Culture and Society in China and the United States

BACKGROUND REPORT
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About This Report

This background report on U.S.–China dialogue on culture and society was developed under the auspices of the U.S.–China Research Group on Culture and Society. Background reports in this series provide a general overview of the evolution of a critical issue in U.S.–China relations with wider implications for world affairs. The text of this report was crafted by initiative staff under the editorial guidance of the research group, which is led by Dr. Becky Hsu of Georgetown University and Dr. Teresa Kuan of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. For more information on this topic and the work of the research group, visit the initiative website at https://uschinadialogue.georgetown.edu.

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Happiness

The field of happiness studies is a growing area of research investigating new and more holistic ways of measuring human well-being and societal flourishing beyond impersonal and oversimplified macroeconomic indicators like gross domestic product and per capita income. According to the 2019 World Happiness Report—an annual report funded by the United Nations Sustainable Development Network—the United States holds the nineteenth position in the ranking of the world’s happiest countries, and China is at the ninety-third spot. While this fact seems significant, interpreting it is difficult. Happiness is an extremely subjective concept, and our evaluations of our own happiness rely to a strong degree on the cultural assumptions we use to assess our lives. The World Happiness Report in particular asks respondents to rate their happiness by imagining a 10-rung ladder where the bottom rung represents their worst possible life and the top rung represents their best possible life, and then to place themselves upon that ladder. Although this question is meant to be understandable by all people regardless of their own culture, the metaphor of a ladder does not necessarily make sense in all contexts. It is therefore important to understand not only how Americans and Chinese rate their own happiness differently, but also how they understand the idea of happiness differently.

China

Although the general expectation is that a country’s levels of happiness (also termed subjective well-being) rises as its affluence increases, China’s explosive economic growth beginning in the 1990s saw a dramatic drop in its reported levels of happiness. While this is not unheard of in situations of systemic transition, such as that from planned to market economies undergone by a number of countries after the fall of the Soviet Union, China presented a particularly notable case given the extents of both the rise in incomes and the drop in happiness.

As the Chinese state relaxed its control over the economy during the 1990s in favor of greater personal liberties in market participation, it also shifted some of the onus of social service provision from the state to the individual and family.
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At the same time, the meaning of happiness has shifted significantly within the past three decades. While happiness has traditionally been interpreted as *fu* in China—a term historically including prosperity, health, longevity, and virtue—over the course of the twentieth century, the term *xingfu* rose in prominence within China and as a translation for the word happiness. During the transition towards a more market-oriented economy in the 1990s, the Chinese state increasingly used *xingfu*, a term which has a far more individual and subjective connotation than the older *fu*, to legitimize its policies.

Reported levels of individual well-being bottomed out between 2000 and 2005 and have been gradually improving since, but still remain below 1990 levels.\(^4\) But this overall return to pre-transition happiness levels masks significant disparities within Chinese society. Whereas Chinese society in 1990 possessed a relatively high degree of economic equality and a correspondingly high level of happiness equality, the rewards of the massive growth that followed were not distributed evenly. Today, while wealthy Chinese are actually somewhat happier (71% reporting high life satisfaction) than the average Chinese in 1990 (68%), the poorest segment of the population remains far below these levels (42%).\(^5\) Other disparities associated with economic inequality play a role in these differences in happiness: a lack of economic security makes health care, childcare, and elder care more costly in income-relative terms, and often limits access to lower quality services as well.

The urban-rural divide is another complex factor in studies of happiness in China, with rural and rural-born people generally worse off than their urban counterparts. Rural-to-urban migrants—a large portion of the national population after decades of urbanization—report lower levels of happiness than people born in the cities, the latter often treating the former as second-class citizens; rural residents have reported lower levels of happiness than rural-to-urban migrants until recently, as their levels have roughly converged.\(^6\) And while the urban-rural happiness disparity is widely observed as a reality, some studies have noted that this seems largely to be a consequence of the weakness of rural social safety systems (medical, education, employment) rather than anything unique to the nature of rural households or voluntary ways of life; equalizing for these social service factors, urban and rural residents otherwise report similar levels of happiness.\(^7\) For urban residents, the size of the city in which they live may also play a factor in their life satisfaction, with Chinese people living in cities with populations between 200,000 and 500,000 reporting higher levels of happiness than those living in either larger or smaller cities.\(^8\)

