan	0.0240	0.4703	0.0968	749	.50
philippines	-0.1998	-0.4346	-0.3586	986	.64
russia	0.5048	0.2653	-0.0924	641	.75
singapore	-0.1259	-0.6321	-0.1528	831	.87
south korea	0.4231	0.1088	0.5966	917	.90
sri lanka	-0.6419	-0.0742	-0.1706	594	.69
taiwan	0.1500	0.3983	0.3781	928	.89
tajikistan	0.3841	0.3257	0.0143	533	.61
thailand	-0.1974	-0.3056	-0.2834	971	.68
turkmenistan	0.9235	-0.7470	-0.4314	100	.69
united states	-0.4622	0.2984	-0.4177	803	.91
uzbekistan	0.2167	0.8296	0.1239	539	.64

Moreover, to locate the stage of modernization, the Human Development Index which is published and ranked by UN is adopted. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and income indices to rank countries into four tiers of human development. It was created by economist Mahbub ul Haq, followed by economist Amartya Sen in 1990, and published by the United Nations Development Programme.

The HDI of developed countries and regions, such as United states, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, are high than 0.8, and the HDI of most Asian countries are lower than 0.8, including China, Mongolia, Nepal, etc.

Though some researcher found that the correlation between HDI in 1999 and average life-satisfaction was  $r = .60$  ( $N = 69$ ), but HDI is just a measure of Nations' wellbeing, is not a good predictor of nations' average level of self-reported life-satisfaction in this research. Above all,

the relation between the HDI and the satisfaction factors should be tested. The data are scaled in two dimensions, the horizontal axis denotes the values of life satisfaction, and the longitudinal axis denotes the values of HDI. Then all countries are divided into 4 parts: higher HDI and higher satisfaction, higher HDI and lower satisfaction, lower HDI and higher satisfaction, lower HDI and lower satisfaction.

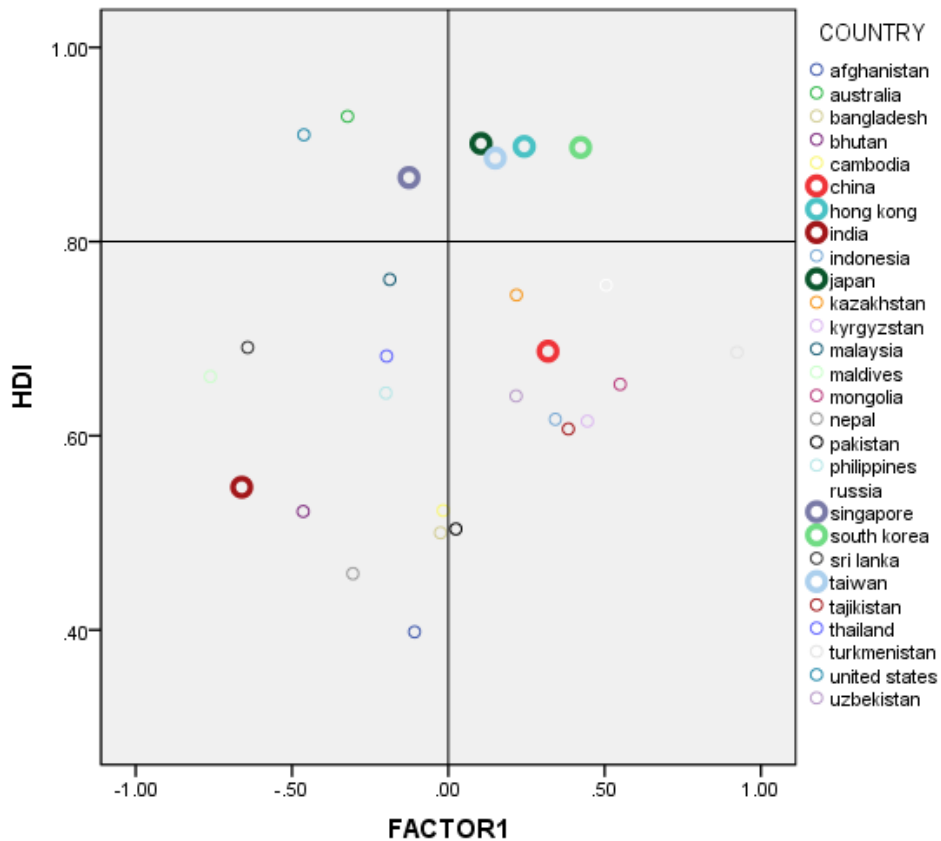
## **3 Results**

### **Comparative study on Eastern Asian countries**

In this study, a number of countries and regions in East Asia are focused on, because they have similar cultural background, although they are at the different stage of economic development.

