



Married Couples' Life Satisfaction and Gender Divisions of Income and Housework in China

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Abstract

Household roles are critical determinants of married couples' subjective well-being. One strand of the literature, focusing on income division, finds that couples experience higher well-being when husbands earn more than their wives. The other strand examines the well-being implications of housework division with mixed results. The present study synthesizes these perspectives by analyzing how combined household roles—incorporating both income and household labor divisions—relate to life satisfaction. Using longitudinal dyadic data from 12,980 couples surveyed in the China Family Panel Studies (2010–2022), results reveal that traditional income arrangements, with husbands as primary earners, consistently associate with higher life satisfaction for both spouses. This pattern is evident both between and within couples, particularly among husbands as they transition into provider roles. This becomes especially pronounced when husbands also contribute significantly to housework. Notably, a small subgroup of husbands reports higher satisfaction within non-traditional arrangements, wherein wives are primary earners and husbands handle most household chores. For wives, transitioning into a double-burden role significantly reduces their life satisfaction. These findings reflect both continuity with and departure from traditional gender norms in China, suggesting non-traditional household roles as emerging pathways that may enhance well-being.

Keywords Income · Housework · Household role · Life satisfaction · China

Introduction

In the context of an uneven and stalled gender revolution across both the public and domestic spheres, household roles—the often-gendered division of labor within and outside households—have been found to be crucial for married couples' subjective well-being. Previous research on household roles and their implications for well-being can be categorized into two main strands. The first, focusing on income division, highlights that traditional income roles, aligned with normative husband-breadwinning expectations, are

conducive to the subjective well-being of both husbands and wives (Hajdu & Hajdu, 2018; Wu, 2021; Zhang & Tsang, 2013). The second strand, centered on the division of housework, generally agrees that perceived fairness positively affects women's subjective well-being (Hu & Yucel, 2018; Yogeve & Brett, 1985), but with mixed results for men. Studies conducted in the U.S. and China indicate that both conventional (Wilkie et al., 1998) and egalitarian (Carlson et al., 2020) housework arrangements benefit men's well-being, while other research finds no significant effect (Ruppanner et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022a, b). These divergent findings suggest that the implications of housework division for subjective well-being vary between genders.

We argue that conceptualizing and operationalizing household roles solely through the lens of either income or housework division within couples is unsatisfactory. This either-or approach assumes that the division of income prescribes and necessitates household labor arrangements, thereby overlooking nuanced connections between public and domestic spheres. Moreover, it reduces the complex, often inconsistent, and intertwined nature of gender

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equalization processes within the family to a single dimension—paid or unpaid labor. As a result, this approach obscures the heterogeneity inherent in household role configurations (Tan, 2023).

Recognizing that the household division of labor is a family process involving both spouses, we aim to examine the combined division of income and housework within couples from a dyadic perspective, thus capturing its potentially varying effects on husbands' and wives' subjective well-being. We situate this study within the context of China, where economic reforms and development over recent decades have presented several counteracting social and structural challenges for families: the resurgence of patriarchal values alongside the rise of progressive feminism (Ji et al., 2017), marketization and rising costs of living that intensify the burden within the private sphere (Bian, 2002; Bian & Logan, 1996), and increasing work-family conflicts that necessitate the renegotiation of household roles (Chen, 2005). Amidst these social changes, the gendered well-being implications of evolving household roles remain unclear and warrant empirical investigation.

Our study seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent do various household roles—defined by combinations of relative income and housework divisions—affect married couples' life satisfaction? To address this question, we employ a dyadic, longitudinal, and gender-sensitive framework, using data from 12,980 continuously married heterosexual couples surveyed in the China Family Panel Studies between 2010 and 2022. By examining household roles and their well-being implications, we contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions about how married couples in China have adapted their divisions of labor to meet the emerging demands arising from the interplay of modernity and tradition.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, we review patterns and changes in gender norms and the household division of labor within the Chinese context. Second, we review existing literature on the associations between divisions of income or housework and subjective well-being. Third, we present our rationale for conceptualizing and operationalizing household roles as joint outcomes of income and housework divisions. Next, we describe our data, methods, and findings. Finally, we conclude by summarizing the results and discussing their implications and limitations.

Prevailing Gender Norms and Challenges in China

The present study situates household roles within the context of China, where the progress toward gender equality has been uneven, stalled, and, in some respects, regressive (Ji et al., 2017; Pimentel, 2006). Over the past few decades, an increasing separation between public and domestic spheres has emerged. In the public sphere, the socialist labor unit (*danwei*) system has given way to a neoliberal market economy (Bian & Logan, 1996; Mu & Tian, 2022). Female labor force participation, once among the highest globally at 73% in 1990, dropped to 61% in 2021 (Wang et al., 2022a, b), and the ratio of women's earnings relative to men's fell from 84% in 2000 to 65% in 2013 (Iwasaki & Ma, 2020). In the private sphere, the gendered gap in housework has shown no sign of convergence, irrespective of age or cohort (Luo & Chui, 2018). The private family, once closely integrated with the state and public sphere under socialism, has become increasingly detached and predominantly served the reproductive functions (Ji, 2025; Ji et al., 2017; Wang & Mu, 2025).

