

Trends in Marital Satisfaction and Social Change in Mainland China over the Past Two Decades

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Abstract

Marriage is the most stable and enduring traditional form of union between sexes in human society, and also constitutes an important component of human culture. Marital satisfaction represents a crucial indicator for measuring the overall quality of marriage, being not only influenced by social, familial, and individual factors, but also exerting reciprocal effects on society, family, and individuals. Ultimately, as society undergoes continuous transformation, marital satisfaction likewise changes accordingly. Therefore, investigating the relationship between marital satisfaction and social change holds significant reference value for understanding psychological transformations in Chinese society and among individuals. This study conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis of 92 research reports published between 2000 and 2021 that measured marital satisfaction among Chinese couples using the ENRICH Marital Inventory (ENRICH), Marital Adjustment Test (MAT), and Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) (totaling 59,122 husbands and wives), integrated with analytical results from the China General Social Survey (CGSS), and examined the relationship between social indicators and marital satisfaction based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The macrosystem encompasses 19 indicators across seven categories: economic development, democracy and legal system, cultural construction, people's livelihood, resource environment, marital development, and family pressure; the microsystem includes six indicators: gender ratio, marriage age, number of children, education level, spousal education matching, and total income in the previous year. The findings reveal: (1) The marital satisfaction of couples in mainland China has gradually improved over the past two decades along with temporal changes; (2) At the macro level, improvements in people's quality of life and reductions in family size promote increases in marital satisfaction; simultaneously, increased marital satisfaction also encourages couples to pursue a better life and maintain family stability; (3) At the micro level, improvements in marital satisfaction amid social change are not influenced by marriage age, gender, number of children, or spousal education matching,

but vary depending on whether children are present, while education level also affects marital satisfaction. In the influence relationship model between social change and marital satisfaction, macrosystem factors, microsystem factors, and temporal changes interact with each other, jointly influencing marital satisfaction, and marital satisfaction also exerts reciprocal effects on macrosystem factors.

Full Text

Trend Analysis of Marital Satisfaction Among Mainland Chinese Couples Over the Past 20 Years

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Abstract

Marriage represents the most stable and enduring traditional form of sexual union in human society and constitutes an important component of human culture. Marital satisfaction serves as a crucial indicator for assessing overall marital quality, influenced not only by social, familial, and individual factors but also exerting reciprocal effects on society, family, and individuals. Consequently, as society continuously evolves, marital satisfaction undergoes corresponding changes. Exploring the relationship between marital satisfaction and social transformation thus holds significant reference value for understanding psychological shifts in Chinese society and among individuals. This study conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis of 92 research reports published between 2000 and 2021 that measured marital satisfaction among Chinese couples using the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Inventory, the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT), and the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI), encompassing a total of 59,122 husbands and wives. Combined with analysis results from the China General Social Survey (CGSS) and grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this paper examines the relationship between social indicators and marital satisfaction. The macro-system includes 19 indicators across seven categories: economic development, democratic legal system, cultural construction, people's livelihood, resource environment, marital development, and family pressure. The micro-system comprises six indicators: gender ratio, marriage duration, number of children, education level, spousal education matching, and total income from the previous year. The findings reveal: (1) Marital satisfaction among Chinese mainland couples has gradually increased over the past two decades; (2) At the macro level, improvements in people's quality of life and reductions in family size promote increased marital satisfaction, while rising

marital satisfaction also encourages couples to pursue better lives and maintain family stability; (3) At the micro level, the improvement of marital satisfaction amid social change is not affected by marriage duration, gender, number of children, or spousal education matching, but varies depending on whether children live with their parents, while education level also influences marital satisfaction. In the model of influence between social change and marital satisfaction, macro-system factors, micro-system factors, and temporal changes interact with each other, jointly affecting marital satisfaction, which in turn reacts upon the macro-system.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, social change, cross-temporal meta-analysis, Chinese General Social Survey, ecosystem theory

Over the 40-year period from 1978 to 2019, China's divorce rate has shown a rapid upward trend overall (Yang & Sun, 2021), gradually increasing from 2.48‰ in 2000 to 7.49‰ in 2020. Generally speaking, lower marital satisfaction corresponds to higher divorce rates (Frank et al., 2005; Li, 2021). Does this imply that marital satisfaction among Chinese couples is also declining? Researchers hold divergent views on this question. For instance, Zhou (2021) argues that due to improved material living standards, more open social culture, and increased Sino-Western exchanges, marital satisfaction among Chinese couples has improved in recent years. Conversely, Wei (2022) contends that as people now demand higher standards from marriage, marital satisfaction is showing a downward trend.

Lewis and Spanier (1979) identified three determinants influencing marital satisfaction: couples' social and personal resources, evaluations of compatibility in life behaviors, and outcomes derived from marital communication. Karney and Bradbury (2020) further propose that factors affecting marital satisfaction include individual, dyadic, and environmental aspects. However, due to differences between Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds and marital life patterns, some determinants that significantly affect marital relationships in Western theoretical models may not necessarily apply to China's reality (Xu & Ye, 1998). What, then, is the trend of marital satisfaction among Chinese couples as it changes over time? And what are the influencing factors? These questions form the focus of this study.

