

Promoting Happiness

SERVICE-ORIENTED GOVERNMENT

IN CHINESE CITIES

Studies suggest that the happiest communities are not necessarily the richest, but those most satisfied with health and environmental conditions, low corruption and high social trust. As part of the **Lien Public Service Index Project**, residents in 38 cities were asked to rate their satisfaction in a 2013 survey. This essay explains the motivations, organisation and content of the project, and its finding that happiness levels are highly correlated to residents' assessment of their city government's performance in public service delivery and management.

Spurred by urban density, cities have become our main sources of innovation, prosperity and progress. But for the same reason, they are also hosts to slums, traffic jams and pollution. As such, country and city leaders, especially those in developing regions like China, face the challenge of managing urban development and driving it forward in a smart way.

In China, whether or not clearly stated in national plans or policies, urbanisation has been the government's main strategy to revitalise or upgrade economic development since 1949, and has proceeded at a rapid rate over the last three decades. According to a study by Buibo and Linna published in 2013, while China's urbanisation rate was just 18% in the mid-1970s, it had doubled by the year 2000, and reached the worldwide average of 50% in 2010. The astonishing expansion of both the number and population of cities has, however, raised concerns about the sustainable development of urban areas and the whole country.

Recognising that economic growth by itself and urban sprawl are not helpful in improving citizens' quality of life, China's leadership has shifted its focus towards a comprehensive goal that embraces sustainable development in economic, social and environmental terms. Meanwhile, the leadership views the building of a "service-oriented government" that can deliver quality public services to citizens and businesses as the key to achieving such a goal. In July 2012, the State Council of China released its 12th Five-Year Plan for the National System of Basic Public Services, providing institutional support and policy guidance for building a service-oriented government.



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The Lien Index Project

Given the importance of building a service-oriented government in China's road towards sustainable and inclusive development, the Nanyang Centre for Public Administration (NCPA) at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore launched the Lien Public Service Research Program in 2010 to track and assess the performance of the government in public service delivery and public management in urban China. With generous support from the Lien Foundation, a philanthropic organisation in Singapore, a research team in NCPA led by Dr Wu Wei and Dr Yu Wenxuan developed a scientific and comprehensive index for the project.

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Since 2010, the team has collaborated with key universities in China to modify the index and, based on it, conduct a nationwide, large-scale survey of both residents and businesses in urban China yearly. The results of the survey data are released through annual press conferences and project reports.

Based on a comprehensive review of literature and pertinent government performance rankings worldwide, the research team defined “service-oriented government” in the context of China as “a government that is honest, effective, open and transparent, encourages citizen participation, creates a favourable environment for sustainable development, provides quality public goods and services, and enjoys a high level of public trust and support”.

Following this working definition, the “Lien Public Service Excellence Index for Chinese Cities” was developed in 2010 in collaboration with the School of Public Affairs at Xiamen University, and further modified and renamed as the “Lien Public Service Index Project” in collaboration with the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2011. Despite minor modifications that were made each year afterwards to capture emerging issues and concerns, the Index remains largely unchanged to maintain its consistency.