These social changes have contributed to a resurgence and consolidation of traditional gender roles—breadwinning husbands and homemaking wives—in some families. For others, particularly those facing the rising cost of living, a phenomenon known as the “second shift” has emerged, whereby women bear most domestic responsibilities in addition to working long hours in the labor market (Chen, 2005; Kan & He, 2018). This “second shift” has intensified work-family conflicts, leading to adverse consequences including negative impacts on health and well-being (Qian & Qian, 2015; Wang & Li, 2023; Wu et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, progress has been made in challenging prevailing patriarchal norms, as seen in women's advancing socioeconomic resources and the emergence of non-traditional household roles. Women have been increasingly represented in higher education, surpassing men's by a notable margin (Treiman, 2013; Wu & Zhang, 2010; Yeung, 2013). The increasing resemblance of men's and women's economic roles has provided women greater leverage in negotiating more egalitarian household roles and challenging the traditional male-breadwinner models (Cheng, 2019; Zuo & Bian, 2001). However, while the expansion of education is progressive, it has led to asymmetrical shifts in gender ideology. Women's growing endorsement of egalitarianism has not been matched by similar progress among men, whose attitudes toward gender roles have only been modestly influenced by education (Ji & Chen, 2015). These asymmetrical ideological shifts caution against assuming that women's educational advancements will necessarily lead to more egalitarian household labor arrangements.

Informed by these complex social changes in China—characterized by simultaneous progress and setbacks in both public and private spheres—we position household roles as primary sites for the manifestation of diverse gender-related changes. We view these roles as coping mechanisms through which married couples negotiate and address emerging challenges associated with China’s modernization.

Household Roles and Subjective Well-Being

Theories regarding household roles generally focus on the intra-couple divisions of income and housework. Specialization theory, for instance, explains the division of labor as a strategy to maximize utility. It posits that the spouse with higher earnings, typically the husband, specializes in paid labor, while the other spouse, usually the wife, specializes in domestic work (Becker, 1973). Resource bargaining theory views household roles as gender-neutral outcomes shaped by intra-couple power dynamics, suggesting that the spouse with greater economic resources holds more bargaining power to negotiate out of less desirable household tasks (Kan & He, 2018; Zuo & Bian, 2001). Meanwhile, gender display theory conceptualizes household roles, particularly the division of housework, as an enactment of gender identity. It posits a curvilinear relationship between relative income and housework: the wife’s share of housework declines as her income increases, but rises again once her income significantly exceeds her husband’s, as a compensation for deviating from traditional gender norms (Kan & He, 2018; Killewald & Gough, 2010; Yu & Xie, 2011). Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight the diverse gender dynamics shaping couples’ adherence to, or deviation from, traditional gendered division of labor and, by extension, their influence on subjective well-being.

Unsurprisingly, empirical studies have underscored the significance of gender norms in shaping the relationships between household roles and subjective well-being. These studies can be broadly categorized into two strands. The first strand, focusing on relative income, provides empirical evidence that increases in wives’ earnings relative to their husbands’ challenge traditional male breadwinner norms and thus destabilize marriages (Hajdu & Hajdu, 2018; Kalmijn et al., 2007). Higher relative income among wives has been associated with lower marital satisfaction, increased divorce risk, and negative consequences for both husbands’ and wives’ subjective well-being. Similarly, in China, scholars have documented the protective effects of traditional income divisions on couples’ life satisfaction, as well as the moderating roles of gender and socioeconomic status (Wu, 2021; Zhang & Tsang, 2013). For example, Qian and Qian (2015) found that in urban China, husbands’

share of income exerted a stronger influence on their happiness compared to wives’, reflecting normative expectations regarding the husband’s role as the primary provider. Using quasi-experimental methods, Wu (2021) found that husbands’ higher earnings significantly enhanced subjective well-being among families of medium socioeconomic status, whereas wives’ higher relative earnings were consistently and negatively related to happiness across all financial conditions.

The second strand of research, focusing on the division of housework and subjective well-being, presents a more nuanced perspective on gender norms. Empirical evidence suggests that conforming to traditional homemaking roles is not protective for women; rather, it tends to be stressful and demanding (Frisco & Williams, 2003). Women’s subjective well-being improves when their husbands share at least some housework, and it is even more favorable when women perceive the division of housework as fair (Wang & Li, 2023; Yogeve & Brett, 1985). Findings regarding men’s well-being have been mixed. Some studies in the U.S. identify positive effects of traditional divisions of housework on men’s subjective well-being (Wilkie et al., 1998), whereas others report insignificant associations (Ruppanner et al., 2018) or suggest that egalitarian arrangements are more beneficial than conventional ones (Carlson et al., 2020). Within the Chinese context, research indicates that the division of housework has little impact on men’s subjective well-being or relational satisfaction, a notable contrast to the significant impact observed on women’s well-being (Pimentel, 2006).