Marital satisfaction refers to the subjective satisfaction and objective identification of couples within their marital relationship, representing the overall adaptation between partners across various dimensions (Lewis & Spanier, 1980). High marital satisfaction correlates with good adaptation, adequate communication, and high levels of marital happiness (Spanier & Graham, 1979). Moreover, marital satisfaction constitutes an important determinant of marital stability (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Li & Luo, 2019). In recent years, the continuous decline in marital stability and rising divorce rates in China have increasingly highlighted social problems (Sun & Ge, 2021), making marital stability a hotly

debated topic among researchers. Due to its close relationship with marital stability, marital satisfaction has attracted considerable attention from scholars across various fields.

However, most research on marital satisfaction has focused on demographic and psychological variables, such as gender (Deng & Jiang, 2020), marriage duration (Guo et al., 2015), education level (Yang & Xie, 2022), number of children (Chen & Ngoubene-Atioky, 2019), personality traits (Ma, 2020), parenting stress (Hou et al., 2019), marital commitment (Hou & Fang, 2015), spousal support (Hou & Fang, 2015; Liu et al., 2020), and sociological variables including population migration (Li, 2021). Yet these variables have yielded inconsistent conclusions in studies of Chinese couples. For example, while numerous studies find that husbands report higher marital satisfaction than wives (Bi et al., 2021; Hou & Fang, 2015), other research finds no significant gender differences (Kou, 2016). Regarding marriage duration, some researchers argue that marital satisfaction gradually declines with increasing marriage length (Bi et al., 2014), while others find a U-shaped trajectory (Feng, 2020). The effects of education level (Duan et al., 2021; Zhang & Zeng, 2010), number of children (Cheng et al., 2014; Zheng & Peng, 2019), and population migration (Luo, 2019; Li, 2021) on marital satisfaction also show inconsistent results.

These inconsistencies arise from several reasons. First, in terms of research subjects, target populations vary across studies, including newlyweds, middle-aged or elderly couples, and differences in occupation, region, and education level. Second, regarding measurement tools, diverse instruments are used. Researchers hold different definitions of marital satisfaction. Sabatelli (1988), representing the marital adjustment school, views marital adjustment and satisfaction as objective and subjective dimensions of marital quality, respectively, while the personal feeling school treats marital quality and satisfaction as identical concepts. Consequently, different questionnaires are employed to measure marital satisfaction, such as the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Inventory, the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT), the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) and its Chinese versions, with some social databases using simple self-assessment questions, resulting in different evaluation criteria. Third, in terms of research content, some studies examine subjective feelings while others focus on specific behaviors like communication or conflict frequency, leading to potentially different measurement results. Fourth, the timing of various studies differs, representing the most easily overlooked impact of social environment and temporal changes. People's social environments are not static but continuously develop over time. Theoretically, all psychologically relevant content sensitive to the social ecological environment requires re-examination from a dynamic, changing perspective (Cai et al., 2020), and marriage is no exception. However, previous empirical research on the changing trends of marital satisfaction among Chinese couples is extremely scarce, and no researchers have explored the influencing factors of marital satisfaction from the perspective of social change.

Therefore, researchers propose that marital satisfaction should be integrated

with broader macro-social contexts to expand the research field, and influencing factors should be examined through more systematic theoretical discussions and empirical studies from multidisciplinary, multidimensional perspectives (Beam et al., 2018; Bulanda & Brown, 2007). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the continuously changing environment in which individuals live and interact is divided into five levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. However, previous research has concentrated on couples' microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem, neglecting the cultural, subcultural, and social environments within these three systems—that is, the influence of the macrosystem, such as urbanization rates, social rule-of-law levels, and resident consumption levels. Yet the reality is that the macro-social environment directly or indirectly affects individuals' marital satisfaction. Research indicates that since entering the 21st century, family debt driven by the housing boom has reduced individual marital satisfaction (Sang, 2020), while large-scale migration of rural workers to southeastern regions has resulted in significantly higher marital satisfaction among migrant workers compared to non-migrants (Li & Xu, 2018). Additionally, as women's independence consciousness gradually emerges and they no longer center their lives entirely on family, the resulting work-family conflict significantly negatively predicts women's marital satisfaction (Zhou et al., 2018).

Moreover, previous research has also overlooked the importance of the chronosystem. The chronosystem includes changes in family structure, living environment, or employment status that occur over time, as well as major events such as wars, economic crises, and immigration waves. Changes in family patterns—for example, the continuous growth of maternal employment rates in Western industrialized societies and the ongoing reduction of extended family models in developing countries—constitute components of the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Over the 40-plus years since China's reform and opening up, tremendous changes have occurred in China's economy, people's livelihood, and environment, and Chinese people's marital satisfaction has continuously changed with the times. However, current research on marital satisfaction mostly consists of cross-sectional studies focusing on marital satisfaction and influencing factors at a single time point. Although some longitudinal studies have examined changes in marital satisfaction within single or multiple fixed families over many years, such research, while incorporating temporal variables, has not analyzed social indicators and lacks evidence of social change. Therefore, there is still no satisfactory answer to whether marital satisfaction changes with the times.