One aspect of happiness trends in China to watch is how Chinese define and determine their sense of subjective well-being. Much is made about the overall difference between Western individualism and East Asian (especially Chinese) collectivism, and this has clear ramifications for whether citizens of a given country tend to define their happiness based more on individual or relational factors. While studies of happiness in China do note a higher degree of relational and familial factors in determining a person’s sense of happiness, there is also a recognition that the ways that Chinese people define happiness are shifting, to some degree, toward more individualistic factors.\(^9\) This trend is seen in the growing importance of *xingfu* relative to *fu*, as the
concept of *fu* historically contained the presence of healthy familial relationships, while it is not as clearly included in the concept of *xingfu*. Examining how cultural definitions of happiness are changing will be an important factor in understanding the ways in which Chinese and American sensibilities around happiness and culture may be converging, diverging, or remaining stable.

**United States**

Happiness in the United States has been subject to its own set of forces and circumstances. In global terms, the United States ranks relatively well overall: the UN-sponsored 2019 World Happiness Report ranked the United States the nineteenth happiest country, compared with China’s position at ninety-third. While this disparity suggests a much higher sense of well-being in the United States, what it does not show is the longer-term context. Whereas China has seen its levels of happiness rise in absolute internal terms (though sometimes falling relative to other countries) since 2005, the United States has been on a steady absolute decline ever since the 1970s. And while the United States has performed decently since robust national happiness rankings began being produced, it has never ranked within the top 10 countries despite long possessing the world’s leading economy and being highly influential in setting the dynamics of global culture as a whole.

There is a consensus among experts in the field that increases in socioeconomic inequality contribute to decreases in reported happiness, and this is viewed as one of the primary drivers of the decreasing levels of happiness in the United States since the 1970s and 1980s, when inequality began to rise at a more rapid pace. Whereas China’s growing inequality has been counterbalanced to some degree by historically unprecedented overall economic growth, the U.S. economy has expanded and retracted in fits and starts, and China-level growth has simply not been possible given the United States’ highly advanced starting point of economic development. As such, the declines in U.S. subjective well-being over nearly the past half-century have transcended socioeconomic lines.¹⁰

While the factors that Chinese individuals report as contributing to their happiness have moved in a somewhat more individualistic direction, at least according to some studies, determinants of happiness among American individuals are still significantly more individualistic—factors like job satisfaction, sense of autonomy and control over one’s own life, and leisure time, among others. However, the U.S.-China divide is not so black and white: In societies of sufficient wealth—pertinent to much, though not all, of the U.S. population—the biggest determinant of happiness is the quality of one’s family relationships, followed by a sense of fulfillment in one’s work, which is then followed by the quality of non-family relationships.¹¹ While distinctions remain, American and Chinese people share this focus on the relationships a person has with his or her family as a central component of subjective well-being.
Living Arrangements

Just as happiness has distinct components and trajectories between China and the United States, so too do the patterns of living arrangements found in the two countries. Also similar to the field of happiness studies, while the norms and trends in living arrangements vary significantly between China and the United States, their respective results are driving their citizens on both sides of the Pacific toward greater, rather than lesser, commonalities.

China

Traditional Chinese custom upholds multigenerational households as the most virtuous living situation, as it allows grown children to better care for their aging parents in accordance with the Confucian value of filial piety. This arrangement typically involves the eldest son’s nuclear family co-residing with his elderly parents, a patrilineal stem family. There is a range of underlying and corollary values that have reinforced this ideal over time, feeding off and back into traditional Chinese culture: the primacy of family, the primacy of elders (parents and siblings), normative social structures, patriarchy, and collectivism, among others.

While this model of multigenerational living remains common across China and is still widely viewed as the ideal, a number of forces have contributed to its decreasing prevalence in modern times. After 1949, housing in urban areas was allocated by work units. Then, beginning in 1979, China’s rapid urbanization has uprooted and geographically splintered families, contrary to the millennia-old expectation that the next generation would continue living in the same village, even the same house, as the previous generation. With vast numbers of adult children migrating from the countryside into cities where the bulk of economic opportunities exist—and in the process transforming China from a majority-rural (less than 19.4 percent in 1980) to a majority-urban (52.6 percent in 2012) country in the course of a few decades—elderly parents can no longer rely as heavily on their children to provide as much care for them as in the past, let alone live in the same house.