Household Role as a Joint Outcome: Combining Divisions of Income and Housework

The extant literature, valuable as it is, has several shortcomings. First, previous research has rarely considered both husbands’ and wives’ subjective well-being using dyadic data that incorporate responses from each spouse. As a result, studies often overlook potential intra-couple differences arising from their asymmetric reception and adjustments to household roles. Such differences, if present, are crucial for understanding gender dynamics underlying the negotiation of household roles and their implications for gender equality. Second, much of the literature examines the divisions of income and housework separately, overlooking the inherent heterogeneity and complexity of household roles (Tan, 2023). In most studies on relative income, the division of housework is either ignored or treated as a covariate (Wu, 2021; Zhang & Tsang, 2013). Likewise, studies on the division of housework often treat income only as a covariate (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Ruppanner et al., 2018). These

approaches reduce the intertwined processes of gender equalization within the family to a single dimension—either paid or unpaid labor, and therefore, they are not well-equipped to fully capture the nuanced relationships between household roles and couples' subjective well-being.

In this study, we adopt the “linked lives” perspective, which emphasizes the embeddedness of human lives within social and familial relationships (Macmillan & Copher, 2005). We argue that household roles should be conceptualized as a range of coping strategies jointly negotiated and employed by spouses to address various social and structural demands, resulting in potentially divergent implications for husbands' and wives' subjective well-being. To capture this diversity, we incorporate both income and housework divisions into household roles. Specifically, we integrate couples' relative income and housework into a cross-tabulated measure, categorized along two dimensions—income and housework—each with three distinctions: traditional, egalitarian, and non-traditional, and in total, yielding nine distinct household role categories. Our goal is, therefore, to describe the distribution of these roles and examine how they impact couples' life satisfaction. This will help understand how diverse family configurations navigate the evolving demands arising from the interplay of modernity and tradition in China.

Data and Methods

Data and Sample

We selected our samples from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a national biennial survey of Chinese communities, households, and individuals. The CFPS employs a multi-stage probability sampling strategy with implicit stratification to ensure national representativeness (see Xie & Lu, 2015 for a detailed discussion of the sampling strategy). Since its baseline survey in 2010, the CFPS has

collected data from over 50,000 individuals. The dataset provides repeated measures of couples' subjective well-being, time use, and socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, making it particularly suitable for investigating the well-being implications of household roles. Our analysis uses six waves of CFPS data from 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022, omitting only the 2012 wave for the lack of information on hours spent on housework.

After merging datasets across years, we performed stepwise sample restrictions, summarized in Table 1. First, since each relationship was represented twice (from both spouses' perspectives), we retained data reported by women only, reducing the sample size by 49.68%, from 200,544 to 100,920 person-year observations. Second, we restricted the sample to women who remained married to the same opposite-sex spouse throughout the years in which they were observed as married, and for whom data from both spouses were available. This step, aimed at eliminating potential confounding effects from divorce, remarriage, or incomplete spousal data, further reduced the sample by 33.34% to 67,265 person-year observations. Third, we limited the sample to respondents aged between 20 and 60, i.e., the primary working age, which further reduced the sample size by 22.04% to 52,443 person-year observations. Fourth, given our focus on housework and income divisions, we retained only couples in which at least one partner reported non-zero values for housework hours and income. This step reduced the sample size by 16.68% for housework and 37.49% for income, respectively, leaving 27,314 person-year observations. Finally, following a Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test, we employed listwise deletion for observations missing essential information (e.g., life satisfaction, education, household registration status, migration status), further reducing the sample by 3.94%. The final analytic sample comprises 12,980 unique couples and 26,239 couple-year observations. It is important to note that this sample is imbalanced, with 50.98% of the couples observed across multiple waves.

Table 1 Stepwise sample restriction

Step	Sample restriction	Sample (person-years)
0	Original sample of the China Family Panel Studies in 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022	200,544
1	Women	100,920
2	Continuously married with the same opposite-sex partner	67,265
3	Aged between 20 and 60	52,443
4	At least one partner does housework	43,696
5	At least one partner reports non-zero income	27,314
6	Non-missing variables (e.g., life satisfaction, education)	26,239 (12,980 unique couples)

Measures

Life Satisfaction

The dependent variable, life satisfaction, is measured using a single survey item on a scale from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*): “Are you satisfied with life?” The survey item is the most extensively used single-item question to measure life satisfaction (Cheung & Lucas, 2014). It is also a reliable indicator of subjective well-being, consistently and comparably collected across all waves of the CFPS (Diener et al., 2009).

Household Roles

In the CFPS, respondents were asked to report the time they spent on various non-work activities, including housework, sleep, and entertainment, on both working days and weekends. For respondents who were not employed, the survey collected information about their activities on a typical day. We calculated weekly housework hours by assuming five working days and two non-working days per week. Income measures include wages, bonuses, cash benefits, and subsidies from all jobs in the past year, net of taxes and insurance contributions.