Cross-temporal meta-analysis, first proposed by Twenge (1997), introduces the concept of “cross-temporal meta-analysis” by incorporating development and change as primary research content, focusing on examining how psychological measures change over time. Unlike ordinary meta-analysis, cross-temporal meta-analysis further investigates the role of social change factors behind temporal variations in psychological measures, which general meta-analysis overlooks. Cross-temporal meta-analysis connects multiple independent studies with the same research object but no direct connection in a time series, treating inde-

pendent studies as random samples from different periods to derive temporal changes (Xin, 2018). Therefore, this paper primarily employs cross-temporal meta-analysis to explore the changes in marital satisfaction over time, as we believe this method can effectively analyze the developmental patterns of marital satisfaction while discovering the important roles played by underlying social change factors.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and under the premise of temporal change, this paper treats changes in social environmental indicators as the macrosystem and indicators reported within families—such as marriage duration, education level, and number of children—as the microsystem. Using primarily cross-temporal meta-analysis, we explore the relationships between the macrosystem, microsystem, and marital satisfaction over time. The selection and classification of macrosystem social indicators are diverse, and examining social environmental indicators with Chinese characteristics will positively contribute to exploring social change. Following China's reform and opening-up transformation in 1992, the country officially transitioned toward building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, achieving this goal in 2020. Therefore, building a moderately prosperous society represents one of the most representative indicators of China's social development and changes since the reform and opening up. The National Bureau of Statistics has constructed a monitoring system based on the scientific connotation and target requirements of building a moderately prosperous society, which is authoritative, representative, and reliable. The 2016 version of the “National Statistical Monitoring Indicator System for Building a Moderately Prosperous Society (Revised Draft)” divides monitoring indicators into five categories: economic development, democratic legal system, cultural construction, people's livelihood, and resource environment, with multiple social indicators under each category. Considering data availability, we selected some indicators from within these categories and added the international homicide crime rate indicator within the democratic legal system category. Given the particularity of marital satisfaction, we added two categories of indicators: marital development and family pressure, and included the household size indicator within people's livelihood. Thus, there are seven categories of social indicators. The specific indicator names and definitions are listed in Table 1 .

To further examine the changing trends of marital satisfaction from a more comprehensive perspective, this paper also incorporates data from sociological databases. After review and examination, we found that the China General Social Survey (CGSS) started relatively early and provides relatively comprehensive measurement data, making it suitable for comparison in this study. Since CGSS only measured marital satisfaction in 2006, 2011, and 2017, this paper only uses the survey results from these three years for analysis. Simultaneously, we recorded variables from the database similar to those selected for cross-temporal meta-analysis: number of children, marriage duration, highest education level attained, education matching, and total income from the previous year. Data coding methods will be described in the methodology section.

2.1 Literature Search and Data Sources

Due to different researchers' conceptual understandings of marital satisfaction, we found that many researchers use the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) to measure marital satisfaction. Therefore, we included results from these two questionnaires as marital satisfaction measurements, adding "marital quality" and "marital adjustment" to the search terms beyond "marital satisfaction." The study conducted comprehensive searches of literature published between 2000 and 2021 using Chinese and English search engines. Chinese searches were performed using three databases: VIP Journal Database, Wanfang, and CNKI, with search terms "婚姻满意度" (marital satisfaction), "婚姻质量" (marital quality), and "婚姻调适" (marital adjustment). English searches primarily used five databases: Web of Science Core Collection, PubMed, Science Direct, Proquest, and SpringLink, with search terms "marital satisfaction," "marital quality," and "marital adjustment."

Macro-system social indicator data were obtained from the official website of the National Bureau of Statistics, the official website of the National Health Commission, and the EPS Global Statistics Data/Analysis Platform.

Social database data were derived from the China General Social Survey (CGSS). Since the 2006 family questionnaire did not measure couples' education levels, number of children, marriage year, and other required data, we only used the marital satisfaction measured in 2006 without adopting its internal social indicators. Both marital satisfaction and social indicators from 2011 and 2017 were used.

2.2 Literature Selection Criteria

- (1) Marital satisfaction was measured using Olson's ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Inventory, Locke and Wallace's (1959) Marital Adjustment Test (MAT), and Norton's Quality of Marriage Index (QMI). All items were positively scored, with higher total scores indicating higher marital satisfaction.
- (2) Studies were empirical research on marital satisfaction with complete data and clear samples, excluding pure theoretical and review articles.
- (3) Study samples were ordinary healthy couples from mainland China without physical or mental diseases.
- (4) Results could be calculated, organized, and used to obtain the required marital satisfaction measurements.
- (5) When data from the same survey appeared in multiple articles, the earliest published article was selected.

(6) Included languages were Chinese and English.

2.3.1 Literature Quality Assessment

Based on the Jadad Scale (1996), we developed an assessment method as shown in Table 2 . The total score for each article was calculated, with higher scores indicating better literature quality. According to classification standards used in numerous studies, articles scoring 1–3 points were considered low-quality literature, while those scoring 4–8 points were considered high-quality literature.