China’s opening to the world has also been accompanied by degrees of Westernization and a growth in the individualist values that come with it, diminishing the cultural-ethical drivers of filial piety at the same time as urbanization is problematizing the practical considerations behind this tradition. Individualism and Westernization are popular culprits among the Chinese for the erosion of social customs, and it may be that Western individualist attitudes are contributing to these changing preferences for family living situations.¹²

All of these forces have contributed to what Yan Yunxiang has called the rise of neo-familism in China, a reshaping of traditional family dynamics in light of modern realities.¹³ This neo-familism has four main characteristics: First, the focus of family life has shifted from ancestors to children, which has redefined the roles of each member of the family. Second, there has been an “intimate turn” in family life that, for many Chinese, has made familial emotions (qingqing) a primary value, both horizontally with greater conjugal intimacy and, especially, vertically with intergenerational intimacy.
rather than deference. Third, a materialistic pursuit of wealth as a quantifiable measure of personal and family success has had a variety of social consequences, including discontent with how much energy is spent on gaining wealth rather than quality time with loved ones.¹⁴ And fourth, a new tension between individual and family interests is pulling people in different directions, making them question such things as whether to stay in an ancestral village to care for aging parents or to migrate to a city for a rewarding career, or whether to resist parental pressure to marry and have children. Altogether, this neo-familism is informing changes in living arrangements and other family dynamics, and because its characteristics arise from tensions between old and new perspectives, these changes are as varied as they are dramatic, navigated on an ad hoc basis by individuals operating out of their particular circumstances.

Beyond these sociocultural forces, Chinese government policies have also contributed in complex and often unintended ways to the changes in family living arrangements. The one-child policy, introduced in 1979 (and preceded by a two-child policy) and ended in 2015 in favor of a new two-child policy, raised a number of tensions for the traditional arrangement of multigenerational living. With only one child permitted for a couple, the full cost of caring for aging parents now fell on a single child rather than being distributed between many siblings, who previously would have all contributed some care even if only one remained living with the parents. This, in turn, led young adults to migrate from villages to cities in pursuit of greater income, often making it more difficult for them to be physically present for their parents back home; the privilege afforded to males over females in the workforce can cause additional burdens on families whose only child is female through no fault of the child or the family. The erosion of the government-provided social safety net over the past several decades as China opened economically to the world, and the early enforced retirement age (60 for males, 55 for female civil servants, 50 for female workers), compounded the difficulties of the situation by making parents more reliant on their children’s support at the same time that families were being permitted fewer children.

These policies were all meant to facilitate the rapid economic development of the country as a whole, a goal at which the Chinese government has succeeded, but they have also created new stresses on traditional models of family life. The story of changing living patterns is not simply one of a shift from multigenerational to nuclear family households; that is one dynamic, yes, but there have also been increases in various nontraditional forms of multigenerational living arrangements. There are different ways of classifying these emergent trends, but some notable examples include the following: A “temporary stem family” differs from a traditional stem family in that the multigenerational living pattern is temporary and circumstantial rather than that family’s permanent standard. A “rotating family” is one in which childcare (or in some cases elder care) is passed between different members of the family, such as a grandchild rotating in six-month intervals between paternal and maternal grandparents while the child’s parents work full-time, often in a city too
distant for them to act as primary caregivers. A “split family” is one in which elder parents with two adult children live apart from each other in their children’s respective houses in order to help care for each household’s grandchildren. A “neighboring family” is one in which the members of a traditional stem family do not live in the same household but rather have the elder generation and the younger nuclear family live in separate but nearby houses. And the “skipped-generation” family, which can overlap with some of the others previously mentioned, is one in which grandparents live with their grandchildren in the absence of the grandchildren’s parents, often due to the parents’ need to work jobs in distant cities.¹⁵

Most of these nontraditional forms of family living have emerged out of the huge economic shifts over the past several decades that have catapulted China to its present economic superpower status. The Chinese government saw the one-child policy and the scaling back of social programs as necessary in order to curb costs for such a massive population; the early retirement age was necessary in order to make sure that mass young adult unemployment did not destabilize the system. Rather than providing for their parents, adult children rely on their parents to take care of their own children; multigenerational families that wish to live in one large household find themselves unable to afford a sufficiently large residence and so have to split into alternative family units distributed across multiple residences. China’s economic growth has undoubtedly had tremendous benefits, but it is important to take note of the complicated and multifarious ways in which it has affected and continues to affect Chinese family dynamics, especially given that the changes have happened so rapidly.