To construct household roles, we first categorized the intra-couple divisions of income and housework into three groups: traditional, egalitarian, and non-traditional, based on the traditional gender roles involving a male breadwinner and a female homemaker. For income division, roles were defined by the wife's share of the couples' total income: "traditional" (wife earns less than 35%), "egalitarian" (wife earns between 35% and 65%), and "non-traditional" (wife earns more than 65%). Likewise, housework division was categorized based on the wife's share of total housework hours: "traditional" (wife performs more than 65%), "egalitarian" (wife performs between 35% and 65%), and "non-traditional" otherwise. By cross-tabulating these two dimensions, we created nine distinct categories capturing a comprehensive range of household role configurations. In subsequent analyses, we set the egalitarian divisions for both income and housework as the reference category.

For robustness checks, we applied alternative thresholds of 40% and 60% for both income and housework divisions. These alternative thresholds also produced reasonable distributions of household roles, as demonstrated by the descriptive statistics presented later. We compared results across the two sets of nine-category household roles to confirm that our findings remain robust and are not driven by arbitrary threshold choices.

Covariates

We controlled for relevant demographic, socioeconomic, and health-related variables, including age (and its squared term), education (*primary or less*, *middle school*, *high school*, and *college or higher*), household registration status (*hukou*) (*agricultural vs. non-agricultural*), migration status (*migrant vs. non-migrant*), chronic health conditions (*having at least one chronic disease vs. having none*), number of children (capped at three), homeownership (*property owner vs. non-owner*), and equivalized household income (log-transformed). These covariates were chosen based on previous research highlighting their significance for subjective well-being in China (Bian et al., 2015). All control

variables were individually measured for each spouse, except for number of children, homeownership, and household income, which were measured at the household or couple level.

Analytical Strategy

To examine the well-being implications of household roles, we employed hybrid mixed-effect models with the Mundlak specification (Mundlak, 1978). This approach is particularly suited for imbalanced panel data, as it effectively distinguishes between-couple and within-couple variations.

Our analytical strategy is able to decompose key time-varying predictors—in this case, categorical indicators of couples' household roles—into two distinct components. The first, representing between-couple variations, is captured by couple-specific mean proportion of time spent in each household role category across all observed time points. The second component captures within-couple variations, measured as deviations from the couple-specific mean at specific time points.

Formally, our model can be specified as:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \sum_k \beta_{1k} (X_{itk} - \bar{X}_{lk}) + \sum_k \beta_{2k} \bar{X}_{lk} + \gamma' Z_{it} + u_i + \epsilon_{it}$$

where Y_{it} denotes life satisfaction for individual i at time t ; X_{itk} is the indicator for household role category k ; \bar{X}_{lk} is the couple-specific mean for category k ; Z_{it} includes other covariates; u_i is a couple-specific random intercept; and ϵ_{it} is a residual error term.

Although Mundlak's (1978) formulation is often employed as a diagnostic to determine the suitability of fixed- vs. random-effects models, here we explicitly adopt it as a modeling strategy to clearly distinguish between-couple effects (i.e., differences in life satisfaction between couples with distinct role configurations) from within-couple effects (i.e., how role transitions over time within couples relate to changes in their life satisfaction). Importantly, the within-couple estimates obtained through this method are analogous to those from fixed-effects models, thus controlling for both observed and unobserved time-invariant confounders. We estimated these models separately for husbands and wives.

To assess the robustness of our findings, we conducted several auxiliary analyses. First, we re-estimated the models using alternative thresholds (40% and 60%) to define household role categories. Second, for clearer distinction between categories, we introduced exclusion bands of $\pm 2\%$ around threshold cutoffs, removing couples whose wife's share of income or housework fell within borderline areas. Third, we restricted analyses to dual-earner couples to

Table 2 Distributions of household roles

Income	Housework	Frequency	Percent (%)
Traditional	Traditional	10,431	39.75
Traditional	Egalitarian	4160	15.85
Egalitarian	Traditional	3440	13.11
Egalitarian	Egalitarian	2286	8.71
Non-traditional	Traditional	2065	7.87
Non-traditional	Egalitarian	1376	5.24
Traditional	Non-traditional	1131	4.31
Egalitarian	Non-traditional	721	2.75
Non-traditional	Non-traditional	629	2.40

The distributions of household roles are summarized from 26,239 couple-year observations (12,980 unique couples) selected from the China Family Panel Studies in 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022

explore potential differences in gender dynamics within this subgroup. Lastly, due to the substantial amount of missing income data, we also conducted multiple imputation analyses and verified consistency using pooled results from multiple imputed datasets.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 2 summarizes the distribution of household roles, constructed through cross-tabulating the three-category divisions of income and housework. The traditional household arrangement—characterized by traditional gender expectations with the husband as the primary breadwinner and the wife as the primary homemaker—was the most prevalent, comprising 39.75% of all couple-year observations. The second most common arrangement involved a traditional division of income paired with an egalitarian housework distribution, accounting for 15.85% of observations. Following these arrangements were categories with egalitarian income divisions combined with either traditional or egalitarian housework divisions, representing 13.11% and 8.71%, respectively. Categories featuring non-traditional income divisions alongside traditional or egalitarian housework arrangements accounted for 7.87% and 5.24% of observations, respectively. The three least prevalent categories—all involving non-traditional housework arrangements—collectively comprised 9.46% of couple-year observations.