2.3.2 Literature and Data Coding

Research characteristics of the literature included in the meta-analysis were recorded, including author, publication year, testing year, subject type, and male proportion. The effect size for marital satisfaction measurement was derived from the ratio of participants' scores to the total questionnaire score (hereinafter referred to as marital satisfaction as a proportion of total score). Education level was measured as the proportion of participants receiving higher education, including vocational colleges and universities and above. For longitudinal studies, data from the first measurement were collected for each indicator. When overall standard deviation was not directly reported, only the standard deviations reported when participants were divided into two categories were used for conversion. The conversion formula is as follows:

Data 1 has n_1 data points, with mean μ_1 and standard deviation σ_1 ; Data 2 has n_2 data points, with mean μ_2 and standard deviation σ_2 .

In the CGSS database, the coding method for marital satisfaction measurement in 2017 was opposite to that in 2011 and 2006, so recoding was performed before data analysis. Here, number of children = number of sons + number of daughters from the question “How many children do you have (including stepchildren, adopted children, and deceased children)?”; marriage duration = measurement year - value from “In what year did you marry your current spouse?”; education matching = value from “What is your highest education level?” - value from “What is your spouse or cohabiting partner’s highest education level?”.

3. Analysis of Data from Various Databases

Literature searches were conducted in Chinese and English databases including CNKI, Wanfang, VIP, Web of Science, PubMed, and SpringLink as described in the methodology section, yielding 792 articles. Ultimately, 92 Chinese and English articles meeting the requirements were obtained. For articles not specifying the exact data collection year, the publication year minus two years was recorded, resulting in data measurement years from 2000 to 2019. The number of articles and participants for each year are shown in Table 3 .

3.1 Overall Temporal Changes in Marital Satisfaction

A scatter plot was drawn with data collection year as the horizontal axis and marital satisfaction values as the vertical axis, as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. Between 2000 and 2019, marital satisfaction among Chinese couples increased year by year, with the average marital satisfaction as a proportion of total score being 0.69.

Linear regression analysis was conducted with measurement year as the independent variable and marital satisfaction as a proportion of total score as the dependent variable. The results showed that year significantly positively predicted marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = 0.03 < 0.05$; $F(1, 91) = 5.11$, $p = 0.03 < 0.05$), with year changes explaining 5.40% of the variance in marital satisfaction. To control for the influence of sample size, weighted least squares regression analysis was performed, and year still significantly positively predicted marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.31$, $p = 0.003 < 0.05$; $F(1, 91) = 9.60$, $p = 0.003 < 0.05$), with year changes explaining 9.60% of the variance in marital satisfaction.

3.2 Magnitude of Change in Marital Satisfaction Over 20 Years

The magnitude of increase in marital satisfaction over 20 years was measured by calculating the effect size (d) of the change magnitude (Xin & Zhang, 2009). The specific calculation process was as follows: sample sizes were weighted, measurement year was used as the independent variable, mean marital satisfaction as the dependent variable, and a regression equation was established. The average standard deviation (MSD) was calculated. Then, 2000 and 2019 were substituted into the established regression equation to obtain M_{2000} and M_{2019} . Finally, the equation $d = (M_{2019} - M_{2000}) / \text{MSD}$ was applied. Values of $0.20 \leq d < 0.50$, $0.50 \leq d < 0.80$, and $d \geq 0.80$ correspond to “small,” “medium,” and “large” effect sizes, respectively.

Simple regression analysis yielded the regression equation $y = 0.006x - 11.625$. Substituting 2000 and 2019 produced $M_{2000} = 0.375$ and $M_{2019} = 0.489$, with a standard deviation of 0.119. The resulting d value was 0.96, indicating that the increase in mean marital satisfaction in this study represents a large effect size.

3.3.1 Stationarity Analysis of Time Series Data

To avoid spurious regression, stationarity analysis must be conducted before testing regression and causal relationship models. To reduce variable scale and mitigate heteroscedasticity effects, all social indicators were log-transformed and subjected to unit root tests. The Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test was used to determine whether each series was stationary, with the Schwarz Info Criterion (SIC) automatically selecting the lag length. The test results are shown in Table 5. Since cointegration relationships are possible only when two time series are integrated of the same order, and $\ln Y$ is a zero-order integrated series, while $\ln X_1$, $\ln X_4$, $\ln X_5$, $\ln X_8$, $\ln X_9$, $\ln X_{10}$, $\ln X_{11}$, $\ln X_{17}$, and $\ln X_{19}$ are non-stationary

in their original series, cointegration tests were not conducted for these, and they were excluded from subsequent regression analyses.

3.3.2 Predictive Effects of Social Indicators on Marital Satisfaction

Whether social development trends affect certain psychological trends can be demonstrated by examining the predictive effects of a given social indicator from the current year, one year prior, three years prior, or five years prior on the psychological indicator under study (e.g., marital satisfaction values in this paper). That is, if social indicators from the current year, one year prior, three years prior, or five years prior significantly predict marital satisfaction values, then social change can be said to influence changes in marital satisfaction. When multiple articles contained data for the same year, the average value was taken as that year's marital satisfaction measurement.

As shown in Table 6, except for traffic accident fatalities and unemployment rates, which showed no significant predictive effect on marital satisfaction, all other indicators showed complete or partial significance. Among them, urban population proportion, divorce rate, and child dependency ratio consistently significantly predicted marital satisfaction. This suggests that economic development (urban population proportion), marital development (divorce rate), and family pressure (child dependency ratio) may be important factors influencing marital satisfaction.