Despite the shifting particularities of living arrangements in modern China, one family dynamic has remained relatively constant: the high prevalence of grandparents as major, and often primary, providers of childcare for their grandchildren. Aside from the somewhat expanded practice of nuclear households—which may nevertheless still incorporate non-resident grandparents as significant childcare providers—the other forms of nontraditional living arrangements discussed here are often built around the grandparents’ ability to provide primary or major supplementary childcare to grandchildren while the middle generation works. In Shanghai, 90% of children are cared for by a grandparent and 50% have grandparents as their exclusive caregivers. Shanghai’s numbers are boosted by the fact that its over-60 population is nearly twice the national average, but 70% of Beijing children are cared for by grandparents, along with 50% of Guangzhou children.¹⁶ After centuries of multigenerational living, grandparent involvement in childcare is the cultural norm, and Chinese grandparents report markedly higher levels of happiness when they live with their grandchildren and play a prominent role in their care.¹⁷ Anecdotally, in the rarer cases of a Chinese grandparent who does not desire to provide regular childcare, that grandparent’s child, the middle generation, may complain that the grandparent “has become too Americanized,” especially when that grandparent has spent time living in the United States.¹⁸
United States

In the United States, the nuclear family living model is widely seen as the norm and has been since at least the end of World War II. Multigenerational stem households were more common prior to World War II, but the postwar economic boom—which was fairly well distributed across the socioeconomic spectrum, at least relative to the periods of U.S. economic growth since the 1980s—gave greater financial resources to most American families, which translated, in traditional Western individualistic fashion, into greater autonomy and nuclear households.

Multigenerational living dwindled in the postwar boom of the 1950s, with 21% of Americans living in such households in 1950 compared to 15% in 1960 and bottoming out at 12% in 1980. But since that time multigenerational living has seen a slow but nevertheless consistent rise, accelerating somewhat since the Great Recession of 2008 and today standing at 20%, nearly matching the 1950 rate. This is consistent with the idea that, in an American culture steeped in individualism and a popular ideal of the nuclear family owning its own home, economic prosperity leads to independent living while economic hardship leads to multigenerational living arrangements. Demographic trends appear to bear out this reality of upticks in the multigenerational living rate, with economic stressors driving these: rates of multigenerational living are up across all racial and ethnic categories of the U.S. population, but whites—who are, on average, the most affluent racial demographic—still have the lowest rate (16%) of any segment.¹⁹ There are, of course, also cultural factors at play in the prevalence of multigenerational living among these different groups: Asian-Americans have the highest rate of multigenerational living among all U.S. ethnic groups at 29%, nearly double that of the white population.

When it comes to grandparents providing childcare for their grandchildren, the United States presents a far different picture from China. There is no general cultural expectation of significant grandparent involvement in childrearing, though racial and ethnic minority communities tend to have somewhat higher rates of such arrangements than the white population. Most U.S. grandparents (72%) provide occasional childcare for their grandchildren, while a fraction of this number (22%) provide it on a regular basis.²⁰ Those who do provide regular care did not foresee it as part of their life plan.²¹ While the incidence of grandparents as major or primary caregivers is not as high in the United States as it is in China, the rate has increased since the Great Recession, and the likelihood of grandparents and grandchildren to be cohabitating is strongly correlated to the family’s level of poverty and “nontraditional” status (e.g. single parent, divorced, widowed).²²

Filial Piety/Responsibility

China

Filial piety is a core value of Confucianism and a cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture. A popular ancient Chinese proverb states, “Of all virtues, filial piety is first.” Indeed, filial piety is enshrined in Article 49 of the Constitution of the People’s
Republic of China: “[C]hildren who have come of age have the duty to support and assist their parents.”²³ Ideas of filial piety revolve around every member of a family, and a society on the broader level, having a specific role with certain concomitant responsibilities, expectations, and orientations toward others based on the nature of each relationship. The foremost of these duty-bound relationships is that of a child to his or her parents, as elders enjoy a high status in the Chinese tradition.