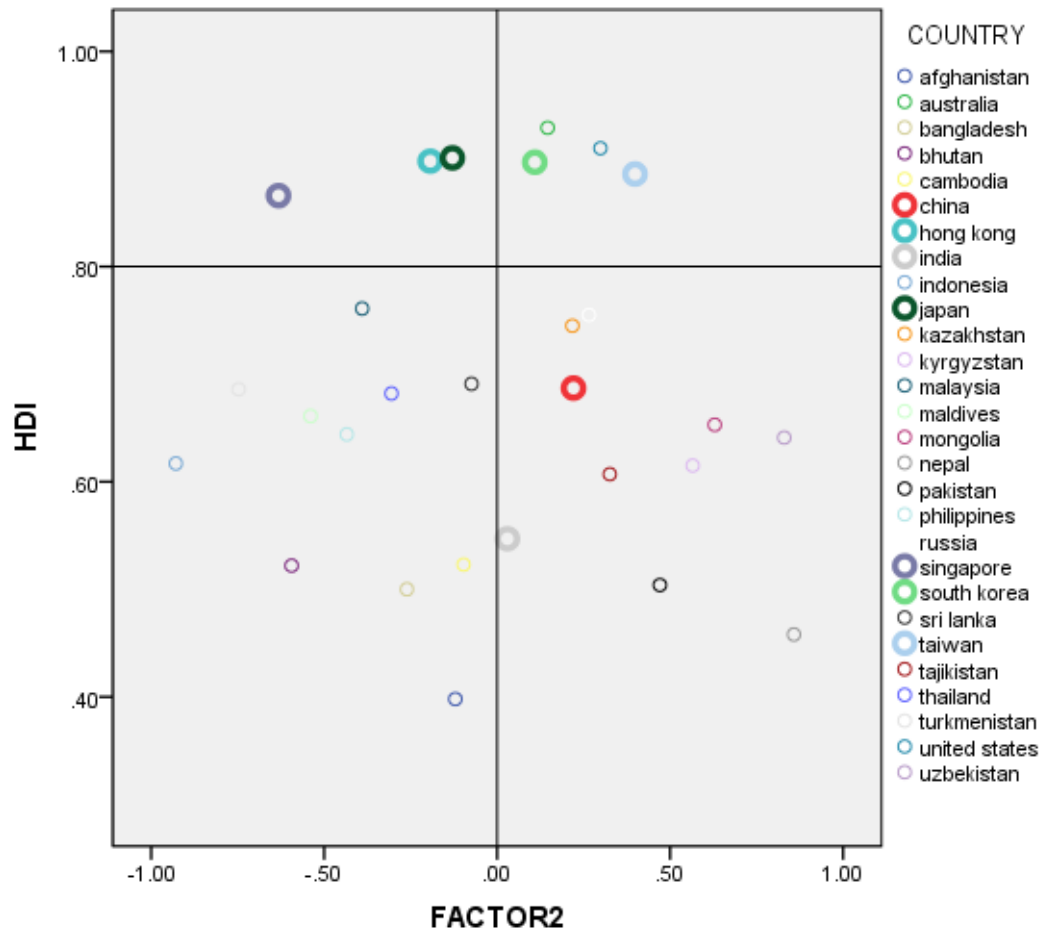
Addition to these countries, Singapore and India are focused as well, the former because it has a similar culture with East Asia, the latter is significantly different in culture.