3.3.3 Predictive Effects of Marital Satisfaction on Social Indicators

To explore whether marital satisfaction predicts changes in social indicators, regression analyses were conducted between marital satisfaction and social indicators from one year later, three years later, and five years later. The results are shown in Table 7. We found that marital satisfaction significantly or marginally significantly predicted urban population proportion, Engel coefficient, and divorce rate. Additionally, it positively predicted the number of mental illness cases detected in premarital checkups one year later and negatively predicted the unemployment rate five years later.

3.3.4 Causality Testing Between Marital Satisfaction and Social Indicators

Regression analysis revealed a lead-lag relationship in time between marital satisfaction and some social indicators. For example, the current year's urban population proportion significantly affected current marital satisfaction, while current marital satisfaction significantly affected urban population proportion five years later. To investigate whether past social indicators primarily affect current marital satisfaction or whether past social indicators and marital satisfaction mutually influence each other's current levels, we employed Granger causality tests. Due to the limited 20-year span of marital satisfaction data, the sample size was insufficient for conducting a series of Granger causality tests

on multiple time series variables based on VAR models, so bivariate Granger causality tests were performed sequentially. Previous research indicates that the lag order for annual data generally does not exceed five (Levendis, 2018; Neusser, 2016), so we conducted five Granger causality tests with lag periods of 1–5. Since traffic accident fatalities consistently showed non-significant predictive results in regression analysis, this item was excluded from testing. Due to space limitations, only results rejecting the null hypothesis of no Granger causality at the 0.1 probability level and below are presented.

As shown in Table 8, at the 0.1 significance level, internet penetration rate at lag periods 2 and 3, Engel coefficient at lag period 2, and divorce rate at lag period 4 cause changes in marital satisfaction; marital satisfaction at lag period 5 causes changes in divorce rate. At the 0.05 significance level, household size at lag period 1 causes changes in marital satisfaction; marital satisfaction at lag periods 1 and 4 cause changes in child dependency ratio and Engel coefficient, respectively. No bidirectional causality exists at the same lag period. The results indicate that internet penetration rate, Engel coefficient, divorce rate, and household size are Granger causes of marital satisfaction, while marital satisfaction is also a Granger cause of divorce rate, child dependency ratio, and Engel coefficient.

3.4 Demographic Factors in Temporal Changes and Differences in Marital Satisfaction

Meta-regression analysis and subgroup analysis were conducted using Comprehensive Meta-Analysis V3. Six articles whose standard deviations could not be converted or were not reported were excluded, leaving 86 articles for analysis.

Moderation analysis results showed: (1) Gender ratio did not significantly moderate marital satisfaction as a proportion of total score ($b = 0.05$, $z = 1.12$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.13]); (2) Higher education proportion did not significantly predict marital satisfaction ($b = 0.06$, $z = 1.07$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.16]); (3) Marriage duration significantly moderated marital satisfaction as a proportion of total score, with marriage years significantly negatively predicting marital satisfaction ($b = -0.01$, $z = -2.76$, 95% CI [-0.012, -0.002]); (4) Number of children did not significantly moderate marital satisfaction as a proportion of total score, with child count failing to significantly predict marital satisfaction ($b = 0.01$, $z = 0.28$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.07]). Subgroup analysis results showed that the type of marital satisfaction measurement questionnaire significantly moderated results, with a Q-value (between groups) of 270.15, $p = 0.00 < 0.001$. Marital satisfaction values measured by QMI were highest, while those measured by MAT were lowest.

4. Analysis of CGSS Database Data

The CGSS database contains 21,413 data entries from 2006, 2011, and 2017. After excluding data with blank marital satisfaction values—3 cases (65 entries)

in 2011, -2 cases (2 entries) in 2011, 98 cases (2 entries) in 2017, and 99 cases (2 entries) in 2017—10,703 valid entries remained. To ensure respondents' seriousness in completing the survey, individuals with incomes exceeding 9,000,000 in 2011 and 2017 (590 entries) and those with marriage years later than 2017 or 2011 (140 entries) were excluded. The remaining data from 2011 and 2017 totaled 9,969 entries.

4.1 Overall Temporal Changes in Marital Satisfaction

Descriptive statistical analysis results for the three years are shown in Table 10. Linear regression analysis with data collection year as the independent variable and marital satisfaction value as the dependent variable revealed that year significantly positively predicted marital satisfaction ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$; $F(1, 9967) = 38.81$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$), with year changes explaining 0.4% of the variance in marital satisfaction.

4.2 Magnitude of Change in Marital Satisfaction Over Time

Using the same method as described in section 3.2, simple regression analysis yielded the regression equation $y = 0.011x - 17.700$. Substituting 2006 and 2017 produced $M_{2006} = 4.366$ and $M_{2017} = 4.487$, with a standard deviation of 0.704. The resulting d value was 0.17, indicating that the increase in mean marital satisfaction in this study approaches a small effect size.

4.3 Demographic Factor Differences in Marital Satisfaction

Simple regression analyses were conducted with marital satisfaction as the dependent variable and number of children, marriage duration, total income from the previous year, highest education level, and spousal education matching as independent variables. Total income from the previous year and highest education level significantly predicted marital satisfaction, while number of children, marriage duration, and spousal education matching could not significantly predict marital satisfaction. Specific results are shown in Table 11.