But the socioeconomic changes of the past several decades have strained traditional practices of filial piety just as they have brought new tensions to the previously discussed field of family living arrangements. The spread of a more individualist ethos has turned the consciousness of some Chinese away from the relational Confucian model. Instead of a duty-based approach to family relationships, individualism has, at least for some, given rise to a more transactional approach in which an adult child’s care for their aging parents is conditional upon the parents having provided the child with a good upbringing.²⁴ While Confucian filial piety is not as rigidly hierarchical as it is sometimes caricatured as being, this sort of transactional, conditional view of parental care is at odds with the traditional view.

At the same time, some scholars argue that the meanings of filial piety have shifted throughout Chinese history, and some of the changes we see in Chinese family dynamics today may actually be in line with a contemporary understanding of filial piety rather than standing in opposition to an ancient, monolithic standard. Urban adults born under China’s one-child policy—a population segment encapsulating much of what is new to Chinese civilization—can explain their understanding of filial piety as “a family ethic that is based on egalitarian inter-generational relationships and intimate parent-child bonding.”²⁵ This conception integrates individualist ideas such as authenticity, the true self, and private feelings as critical ingredients in a parent-child relationship worth tending to. Certainly not all Chinese would accept this as a proper view of filial piety, but it is worth noting that many Chinese seem to be adapting their approach to filial piety in light of practical socioeconomic realities rather than abandoning the entire concept of filial piety because of them.

Legal regulations in the Chinese Constitution around filial piety have recently expanded beyond the general upholding of this tradition. In 2013, the Chinese government enacted a new law mandating that adult children regularly visit their parents and allowing parents to bring lawsuits against children who do not provide adequate financial, practical, and “spiritual” support.²⁶ This law became a lightning rod for debate around whether morality ought to be enforced by the government, and whether such a policy was even enforceable at all. Indeed, in the years since this filial piety law went into effect, it appears that it has rarely been used or enforced. The official Xinhua News Agency reported the case of a 90-year-old mother who sued her six children for not visiting often enough and not paying her nursing home bills, with a court mediator arranging an agreement whereby the children would take turns to ensure she was visited weekly.²⁷ The city of Shanghai, however, has adopted a more
assertive stance. In 2016, Shanghai officials implemented an enforcement mechanism for the filial piety law through which, when a parent brings suit against an adult child and a court rules in the parent’s favor, if the child does not abide by the court order, he or she may be entered into a “credit score blacklist” that will affect their ability to open bank accounts, obtain loans, and engage in other credit-related activities.²⁸ Shanghai subjects violators of other laws, such as traffic offenses, to similar credit rating consequences.

The fact that Shanghai has been the most active area in China for enforcing filial piety lends credence to the idea that at least part of the government’s heightened efforts in upholding this tradition are practical concerns about a rapidly aging population. Shanghai has the highest proportion of pensioners among all of China’s many cities, with about 30 percent of people over age 60—roughly double the national average. The elderly proportion of the Chinese population as a whole is set to swell to Shanghai levels by 2050. With a younger population proportionally reduced after decades of the one-child policy, the tax base of working adults will strain to meet the financial needs of the pension system that serves as a social safety net for the elderly. The government’s thinking, in the view of some analysts, is that promoting the deeply rooted cultural tradition of filial piety will remind working-age adults to step up their level of care for their parents, taking some of the burden off of the state—an important effort in light of the spread of individualist values that might otherwise lead younger generations to provide less, rather than more, to their elders. The state promotion of filial piety and the decreases in government-provided social services are manifestations of the “familialization of social welfare provision,” the strategic devolution of social service responsibility from the state to the family unit.²⁹

