ABSTRACT. This study investigates how happiness of elderly Chinese is related to their social support networks, based on survey data collected in 2000 from Beijing and Hong Kong. These two Chinese cities share a common cultural heritage but differ in social-economic structure. It was found that in both cities, income is more significant than gender and education in determining happiness, but it is less important than personal network size and particularly perceived social support. More importantly, findings from the two cities consistently lend support to the thesis that older persons with a larger network are happier and that social support plays a mediating role. Controlling for social-demographic factors does not change this pattern of relationships. There are, however, differences between the two cities. Beijing’s elderly were found to be happier and have larger social networks than Hong Kong’s elderly. Also, our explanatory models consistently account for less variance in the happiness of older persons in Beijing. These findings are probably due to the differences between socialist Beijing and capitalist Hong Kong in degrees of modernization and urbanization and in social organization of work and community life.

KEY WORDS: happiness, later life, network size, perceived support, social network.

INTRODUCTION

The enormous progress in living standards and health services in recent decades has contributed to the significant improvement of people’s health in modern societies. Life expectancy has been rising, resulting in an increasing number and proportion of elderly people in many populations including those living in contemporary Chinese societies. According to the estimates of the United Nations (see http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp), for instance, during the two decades from 1981 to 2001 the expectation of life at birth rose from 75.5 to 81.5 in
Hong Kong and from 66.6 to 71.5 in Mainland China. Meanwhile, the percentage of population aged 60 and above in Hong Kong and Mainland China increased from 10.0 to 15.4 and from 7.4 to 10.9, respectively. However, a longer life for older persons does not necessarily imply a happier life, and a larger elderly population may not make a better society for them. Researchers from various academic disciplines have come to be increasingly concerned with such questions as: How enjoyable or unpleasant can later life be? Or, how do elderly people feel about the quality of recent life?

The present paper aims to shed light on the quality of later life in contemporary Chinese societies. Specifically, we wish to report our survey findings about the happiness of the elderly Chinese living in Beijing and Hong Kong. The questions of concern are: To what extent are the elderly in these two Chinese cities generally satisfied with recent life? What are the major social determinants of their feelings of happiness? Among the various social determinants, we choose to focus on personal social support networks.

It should be explained that both Beijing and Hong Kong are Chinese cities, sharing a common heritage of Confucian cultural traditions with a great emphasis on family ties, paternalism and filial piety (Kuan and Lau, 2002; Ng et al., 2002). Hong Kong was a British colony for about a century and a half until the reclaiming of its sovereignty by the People’s Republic of China in 1997. Both Beijing and Hong Kong now belong to one country (The People’s Republic of China) but they represent “two systems” (Kuan and Lau, 2002). Beijing is the capital of China and is a socialist society, while Hong Kong is designated as a Special Administrative Region of China and is a capitalist society. Over the last half century, Hong Kong has emerged as a highly modernized commercial center in East Asia. Like other cities in socialist China, Beijing introduced the Open-Door Policy and started the market-led economic reforms only in recent years. Compared with Beijing, Hong Kong has apparently achieved a higher level of modernization and urbanization (Beaverstock et al., 1999; So et al., 2001).

A socialist way of organizing social-economic life in Beijing and other parts of Mainland China should be highlighted. Like