Overall, the distribution of household roles demonstrates both continuity with and departure from traditional gender roles. Traditional arrangements, in which husbands earned more income and performed less housework than their wives, remained predominant. This trend was particularly notable for housework, suggesting that shifts toward equality in domestic labor lag behind changes occurring in the public sphere. Conversely, a substantial proportion

Table 3 Descriptive characteristics

	Husband	Wife	T/ χ^2 tests
Life satisfaction	3.74 (1.01)	3.77 (1.00)	***
Income	35894.15 (42246.55)	20008.64 (30446.96)	***
Housework hours	7.98 (9.36)	16.65 (11.48)	***
Age	43.44 (10.36)	41.67 (10.18)	***
<i>Education</i>			***
Primary or less	30.34%	40.87%	
Middle school	36.88%	31.48%	
High school	18.24%	14.69%	
College or above	14.53%	12.95%	
<i>Hukou</i>			***
Agricultural	68.39%	70.38%	
Non-agricultural	31.61%	29.62%	
<i>Migration</i>			***
Migrant	94.77%	95.19%	
Non-migrant	5.23%	4.81%	
<i>Chronic disease</i>			***
No	88.37%	86.41%	
Yes	11.63%	13.59%	
<i>Number of children</i>			—
0	5.39%	—	
1	45.01%	—	
2	38.51%	—	
3+	11.09%	—	
<i>Homeownership</i>			—
No	15.96%	—	
Yes	84.04%	—	
Equalized household income	6959.20 (15563.17)	—	—

Samples include 26,239 couple-year observations (12,980 unique couples) selected from the China Family Panel Studies in 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022. Number of children, homeownership, and equalized household income apply to both spouses. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Percentages of categorical variables may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

of couples had adopted egalitarian arrangements, sharing responsibilities equally in income-generation or housework. In 22.57% of observations, couples organized roles non-traditionally in at least one domain, deviating from conventional gender expectations.

Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for all variables included in our analyses. We observed significant differences between husbands and wives across individual-level characteristics, especially regarding income, housework, and life satisfaction. Husbands earned, on average, 44.26% more income than their wives, while performing fewer than half the housework hours that wives performed weekly. Additionally, wives reported slightly higher life satisfaction ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.00$) compared to husbands ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.01$). Demographically, husbands were older (average age of 43.44 years) than their wives, with an average age

difference of 1.77 years. Husbands were also more likely than wives to have completed at least a high school education (32.77%) and to hold an urban *hukou* (31.61%). Slightly higher proportions of husbands identified as migrants relative to their spouses. Regarding health conditions, over 10% of husbands reported experiencing at least one chronic disease in the preceding six months, lower than the 13.59% reported by wives. Most couples in our sample had children, and 84.04% owned their residence.

Model Findings

Table 4 summarizes the results from mixed-effects models estimating the between- and within-couple effects of household roles on husbands' and wives' life satisfaction, using the Mundlak specification.

For husbands, traditional income arrangements—where men contributed more than 65% of the couple's total income—were associated with higher life satisfaction compared to egalitarian roles, regardless of housework division. This life satisfaction premium was especially pronounced when husbands also contributed a larger share of housework (non-traditional housework division), indicating greater satisfaction among men who assumed substantial responsibilities in both public and domestic spheres. These patterns were clear between couples and, to a slightly lesser extent, apparent within couples over time, suggesting that men generally experienced higher well-being in traditional breadwinning arrangements, and transitioning into such roles also enhanced their well-being. Unexpectedly, husbands who earned less income than their wives but took on more housework responsibilities also reported higher life satisfaction, but this pattern emerged only in between-couple comparisons.

For wives, traditional income arrangements were likewise associated with increased life satisfaction. Among women in these marriages, their satisfaction further increased as husbands took on greater shares of household chores. Specifically, the life satisfaction advantage rose from 0.12 (compared to egalitarian divisions in both domains) when wives performed most household chores, to 0.15 with an egalitarian split of chores, and further to 0.17 when husbands performed the majority of housework. Women in marriages characterized by non-traditional income division but egalitarian housework also experienced a small yet significant increase in satisfaction. However, most of these associations did not hold for within-couple changes over time, except for a marginally significant drop in women's life satisfaction when transitioning into a “double burden” arrangement (wives earning most of the income and performing most housework).