5. Discussion

This study explored changes in marital satisfaction among Chinese couples alongside social transformation and the predictive effects of marital satisfaction on various social indicators, while also examining the moderating effects of internal family micro-factors. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, this research considered the relationship between macro-system factors, micro-system factors, and marital satisfaction while examining the influence of the chronosystem on marital satisfaction. Various social indicators were treated as macro-system factors, internal family indicators as micro-system factors, and the relationships among macro-system factors, micro-system factors, and the chronosystem were explored.

5.1 Overall Trend of Marital Satisfaction

Both cross-temporal meta-analysis and CGSS database analysis found that marital satisfaction among Chinese couples has shown an upward trend over the past 20 years, consistent with many previous studies on marital satisfaction (Chen, 2013; Jiang, 2016; Lu, 2011; Zhou, 2021). The simultaneous upward trend of both marital satisfaction and divorce rates represents an important phenomenon worthy of attention. Within traditional Chinese cultural contexts, personal emotions and happiness are often not the most important factors in determining marriage. Unlike Western culture's emphasis on emotional priority, Chinese culture emphasizes family priority. Zhang's (2009) study clustered couples into four types based on marital quality and divorce tendency scores: happy, stable, tolerable, and failed types, accounting for 23.4%, 31.1%, 33.5%, and 12% of the research population, respectively. The tolerable type (with marital quality and divorce tendency scores slightly below average) accounted for the highest proportion, indicating many couples with low marital quality but low divorce tendency. This suggests that in Chinese society, marital satisfaction and divorce outcomes should be viewed independently, as they are not simply linearly related.

Undeniably, China's rapid social development since the 21st century has diversified marital concepts, intensified the public's pursuit of marital satisfaction, and created more tolerant attitudes toward divorce, gradually reducing divorce costs (e.g., difficulty of divorce, social pressure). Becker (1974) first incorporated economic analysis frameworks into family research, arguing that reasons for feeling marital error or divorce may stem from additional information about one's spouse or other potential partners. That is, when marital benefits fail to meet expectations or when more desirable partners who could increase marital benefits are discovered, divorce may result. Therefore, divorce is essentially a correction of erroneous or low-quality marriages (Chen et al., 2021), and rising divorce rates to some extent imply improved overall social marital satisfaction (Fu & Li, 2008; Zhang & Chen, 2000). Our results further confirm this phenomenon: the study found that divorce rates and marital satisfaction can mutually positively predict each other, and Granger causality exists between divorce rates and marital satisfaction at different lag levels. Therefore, the simultaneous upward trend of divorce rates and marital satisfaction is not contradictory but rather represents a mutually reinforcing relationship at the overall social level.

5.2.1 Influence of Social Indicators on Marital Satisfaction

First, the increase in marital satisfaction among Chinese couples may be related to improved quality of life. Urban population proportion significantly positively predicts marital satisfaction. Urban population proportion is an important manifestation of urbanization, with higher proportions representing more cities or more people enjoying urbanization outcomes, including employment, education, institutions, and social security. Improvements in living environment and economic conditions brought by urbanization may positively influence marital sat-

isfaction. Second, internet penetration rate is an important indicator measuring information development. Pre-marital internet use helps individuals obtain potential partner information and communicate conveniently, facilitating finding suitable partners and increasing marital happiness (Bellou, 2015). Third, the decrease in Engel coefficient indicates a reduced proportion of food consumption in total consumption, primarily due to income increases, enabling families to afford cultural or entertainment consumption beyond necessary food expenses. Numerous studies have proven that income positively correlates with marital satisfaction (Hamilton et al., 2017; Qiong et al., 2019), and CGSS data in this study also showed that total income from the previous year significantly predicted marital satisfaction. Therefore, changes in urban population proportion, internet penetration rate, and Engel coefficient accompanying social transformation have improved people's quality of life, thereby affecting marital satisfaction.

Second, the increase in marital satisfaction among Chinese couples may be related to reduced family size. Reduced family size mainly involves two aspects. First, improved urbanization has transformed modern families from traditional extended families to nuclear families (Chang, 2022), and nuclear family couples face fewer stressor events such as mother-in-law conflicts and sister-in-law disputes (Deng et al., 2014), resulting in higher marital satisfaction than traditional extended families (Yang, 2014). Second, related research shows that fertility intentions and levels are gradually declining (Hou et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2016), reducing the number of newborn children within families. Our study results show that child dependency ratio consistently negatively predicts marital satisfaction, meaning that more children may be detrimental to couples' marital satisfaction. On one hand, although per capita income has been rising, wage increases in many occupations have been lower than living cost increases (Sun, 2018), and raising children further increases living costs, creating greater economic pressure. On the other hand, research has found that the number of minor children is proportional to parental energy investment (Huo, 2022), with parents' psychological and physical consumption increasing significantly with more children. These factors negatively affect marital satisfaction. Additionally, research has proven that marital satisfaction increases when women enter the labor market (Yu & Liu, 2021), yet child-rearing demands force women to give up work for periods or even longer. Therefore, the gradual reduction in family size brought by social transformation has promoted the increase in marital satisfaction.