01 Residents exercising in a public space at Tiananmen Square, Beijing.

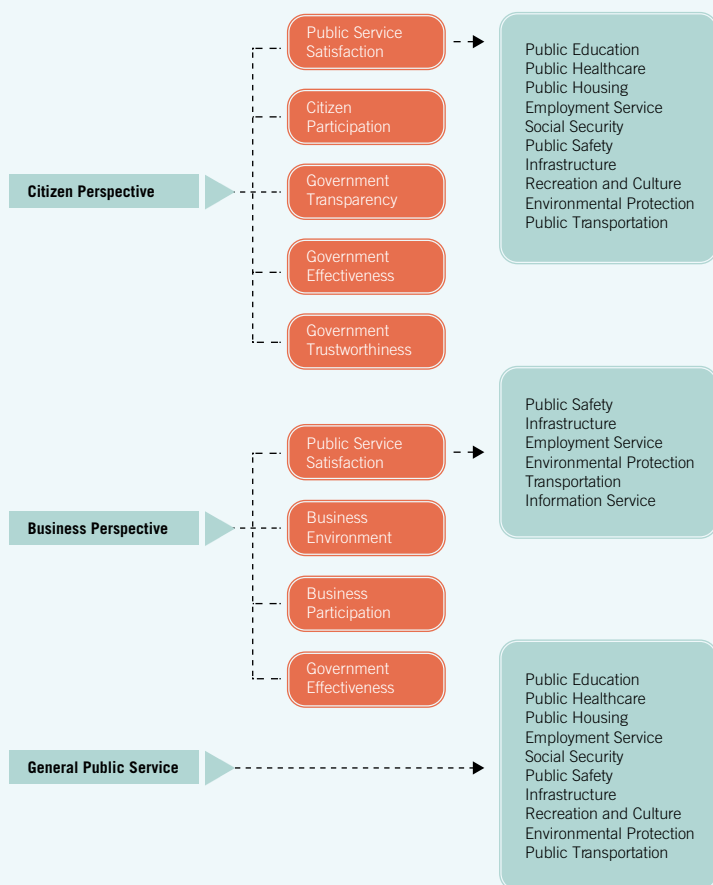


FIGURE 1

Lien Chinese Cities Service-Oriented Government Index

The Index consists of three general dimensions, namely Citizen Perspective, Business Perspective and General Public Service. While the first two are constructs of subjective information from surveys, the last is a construct of objective information from official statistics. Figure 1 provides details on how the Index is structured. Given the people-centred approach at the core of building a service-oriented government, the team adopted a set of weights (4:3:3) and aggregated the scores of the three general dimensions to rank the surveyed cities in Mainland China.

From April to August in 2013, NCPA and SIPA administrated the fourth annual survey in 36 major cities in Mainland China as well as in Hong Kong and Taipei, as marked in the map shown in Figure 2. In each of these cities, at least 700 residents and 150 companies were randomly selected for phone interviews. This essay presents the findings from the 2013 survey regarding the citizens' life satisfaction, or happiness.



FIGURE 2
Chinese Cities Covered In The Lien Public Service Index Project

Happiness and Service-Oriented Government

The significance of citizens' happiness to the building of a service-oriented government in contemporary urban China can be understood from some philosophical traditions and actual surveys of citizens' happiness. Aristotle, in his work, *Politics*, argued that, more important than ensuring the survival of its citizens, a state exists to help them achieve "the good life" (*eudaimonia*). Bentham also asserted that a citizen's happiness can and should be promoted through government actions, although he held a more utilitarian view of happiness. Many other pundits and scholars (e.g., Veenhoven, and Donovan & Halpern) followed by pointing out that the aggregative

level of happiness is correlated with a series of social factors, such as civil rights and economic freedom, over which governments have certain control and influence.

Additionally, the analysis of more than 450,000 responses to a daily survey from 1,000 US residents as cited by Kahneman and Deaton in 2010 has shown that emotional well-being returns to economic status diminish after reaching a certain level, of around US\$75,000 annual family income. Studies also suggest the communities with the highest level of happiness are not those most affluent, but instead those satisfied with their health and environmental conditions, social and institutional arrangements, the level of social trust and inclusion, and low bribery and corruption.



⁰¹ Police in Hangzhou. Public safety is one of the qualities measured by the Lien index.

⁰² Panoramic view of Qingdao, the top ranked city in the Lien index.



Taken together, while building a service-oriented government is key to accomplishing the comprehensive goal of sustainable development in urban China, devoting substantial attention to citizens and promoting their overall happiness should be put at the core of building a service-oriented government.

In the 2013 survey, we asked citizens in the surveyed cities how satisfied they were with their lives using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10 points. The responses collected across the three dimensions of this study were first analysed at the city level and then summarised in Figure 3. For the comparison, Beijing and Shanghai were selected as individual cities from Mainland China as they are comparable to Hong Kong and Taipei in terms of the level of development and internationalisation; while the average score of the 36 cities in Mainland China was used to cover all information collected from this area.