Figure 1 illustrates the predicted levels of life satisfaction for husbands and wives, holding all control variables at mean levels. These results confirm the findings from our analyses of between-couple differences: husbands with traditional income divisions reported the highest life satisfaction, especially when coupled with non-traditional divisions of housework or, alternatively, in fully reversed gender roles, specializing in housework while wives earned more income. For women, significantly higher life satisfaction was reported within traditional income arrangements, particularly when husbands shared or took on more housework responsibilities.

Among covariates, both spouses' life satisfaction was negatively associated with husbands' age but positively linked to wives' age. Educational attainment of spouses appeared to have a stronger influence on individuals' life satisfaction than their own educational levels. Additionally, non-agricultural *hukou* status, non-migrant status, and the absence of chronic diseases were positively associated with life satisfaction for both husbands and wives. At the couple level, having children, homeownership, and higher household income were each positively related to subjective well-being.

Overall, these findings underscore the protective role of traditional income arrangements aligned with prevailing gender norms. Higher male earnings within the household continued to positively influence subjective well-being for both spouses. Conversely, despite the persistence of traditionally gendered housework divisions, this arrangement was not optimal for couples' life satisfaction. Indeed, both husbands and wives reported greater life satisfaction when contributing equally to household tasks or when husbands took on most chores. These insights suggest that, in China, conventional expectations of men as primary earners remain influential in shaping subjective well-being, whereas evolving attitudes toward household labor, emphasizing fairness and egalitarianism, may offer additional pathways to enhance life satisfaction for both spouses.

Auxiliary Analyses

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we conducted several auxiliary analyses. First, we constructed household roles using alternative thresholds for income and housework divisions. Specifically, the income division was defined as “traditional” if the husband contributed more than 60% of the couple's combined income, “egalitarian” if contributions ranged between 40% and 60%, and “non-traditional” otherwise; housework division categories were defined similarly, but with gender roles reversed. Results from these analyses, summarized in Supplementary Table 1, largely confirmed our primary findings. Men's life satisfaction was

Table 4 Mixed-effects models with Mundlak specification on couples' life satisfaction

	Husband	Wife
Income-housework roles (ref: Egal-Egal)		
<i>Between-couple effects</i>		
Egal-Trad	0.06 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Egal-NonTrad	0.07 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
Trad-Egal	0.14*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)
Trad-Trad	0.18*** (0.03)	0.12** (0.03)
Trad-NonTrad	0.25*** (0.05)	0.17** (0.05)
NonTrad-Egal	0.09 (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)
NonTrad-Trad	0.03 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
NonTrad-NonTrad	0.17* (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)
<i>Within-couple effects</i>		
Egal-Trad	0.04 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Egal-NonTrad	0.01 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Trad-Egal	0.10** (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Trad-Trad	0.09** (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Trad-NonTrad	0.12* (0.05)	0.03 (0.04)
NonTrad-Egal	0.01 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)
NonTrad-Trad	0.01 (0.04)	−0.07 (0.04)
NonTrad-NonTrad	−0.03 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.05)
Age (husband)	−0.07** (0.03)	−0.05* (0.03)
Age (wife)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)
Age squared (husband)	0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
Age squared (wife)	0.03* (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
<i>Education (husband) (ref: primary or less)</i>		
Middle school	0.03 (0.02)	0.06*** (0.01)
High school	0.00 (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)
College or above	0.07* (0.03)	0.16*** (0.03)
<i>Education (wife) (ref: primary or less)</i>		
Middle school	0.07*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
High school	0.08** (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)
College or above	0.22*** (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)
Non-agricultural hukou (husband)	−0.07** (0.02)	−0.06** (0.02)
Non-agricultural hukou (wife)	−0.07** (0.02)	−0.06** (0.02)
Migrant (husband)	−0.08** (0.03)	−0.04 (0.03)
Migrant (wife)	−0.11** (0.03)	−0.08** (0.03)
Chronic (husband)	−0.14*** (0.02)	−0.00 (0.02)
Chronic (wife)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.12*** (0.02)
<i>Number of children (ref: 0)</i>		
1	0.05 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
2	0.17*** (0.03)	0.10** (0.03)
3+	0.12** (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)
Homeownership	0.15*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)
Equalized household income	0.15*** (0.01)	0.14*** (0.01)
Intercept	1.98*** (0.07)	2.29*** (0.07)
Group ICC	0.28	0.30
Observations	26,239	26,239

Samples include 26,239 couple-year observations (12,980 unique couples) selected from the China Family Panel Studies in 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022. Number of children, homeownership, and equalized household income apply to both spouses.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

positively associated with traditional income arrangements, particularly when paired with non-traditional housework roles. Additionally, men reported higher life satisfaction when both income and housework divisions were non-traditional. By contrast, women reported the highest life satisfaction when their husbands contributed a larger share of both income and housework. Notably, under these alternative thresholds, nearly all significant effects emerged primarily in between-couple comparisons, suggesting that larger within-couple shifts, as seen in our main analyses with wider thresholds, might be necessary for observing within-couple impacts.