In this chart, seven countries which are focused on have been divided into four sections: Singapore's HDI is higher and life satisfaction is higher too. While India's HDI is the lowest, but the life satisfaction is the highest one. Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea have higher value of HDI, but their life satisfaction is lower. China is the type of lower HDI, lower life satisfaction. Considered that factor1 is representing the life satisfaction of the socio-economic status, such as income, occupation, education, it seems that there is no correlation between personal life satisfaction and HDI at the national level, at least in the 7 countries which are selected to compare. HDI value in Singapore, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong on the same level, but only Singapore's life satisfaction is more than the average of all countries in the surveys.

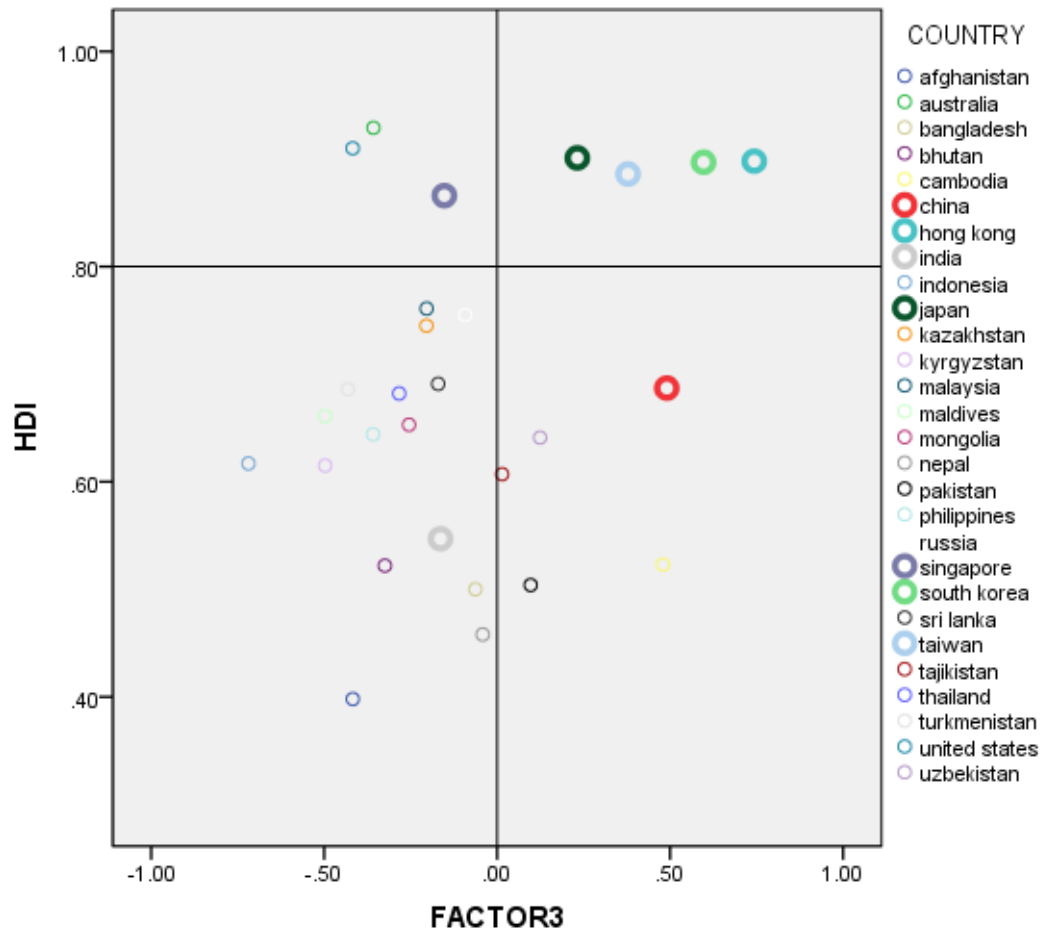


Factor 2, which reflects the social system as a whole, is significantly different with Factor1 which reflects personal economic-social status. In previous studies, some domain life satisfaction of Factor2 shows a strong correlation with the level of HDI, such as in higher HDI countries, the public safety of the countries may be better. Thus, in the following figure, developed countries and regions are transfer from the part of higher HDI and lower satisfaction to the part of the higher HDI and higher satisfaction, such as Japan and Hong Kong. On the contrary, India moves from the part of the lower HDI and higher satisfaction to the part of lower HDI and lower satisfaction. Taiwan and South Korea are still in the part of higher HDI and lower satisfaction, China is also no in the part of lower HDI and lower satisfaction.