United States

While filial piety is not as central to American culture as it is to Chinese, families in the United States do of course show care for their aging parents, albeit in different and arguably less prioritized ways overall. Notions of filial responsibility were once more common in the United States than they are presently. Filial support laws evolved in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American colonies out of the sixteenth-century Poor Laws in England, the general belief being that people should look after their own families rather than rely on public resources to do so.³⁰ This origin explains why U.S. filial support laws focus on indigent parents rather than on all parents by virtue of filial bonds. At one point, 45 U.S. states had such laws in effect, but with the advent of Medicaid in 1965 as the primary means of funding support for the poor and elderly, many states discontinued their filial support laws, and their normative power waned even in those states that kept them in their legal codes. Reinforcing this trend was the deepening of American culture’s commitment to individual rights and an individualistic mindset in the late 1960s and beyond.
The legal status of filial responsibility is in some ways the inverse of what it is in China. Whereas China has a deep-set cultural commitment to filial piety but has only recently begun enacting laws to regulate its practice, there are many old laws still on the books across 29 U.S. states and Puerto Rico that require adult children to care for parents who are in need (specifically significant financial need), but these laws are rarely enforced and largely forgotten. There have been several cases in which nursing homes have sued residents’ children for recovery of care costs, but all of these have involved children misusing or hiding their parents’ financial assets.

There are, however, a couple notable outliers where filial support laws are being enforced on a somewhat regular basis: the states of Pennsylvania and South Dakota, with North Dakota possibly joining their ranks. These are the only states in which a nursing home has successfully sued a former resident’s child for financial remuneration for the parent’s care despite the adult child having engaged in no wrongdoing. In one major case, a parent absconded with her money to Greece, yet her nursing home successfully sued her son for her $93,000 bill.³¹ Pennsylvania nursing homes, through third-party creditors, now use old filial support laws as a primary way of recovering the costs of care for elderly patients who have not been able to pay for themselves.³² Micro- and macro-level financial concerns are driving this uptick on filial support enforcement in these states. Many nursing homes are struggling to stay afloat and desperately need more funds, and cuts to Medicaid have begun to force caregivers to shift expectations for payment away from government programs and back toward the adult children that those programs had once relieved.³³

Additional Family Dynamics in the United States and China

Marriage and Divorce

One of the most notable and internally disparate trends in China today is the skyrocketing prevalence of divorce in urban centers. The national divorce rate overall is rising but still only stands at 2.67%, but the divorce rate in Beijing is now 15 times the national average, at 40%. This urban/rural disparity is at least in part grounded in culture, with rural populations seeing divorce as shameful for women, exerting social pressure on them to stay in relationships, and all in an environment in which women have fewer opportunities for economic self-sufficiency than in the cities.³⁴ China’s overall divorce rate has been rising consistently since the 1980s, spiking up since shortly after the turn of the twenty-first century.³⁵ Meanwhile, marriage rates are falling: nearly 10 of every 1,000 Chinese were getting married in 2013, whereas that rate dropped over 15% by 2016 to 8.3 per 1,000.³⁶ The proportion of remarriages among total marriages has jumped considerably as well, now making up more than a tenth of all marriages.³⁷

There are no definitive diagnoses for these changes in how the Chinese, especially those in urban areas, view marriage and divorce, but among the many factors people point to are greater economic equality for women, the rise of
individualism, the effects of social media, and the psychosocial effects of China’s one-child policy, which some argue have produced a “me generation” that is not able to negotiate and compromise.³⁸ The rise of individual over family interests has clearly been a factor: In the face of the tradition-bound practice of parents networking to set up adult children for marriage, young people have organized movements to push back against this parental pressure to marry through public displays in cities across China in a phenomenon that is being called fanbihun, fancuisheng (“against the pressure to marry, against demands to have children”).³⁹ Individual interests have also played some role in boosting the importance of the power of the woman in the marital relationship.⁴⁰

The previously discussed rise of intergenerational intimacy may also be contributing to challenges in conjugal intimacy, as seen, for example, in the increase in parent-driven divorces since 2000 among urban residents; and as intergenerational relationships have become more affection-based rather than duty-based, a parent may come to feel that his or her own parent is better at child-rearing than his or her spouse.⁴¹

The United States has seen different dynamics at play. The divorce rate began spiking in the 1960s and peaked in 1980, slowly declining to a relatively steady level around the 40 to 50% range since. However, recent years have seen a statistically significant drop in the divorce rate, driven in particular by the relatively low divorce rate among the millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 1996). While Millennials are less likely to get married than previous generations, the fact that the divorce rate is measured as the proportion of marriages that end in divorces points to the fact that there are a number of factors that are contributing to keeping people of this age together: Millennials are much more comfortable than previous generations living with a partner prior to marriage, which gives the couple more time to explore the relationship’s sustainability; and Millennials are tending to marry a bit later in life after they have completed their education and become established in a career that provides some financial security, allowing them to be more mature and in a life situation with fewer stressful uncertainties.⁴² While these may be seen as positive and relationship-strengthening social trends, there is also a more troubling side to the declining divorce rate and the aforementioned factors behind it. Rather than marriage serving as a platform for a couple building out their individual and shared lives, the later age of marriage and the fact that wealthier Millennials are significantly more likely to marry than poorer Millennials suggest that marriage has become a status symbol.⁴³