Second, to establish clearer distinctions among household role categories, we implemented exclusion bands of $\pm 2\%$ around our threshold cutoffs, removing couples whose income or housework shares fell within borderline areas. All main conclusions remained robust. Additionally, we observed that non-traditional income arrangements coupled with egalitarian housework divisions became positively associated with life satisfaction for both spouses. With these clearer categorical distinctions, we also found strong evidence supporting that women's life satisfaction declined significantly upon transitioning into a double-burden arrangement, consistent with prior research (Wang & Li, 2023; Wu et al., 2016).

Third, we restricted the sample to dual-earner couples to examine whether our primary findings remain valid within this subgroup. Results, summarized in Supplementary Table 3, generally confirmed our earlier results for men. In between-couple comparisons, men reported higher life satisfaction when they earned more than their wives, especially when also assuming a larger share of housework duties. Furthermore, transitioning into traditional divisions of both income and housework increased men's life satisfaction over time. However, the positive association previously observed for men in non-traditional roles (earning less income but performing more housework) became non-significant within dual-earner couples, indicating that the benefits men derived from non-traditional arrangements in our main analysis may primarily reflect cases involving husbands without earnings. For women in dual-earner couples, we found that traditional income division paired with an egalitarian distribution of housework responsibilities was positively associated with life satisfaction.

Lastly, we performed multiple imputations ($n = 20$) and reported pooled results in Supplementary Table 4. The results confirmed that the traditional income division, particularly when combined with non-traditional housework arrangements, was positively associated with men's life satisfaction. This pattern was evident both between couples and during transitions into arrangements where men contributed more to both income and household labor. However, after

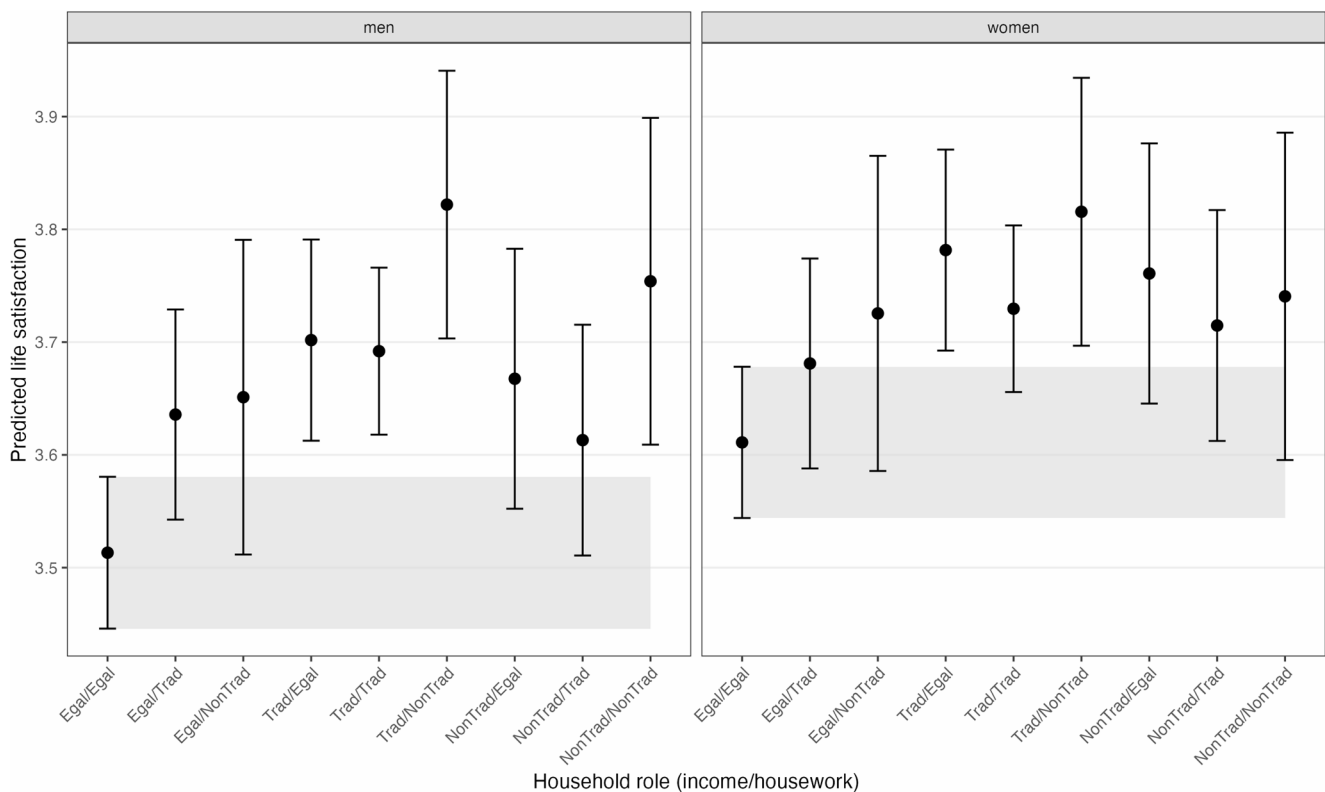


Fig. 1 Predicted life satisfaction across different household role configurations

imputation, household roles did not show significant effects on women's life satisfaction. This discrepancy likely arises because imputed samples featured more dual-earner couples than before. Thus, we caution readers about the sensitivity of women's results to missing income data.