The third factor is correlated with the private social network, friendship, neighborhoods, family life, etc. The distribution of life satisfaction (Factor3) in those 7 countries is similar with Factor1 in the following figure. Singapore is the only country which has higher HDI and higher life satisfaction. Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea are higher HDI and lower life satisfaction. Both India and China are lower HDI countries, but the life satisfaction of India is higher than China. In the figure, China's position is relatively far away from any other countries, it indicates that China is a special type.



It should be interesting if the study is focus on developed countries whose HDI is larger than 0.8.

There are two more counties Austria and United States which are located in the upper part of the above three figures. Both Figure1 and Figure3, East Asian countries and regions are located in the right part which means lower life satisfaction, but Austria and United States are located in the left part which means higher life satisfaction. In the Figure2, Austria and United States are located in the right part which means lower life satisfaction, but some East Asian countries and regions go to the opposite direction. There is a common ground between Factor1 and Factor3 that is they are related to private life. Factor1 is emphasis on the personal economic capital, and Factor1 is emphasis on the social capital. Contrarily, Factor2 is consisted by evaluations of public business, not an indicator relevant to personal life, which Austria and United States have lower satisfaction.

In other words, if the factor is about personal life, Eastern Asian countries tend to worse evaluation, but Austria and United States tend to better evaluation; if the factor is about public affairs, Austria and United States tend to worse evaluation. Then there rise a question what cause the difference even in the similar HDI.

Maybe need satisfaction model can explain the difference. The basic premise of the need satisfaction model is that people have basic needs they seek to fulfill in each life domain. Individuals derive satisfaction in a particular life domain when events and experience related to that domain fulfill their needs. In the modern society, every life domain is affected by both personal and public affairs. For example, someone's satisfaction of health life domain, maybe based on positive experiences concerning health-related activities such as a healthy diet, regular exercise, also on account of medical insurance system which is provided by government. If you are not satisfied with your health, either ascribing to improper diet and short of exercise or ascribing to bad medical insurance system is reasonable. Therefore, under need satisfaction model, it seems to suggest that people in Austria and United States who are not successful in satisfying their needs are likely to express lower satisfaction on public affairs, but people in Eastern Asian are likely to express lower satisfaction on personal affairs. This reflect that Confucian culture places great emphasis on introspection and self-discipline, but under Western culture these discontent is due to the outside world. The difference in life satisfaction can be well explained by Cultural differences in developed countries, and the same is true between China and India as well.

### **Comparative study on Japan and China**

The Asia Barometer data set, in fact, collect China and Japan survey data twice, each country had conducted a survey respectively in 2006 and 2008. Then it provides a liable time scale and enough samples to find the origin of the differences in life satisfaction.

Before this comparative analysis, a detailed statement on the backgrounds will be beneficial to understand the difference of life satisfaction between China and Japan.

Though China and Japan have similar Confucian culture, as mentioned above, they have different subculture respectively. In any event, Japan has often been described as pragmatists. So it is easy for Japan to absorb experience, technology and institution from the external world as soon as possible, as long as they are helpful and useful for development. Taking into account that China had been standing in the East Asian for thousands years, once China complete the establishment of an independent economic-social-political system, it is not difficult to understand why China is too self-important to keep moving with other countries in the world, even it had been beaten by Western countries.

Despite increased economic aggregate, China is still a developing country from the point of view that GDP per capital is the key indicate for people's wellbeing. Actually, China which is extremely different with Japan in the stage of development, have to face so many social problems, not only how to keep the economic growth, but also how to deal with the increasing social inequality which had negative impact on social stability. Hence one can see that it is much more difficult to make everybody feel satisfied.

Thirdly, there are different social structures between China and Japan. Before 1990s, below planned economy system, China is equalitarianism allocation is mixed inefficient growth coexists. To improve the efficient growth, China encouraged social mobility and result in seriously

polarization between the rich and the poor, the society had divided into different interest groups, some benefit from the social changes, someone not. Whoever does not benefit from the social transformation, will certainly not feel satisfied. In Japan, there exist a large number of middle class that make Japanese society is much more stability than China, then the life satisfaction will be higher.