5.2.2 Influence of Marital Satisfaction on Social Indicators

First, increased marital satisfaction may promote couples' pursuit of high-quality life. Results show that marital satisfaction significantly predicts urban population proportion and Engel coefficient, both of which are important manifestations of improved quality of life with social transformation. On one hand, good marital satisfaction promotes the pursuit of better life goals. Researchers initially found that marital satisfaction relates to individuals' and

spouses' pursuit of intimacy goals (Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Subsequently, Fowers and Owenz (2010) proposed the eudaimonic theory of marital quality, suggesting that goal pursuit should be a primary domain of marital assessment and research, including the pursuit of high-quality life. On the other hand, good marital satisfaction promotes the achievement of better life goals. The dynamic goal theory of marital satisfaction posits that people have multiple goals to achieve in marriage, which can be divided into three categories: personal growth goals, companionship goals, and instrumental goals (Li & Fung, 2011). Good marital satisfaction promotes mutual support for marital and personal goals between spouses (Brunstein et al., 1996). Therefore, good marital satisfaction promotes couples' pursuit and achievement of high-quality living conditions.

Second, increased marital satisfaction may promote individual mental health and family stability. Results show that marital satisfaction negatively predicted the unemployment rate five years later. Work-family imbalance has become a new problem facing people today, bringing many negative physiological and psychological effects, such as reduced work efficiency and job satisfaction (Zhou et al., 2018). Individuals with lower marital satisfaction also have lower job satisfaction, experience more severe psychological distress (Ashkzari et al., 2017), and have increased turnover intentions (Jiang et al., 2019), leading to increased unemployment rates. Higher marital satisfaction may weaken the impact of stress on depression and help individuals more comprehensively understand depression risks, which is beneficial for preventing and treating depression (Shi & Whisman, 2023), thereby reducing turnover and unemployment. Regarding why unemployment rates can only be predicted five years later, this may be because the development of certain outcomes from increased or decreased marital satisfaction is not immediate. As the cell of society and a microcosm of society (Guo, 2022) and the foundation of social development (Liu & Guo, 2022), families' impact on society requires a certain cumulative effect. This demonstrates that harmonious internal family marriages positively influence individual mental health, family stability, and social development.

5.2.3 Causal Relationships Between Marital Satisfaction and Social Indicators

Granger causality tests further demonstrate causal relationships between marital satisfaction and various social indicators. Under different lag periods, changes in social indicators may cause changes in marital satisfaction, and changes in marital satisfaction may cause changes in social indicators. The existence of lags may relate to the aforementioned non-immediacy. First, changes in marital satisfaction are Granger causes of changes in child dependency ratio. Couples with lower marital satisfaction have poorer marital quality and may face divorce risks, making them naturally unprepared to have the next child immediately. The result of whether couples have children will manifest in the child dependency ratio approximately one year later, coinciding with the lag

period of 1 between them. Second, besides internet penetration rate and Engel coefficient possibly having lags with marital satisfaction due to non-immediacy, the Granger causal relationship between divorce rate and marital satisfaction also warrants attention. Divorce rate causes changes in marital satisfaction at lag period 4, while marital satisfaction causes changes in divorce rate at lag period 5. This may be because decreased marital satisfaction does not immediately lead to divorce or separation; divorce requires satisfaction to fall below a certain threshold where marriage cannot continue. However, the specific mechanism behind this lag exceeds the explanatory scope of this study and will be an important direction for future research.

In summary, we can confirm that the relationship between couples' marital satisfaction and social indicator changes is mutual. Changes in social indicators affect marital satisfaction, while marital satisfaction also influences social development. Improvements in people's quality of life and reductions in family size may promote increased marital satisfaction, which in turn encourages couples to pursue high-quality lives, improves mental health levels, and contributes to family and social stability. Moreover, changes in marital satisfaction result from the combined effects of multiple indicators. For example, both urbanization and reduced family size affect marital satisfaction, with urbanization's effects possibly being more pronounced for rural couples. Therefore, under the same social environment and changes, marital satisfaction changes may vary across different families.

5.3 Similarities and Differences in Demographic Factors' Moderating Effects on Marital Satisfaction

Different internal family situations affect marital satisfaction differently. For instance, children's arrival increases economic pressure and time and energy consumption (Chen & Ma, 2022), and differences in education levels between spouses bring divergent parenting philosophies (Leng, 2015; Sun, 2015), all affecting marital satisfaction. Undoubtedly, family micro-factors are also inseparable from temporal changes. For example, as times change, people's education levels generally improve, incomes gradually rise, and marriage duration also increases with years.