Discussions

In the current study, we constructed household roles of married couples by integrating the divisions of income and housework and analyzed their relationships with couples' subjective well-being. As anticipated, we observed a concurrence of still-dominating traditional household roles and emerging non-conventional roles, reflecting a polarization in gender role attitudes between rejuvenated patriarchal norms and progressive egalitarianism in China (Ji et al., 2017; Ji & Chen, 2015). We found that household roles linked to the highest life satisfaction for both husbands and wives continued to involve traditional income divisions, although the benefits of traditional income roles were largest when the husbands shared or took on more housework. These patterns were evident both across couples and, especially for husbands, during transitions into such arrangements over time. Notably, there was also a small group of men who deviated from traditional gender norms—taking on greater

responsibility for housework while their wives served as primary breadwinners—who reported significantly higher life satisfaction. Women experienced reduced life satisfaction in “double burden” arrangements (Carlson et al., 2020; Wang & Li, 2023). Our findings therefore illuminate both the persistence of and divergence from traditional gendered expectations.

We advise caution in interpreting certain findings as indicative of progressiveness. Although higher life satisfaction linked to traditional income divisions was consistently apparent in comparisons both between and within couples, the well-being advantage associated with non-traditional household roles emerged exclusively in between-couple analyses and were not evident among dual-earner couples. This suggests that selection effects—whereby couples adopting non-conventional roles might already possess egalitarian attitudes or specific resources conducive to enhanced well-being—could shape these outcomes. Therefore, rather than uniformly reflecting shifts towards gender egalitarianism, the observed advantages of non-traditional arrangements may partly reflect underlying couple-specific characteristics and predispositions.

The present study makes its contributions first and foremost to the conceptualization and operationalization of household roles. We contend that to preserve as much diversity as possible, the divisions of both income and housework

as well as the interdependencies between them should be considered (Kan & He, 2018; Tan, 2023; Wu, 2021; Yu & Xie, 2011). The household roles we identified exhibited heterogeneity in both their distributions and associations with couples' life satisfaction, corroborating the necessity of such construction.

We further contribute to the literature by stressing the importance of a dyadic perspective. By including both husbands' and wives' life satisfaction from a fully dyadic dataset, we highlighted how the same household roles can have distinctive effects. For instance, transitioning into a traditional division of income enhanced men's life satisfaction but had limited effects on women's. Embracing a dyadic perspective enables us to capitalize on potential within-couple differences, demonstrating that household roles, albeit outcomes of negotiation, carry different meanings for husbands and wives and do not lead to the same outcome for both.

This study is not without limitations. First, our analyses are exploratory in nature, as we could not conduct mediation analyses due to the unavailability of relevant variables—particularly gender role attitudes—across survey waves. Moreover, while life satisfaction provides a useful overall measure of subjective well-being, relationship-specific indicators might better capture couples' experiences within different household role configurations; however, such measures were not consistently available in the survey (specifically, missing in the CFPS surveys for the years 2010, 2012, and 2016). Second, potential misreporting of income and housework could introduce bias; for instance, husbands might overreport their contribution to household chores due to social desirability concerns (Achen & Stafford, 2005). However, the observed pattern, in which husbands performed less than half of the weekly housework hours reported by wives, is consistent with previous studies in China, partially mitigating this concern (Kan & He, 2018; Luo & Chui, 2018; Zuo & Bian, 2001). Third, our sample is imbalanced due to attrition across survey waves. A sizable proportion was observed only once, raising concerns about potential self-selection into specific household roles and limiting our ability to thoroughly investigate within-couple changes over time. Fourth, a substantial amount of missing income data creates additional challenges. Although we addressed this concern by employing multiple imputation analyses and confirmed most findings on the part of men, results for women were particularly sensitive to missing data, advising caution in interpreting findings regarding women's household role configurations.

Findings of this study highlight important avenues for future research on household roles and subjective well-being. While prior work emphasized the protective effects of gender norms, our results demonstrate that household

roles function as heterogeneous coping strategies, with both traditional and non-traditional arrangements offering distinct pathways to well-being. Notably, gender norms remain influential, yet are increasingly contested, as evidenced by the emergence of more egalitarian divisions of labor. Future research should investigate how couples negotiate household roles over time and consider broader outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and stability. Adopting a contextualized and longitudinal perspective will be essential for understanding the full diversity of household roles, their motivations, and their long-term effects on well-being.

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