Last, not the least, social psychological factors should not be omitted. In a stable society like Japan, everyone has his own task to do, performs its own functions and do it superbly. But in China, it is an impetuous era, is a lost era. Under the malign influence of luxurious living, most people, who live in an unreal world imagined, are spending their life chasing the rainbow of overnight success. Instead of steady progress which should be the mainstream in the future, social psychology has been fulfilled with restlessness that will bring back more disappointed. Furthermore, there will be less life satisfaction, which would lead to anti-social behavior, when such unsuccessful conduct occurs.

All these four aspects above are not only the introduction of background, but also the reasons what had caused the difference on life satisfaction between China and Japan.

In the following chart, it shows scores of three life satisfaction factors in each survey between China and Japan.

It can be seen that all three life satisfaction factors of Japan is higher than China in both surveys, although life satisfaction of China had improved more than Japan from 2006 to 2008. The most noticeable changes of these three factors in China are that the gap of Factor2 between China and Japan became much narrower.

For the Factor1 of life satisfaction, both China and Japan had enhanced, the disparity still existed

from 2006 to 2008. Either China or Japan did not get better scores in Factor3 of life satisfaction during this period.

Overall, there are two points worth noting. The first one is there is almost no change in the life satisfaction of social networks. As we all know, China and Japan are the countries, attaching much importance to family life and social networks, which under a great impact of the modern society, the traditional family model and social networks had been put in harm's way. Therefore, it is difficult for Chinese and Japanese to feel life satisfied in this society transformation.

The second point is that the upgrade in life satisfaction of social system is very obvious in China. It may be associated with reform conducted by China government, who made great efforts to promote various polices of social security vigorously after 2005, the including health insurance, pensions, unemployment insurance, etc.

Country and year	All respondents		
	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3
China2006	0.376	0.415	0.498
China2008	0.208	-0.157	0.475
Japan2006	0.144	-0.083	0.237
Japan2008	0.069	-0.172	0.226

An old truism said that: the young are the country's future, so this paragraph is concerning on the life satisfaction of the young who is younger than 30 years old. Comparing with other age groups, the Chinese youth have lower life satisfaction of first two factors and higher life satisfaction of the last factor; the Japanese youth have higher life satisfaction of all three factors except the Factor3 in 2008. This raises the question why there is such a disparity between the Chinese youth and the Japanese? This must be explained current social mobility and living conditions of the youth in

China. After the reform and opening up, the social gap between the rich and the poor is continue widening s in China, while the process of social mobility had stagnated because of government corruption and obstructing the advance of the reform by interest groups. Success and climbing upwards in society is inaccessible for the youth who are strongly attacking corruption and favoritism in the government to express their unsatisfied. This phenomenon can be theoretical explained by the spill over theory.

The spill over theory is viewed as having two broad types; bottom-up and top-down theories. Bottom-up theories assume that life satisfaction is a summary evaluation of aspects of one's life. For example, one is satisfied with life because one has good social relationships, enough money, weight under control, and an interesting job. Conversely, top-down theories assume that life satisfaction is due to personality influences. For example, a hopeless individual is more dissatisfied in general with his or her job, social relationships, weight, and income in particular. Top-down spill over theory is very appropriate to explain the situation and life satisfaction of the Chinese youth.

Country and year	The youth		
	Factor1	Factor2	Factor3
China2006	0.487	0.569	0.333
China2008	0.176	-0.074	0.391
Japan2006	0.034	0.045	0.152
Japan2008	-0.198	-0.158	0.312

## Conclusion

According to the analysis, some conclusions can be drawn from this paper.

It is Confucian culture that leads to lower life satisfaction of private life and relatively

higher life satisfaction of social system in Eastern Asian countries.

Being a developing country, whether the level of economic development or the social system which need continuously improvement and perfect, Chinese's life satisfaction is lower than Japanese's, even the social system had been much better recently years.

Due to government corruption and lacking of success opportunities, the life satisfaction of the Chinese young is lower than other age groups. Conversely, the life satisfaction of the Chinese young is higher.