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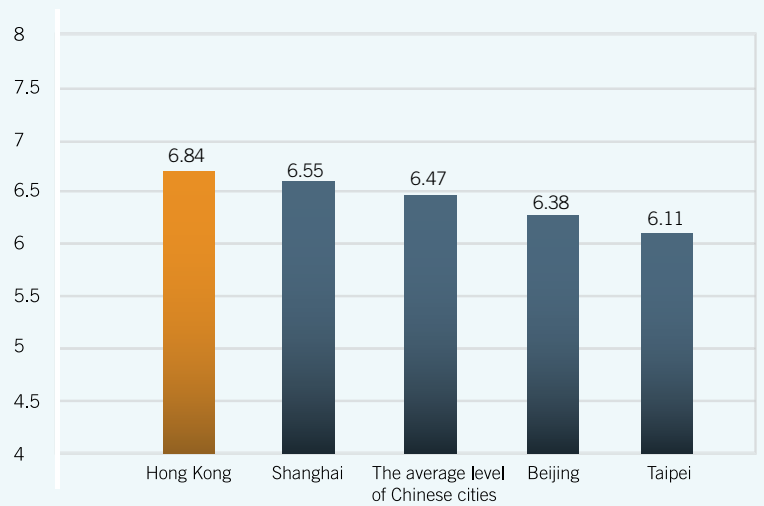


FIGURE 3
The Level of Citizen's Happiness by City

01 School children in Hong Kong. Public education was one of the qualities tracked in the Lien index.



The figure indicates that citizens in the surveyed cities are generally happy with their lives across the three areas, but at a modest level. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that the level of happiness in Hong Kong is the highest, followed by Shanghai, the average of Chinese cities, Beijing, and lastly Taipei.

Further analyses revealed that the aggregate level of citizens' happiness is significantly correlated with their occupation, marital status and family income. It is not surprising that these variables are highly relevant as they are closely associated with traditional definitions of "success", but what is more informative is that the significant correlation between happiness and family income only appeared in the Mainland China survey data and among citizens with annual income of below US\$25,000. This finding is consistent with previous findings that happiness has a weak relationship with economic status above a certain threshold.



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TABLE 1
The Lien Index Top 10 Cities with Service-Oriented Governments and the Level of Their Citizens' Happiness

The ranking according to the index score	City Name	Citizens' Happiness	
		Mean Score	Ranking
1	Qingdao	6.827	1
2	Hangzhou	6.690	6
3	Xiamen	6.651	8
4	Beijing	6.376	31
5	Chengdu	6.717	4
6	Jinan	6.583	11
7	Dalian	6.744	3
8	Nanjing	6.478	25
9	Ningbo	6.586	10
10	Shanghai	6.549	20
10	Urumqi	6.555	17

Much more importantly, our analyses found that citizens' happiness is significantly related to their assessment of their city government's performance in public service delivery and public management in all surveyed cities, including Hong Kong and Taipei. In fact, the ranking of citizens' happiness shown in the above figure is similar to that of citizens' assessment of city governments' public service and public management performance. Moreover, looking at the happiness score of the Lien Index top 10 cities with service-oriented governments (shown in Table 1), we find six of the 10 happiest cities have also consistently ranked in the Lien Index top 10 cities with service-oriented governments from 2011 to 2013.



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The Lien Public Service Index Project suggests that people in Chinese cities are generally satisfied with their lives in the three dimensions of this study, but at a level that could be much improved. In addition, the level of people's happiness is highly correlated to their assessment of their city government's performance in public service delivery and public management. Although the associations do not mean that promoting public service and public management can automatically increase citizens' happiness, they imply indirect or direct interactions exist between the performance of city governments and their citizens' happiness. Clarifying and managing such interactions for healthy urban development call for greater attention and investigative efforts.



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Assoc. Prof. **Wu Wei** is the Director of China Affairs Office at Nanyang Technological University, where he has also served as an associate dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, director of Nanyang Centre for Public Administration, and associate dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Prof. Wu received MA degrees from Stanford University and Xiamen University, and his PhD from Indiana University. He specialises in public communications and public management.