First, regarding marriage duration, previous studies have reached different conclusions about its relationship with marital satisfaction, including no correlation (Jia, 2020), positive correlation (Huang, 2019; Zhang et al., 1996), negative correlation (Liang, 2014), and U-shaped changes in marital satisfaction with increasing marriage duration (Feng, 2020; Rollins & Feldman, 1970; VanLaningham et al., 2001). Family development school researchers use children as the main thread to divide the family life cycle into eight stages, with numerous studies based on this theory showing that children leaving home significantly improves couples' marital quality (Chen et al., 2021; Wang, 2011). This coincides with Vaillant et al.'s (1993) study identifying 20 years after marriage as a watershed for marital satisfaction changes. Chinese researchers have also pro-

posed that 20 years of marriage represents a “watershed” for couples’ interaction quality (Tong & Huang, 2015). Considering that the average marriage duration in the meta-analysis portion of this study’s data sources was only 18 years at maximum, while the CGSS analysis included marriage durations up to over 70 years, and combining the meta-analysis and CGSS results showing that number of children does not moderate marital satisfaction, we believe that marital satisfaction is only related to whether children live with their parents, not the number of children (Dobrowolska et al., 2020). That is, when examining within 20 years of marriage, marital satisfaction decreases with increasing marriage duration, but when examining across the lifespan, no significant relationship exists between marital satisfaction and marriage duration, manifesting as a U-shaped trend in marital satisfaction changes with increasing marriage duration.

Second, regarding education level, individual highest education level in CGSS data significantly positively predicted marital satisfaction, while the proportion of higher education in the meta-analysis did not significantly moderate marital satisfaction. Previous research on the influence of couples’ education levels on marital satisfaction found that education level was the weakest among all predictive indicators but still significant (Dobrowolska et al., 2020), so this paper concurs that education level positively predicts marital satisfaction. However, the difference between higher education proportion and highest education level lies in that the former ignores individuals without higher education, lacking continuous measurement of education level and treating it as a direct dichotomous variable. This suggests that future research should focus on examining more detailed and continuous education levels. Furthermore, we found that spousal education matching in CGSS data could not significantly predict marital satisfaction. This may be because when wives’ education level is higher than husbands’, both spouses’ marital satisfaction decreases; when wives’ education level is slightly lower than husbands’, their marital satisfaction significantly increases (Wang & Li, 2021). The influence of spousal education matching on marital satisfaction is not that greater consistency yields higher satisfaction but depends on whether the husband or wife has higher education.

Finally, regarding gender, this study found no significant moderating effect of gender on marital satisfaction, meaning no significant difference actually exists between husbands’ and wives’ marital satisfaction. This is consistent with the results of a meta-analysis study by Jackson et al. (2014), which found that the overall difference in marital satisfaction reported by women compared to men is very small, and this difference mainly comes from couples undergoing marital therapy. When this sample data were removed, no significant gender differences in marital satisfaction existed between spouses. On one hand, husbands also face tremendous pressure to meet family and work demands, which may essentially offset the marital difficulties experienced by wives. On the other hand, the role of full-time housewives has changed over the past two decades. Although women still bear some family responsibilities, the gender gap in responsibility division has greatly narrowed. Therefore, we believe that while gender differences in marital satisfaction may still exist in some groups, they are not significant

overall.

Meta-analysis results showed that marital satisfaction values measured by QMI were highest among Chinese couples, while those measured by MAT were lowest. Considering that MAT questionnaires contain over 100 items, ENRICH questionnaires have fewer, and QMI has only 6 items, this result suggests that future marital satisfaction measurement tools should consider the impact of item quantity while ensuring comprehensive measurement.

5.4 Innovations and Limitations

In summary, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this paper examined the relationship between marital satisfaction and social transformation. We found that various factors (macro-system factors, micro-system factors, temporal changes) interact with each other rather than being independent. Social transformation brings changes in macro-system factors, micro-system factors, and marital satisfaction, and changes in these three aspects also partially reflect social transformation. This paper also compared CGSS database data with our cross-temporal meta-analysis results, demonstrating from two perspectives that marital satisfaction has shown an upward trend over the past two decades, and that the influence relationships between marital satisfaction and various social factors are mutual. Therefore, marital satisfaction is not only interactively influenced by social, family, and individual factors but also reacts upon society, family, and individuals. Ultimately, as society continuously changes, marital satisfaction also continuously changes. Thus, exploring the relationship between marital satisfaction and social transformation has important reference significance for understanding psychological changes in Chinese society and among individuals.

Despite these findings, this study has several limitations. (1) Although we conducted literature searches across various databases as comprehensively as possible, some literature may have been missed, leading to omitted data. (2) Measurement of marital satisfaction in various social databases is very limited, resulting in relatively insufficient data analysis for this portion. (3) This study analyzed the trend of marital satisfaction among Chinese couples with social transformation and discussed possible influences between macro-social indicators and marital satisfaction based on data, but did not further verify and discuss possible psychological processes and influence mechanisms. For example, how the lag in predictive and causal relationships is formed remains unclear, making longitudinal surveys of marital satisfaction an important direction for future efforts.

Conclusion

- (1) Marital satisfaction among Chinese mainland couples has gradually increased over the past 20 years with temporal changes.

- (2) At the macro level, improvements in people's quality of life and reductions in family size promote increased marital satisfaction, while rising marital satisfaction also encourages couples to pursue better lives and maintain family stability.
- (3) At the micro level, regarding the association between marital satisfaction and social change, marriage duration, gender, number of children, and spousal education matching do not affect the improvement of marital satisfaction, but changes occur due to whether children live with their parents, and education level also influences marital satisfaction.

In the model of influence between social change and marital satisfaction, macro-system factors, micro-system factors, and temporal changes interact with each other, jointly affecting marital satisfaction. Moreover, marital satisfaction reacts upon macro-system factors, promoting harmonious and stable social development.

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