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Inheritance

Traditional inheritance practices in China, premised on Confucian values, dictate that the estate of the deceased pass in equal parts to the person’s spouse, children, and parents; in the event that the deceased does not have any such relatives, his or
her possessions would pass equally to any surviving siblings and grandparents. If the deceased does not have any of these relatives still living and has left no will, his or her estate passes to the state.⁴⁴ Some variability in these shares is seen as desirable if certain family members are in situations of financial need, or if some of them either provided or refused significant care to the deceased, especially in his or her later years, increasing or decreasing such family members’ shares, respectively. In keeping with the value of filial piety and respect for elders, if a widowed son-in-law or daughter-in-law provided significant care to the deceased, he or she may be included in the first category of inheritors with spouse, children, and parents.

But the most interesting changes around inheritance in China have arisen both from cultural shifts and from the country’s rapid economic growth. In Chinese culture, talk of one’s own death or the death of a beloved elder has been something of a taboo to be avoided. As such, most Chinese traditionally did not write wills.⁴⁵ This was relatively unproblematic for most people throughout Chinese history, with the largely rural agriculturalist population having little to pass on beyond the homes and livelihoods they already shared with younger generations. But as the country has grown more affluent and people’s finances have become more complex, the lack of a will can become highly problematic for surviving family members.⁴⁶ It has only been over the past few years that China has seen an uptick in people establishing wills out of a growing recognition of their importance in today’s society.

Inheritance law in the United States is better established, and Americans have no hesitation in drawing up wills. Some states are community property states, while others are common law states. In the former, half of the deceased’s estate passes automatically to the spouse; in the latter, spouses receive between a third and a half of the estate. Of course, a person can construct their will however they like, but if it diverges too far from the relevant community property or common law norms by giving the spouse less, the spouse would have recourse to challenge the will. Notably, and unlike how things are done in China, children do not enjoy any legal guarantee of inheritance in most U.S. states.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The United States and China each have distinct historical contexts and present realities that are shaping the direction in which each culture is moving. But perhaps what is most striking in the stories of these two global powers is the way that, despite their vast differences, they appear to be drifting toward a state of sharing more common ground on a cultural level rather than less. As China remains rooted in an ancient tradition of multigenerational households while also expanding its embrace of nuclear households, the United States remains committed to a nuclear family ideal but is also expanding its appreciation for the merits of multigenerational living. The Chinese divorce rate is spiking upward while that of the United States is trending downward more strongly than it has in decades. And the United States is ranked among the upper echelons of the world’s happiest countries but is consistently becoming less happy, whereas China is in the middle of the global pack on happiness but is now growing happier with
each year. Are these two great civilizations moving toward a stronger resemblance with one another through these trends in living arrangements, marriage, and happiness levels? And, if so, how far will this cultural convergence proceed, and to what extent will it benefit the United States, China, and the bilateral relationship?

What unites the two countries is the central role of economic change in driving or enabling cultural change. From urban-centralized economic opportunities that drive families into nontraditional living arrangements in China, to economic inequalities that are boosting the marital success of the well-heeled while leaving marriage unattainable for others, new economic realities are driving cultural transformations on both sides of the Pacific.

In addition to economic developments, the other powerful factor at work in both China and the United States is the arguably stabilizing effect of tradition. At the same time, the economically driven cultural changes we are witnessing are calling into question the power of these traditions that are central to Chinese and American national identities. There is a psychological tension between the autonomous, individualistic American self-image and the reality of greater reliance on others, just as there is tension between the filial piety of a dutiful child and the economic necessity of leaving one’s parents behind to better one’s own and one’s family’s economic prospects. As is so often the case, it may be how the United States and China choose to navigate these tensions that comes to define their respective cultures in the twenty-first century.
Notes


18 Yang, “In China.”


25. Ibid.


