

## URBAN-RURAL DIFFERENCES IN SUBJECTIVE QUALITY OF LIFE IN DEHUI

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The subjective quality of life (QOL) can reflect differences in perceptions of residents and their true state of life. Taking Dehui City of northeast China as a case, based on 482 questionnaires from urban and rural residents, this paper evaluated the subjective QOL from three views, i.e. the attitude of residents to the objective material conditions where they live in, the satisfaction with various emotional relationships and the degree of concern about future unpredictable conditions. The purpose of this paper is to compare the subjective QOL of urban and rural residents and find out the key influencing factors, which will help the government to make precise measures to narrow the gap between urban and rural development in China. The results showed that the overall satisfaction of urban and rural residents in Dehui City with the basic living conditions, emotions and unknown conditions is generally higher. However, there are significant differences between urban and rural residents about the satisfaction with the basic living conditions and the degree of concern about unknown conditions. The subjective QOL of most rural residents is not ideal, and the degree of satisfaction of urban residents and rural residents who live near the urban center of Dehui and the provincial capital Changchun is slightly higher than those of the rural areas in northwestern Dehui. Social security, diversification of family income, improvement of regional environment, and family economic foundation are important factors in improving the subjective QOL of urban residents, while social security and regional environmental improvement have positively promoted the subjective QOL of rural residents.

*Key words: Subjective quality of life, Urban-rural differences, Influential factors.*

*JEL Codes: I31, O18, Q12.*

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## **1. Introduction**

In 1958, American scholar J. K. Galbraith proposed the concept of quality of life (QOL), and it is believed that the QOL is the degree of comfort and convenience of people's lives and the enjoyment and fun that they have in life (Feng, 2009). Since then, the study of QOL has become the focus of research in sociology, psychology and other disciplines, and a large number of theoretical exploration and empirical analysis have been carried out (Cheng, 2008; Deng, 2014). QOL includes both objective QOL and subjective QOL. Between them, objective QOL uses material as the core to study people's living conditions and living standards (Hong, 2010). It is a monetization measure of people's QOL in the certain level of social and economic development. Subjective QOL starts from people's subjective feelings, which examines the perceptions and feelings of people about life and its various aspects and evaluates the QOL with the satisfaction and happiness that people get in life, reflecting the influence of culture and spirit on people's perceived QOL (Li, 2012). Exploring the QOL from the perception level can explain to a large extent why individuals at the same substance level have different QOL and why individuals with higher levels of material are not necessarily happier than individuals with material shortages. This kind of material richness and feeling of emptiness is more and more difficult to avoid in the rapid development of economic society. Therefore, the study of subjective QOL is closer to people's real state life. At the national or regional scale, a large number of regular questionnaire surveys or interviews are used to reveal the overall quality of life of a country or region, especially in western countries (Noo, 2015; SØRENSEN, 2014). However, the research on subjective QOL in China is at a preliminary stage (Chen, 2008).

With the continuous exploration and advancement of research on QOL, research on subjective QOL and related results continue to emerge. Economists believe that factors such as leisure and consumption are the main factors affecting the QOL. Psychologists believe that personality, health, social networks and satisfaction in different areas of life can explain 70-80% of QOL, and the purchase and consumption of goods and services has little impact on QOL (Deaton, 2003; Wilkinson, 1996; Adjaye-Gbewonyo, 2012). Since the 1980s, some scholars have constructed subjective QOL evaluation indicators and conducted questionnaire surveys, and it has been discovered that work, family and environment affect people's attitudes and life evaluation. Residence satisfaction and marriage satisfaction are the main factors affecting the quality of family life (Zhang, 2014; 2017). Based on existing studies, this paper put focus on three levels in the evaluation of subject QOL. The first is taking into account the residents' evaluation on their objective material conditions, including attitudes to specific aspects that are closely related to life. The second is investigating the impact of interpersonal relationships on subjective QOL from the links between families, neighborhoods and colleagues based on the perspective of human emotions and mental health. The third is the levels that are scarcely involved in existing research and from the perspective of people's expectations for the future. No matter how optimistic the

situation is, once people are pessimistic about the situation that may be encountered in the future, the QOL will be reduced directly. To characterize the differences between urban and rural residents' subjective QOL, from the perspective of geography research, Dehui City, Jilin Province of northeast China was selected as the case area. It is the county-level city under the jurisdiction of the provincial capital Changchun City and is driven by the central city in a long run, with superior geographical location, and significant advantages in terms of grain production capacity and production potential and processing of agricultural products. It also has the typical characteristics of a large agricultural market, low urbanization level (about 20%), single income type of farmers, and large income gap between urban and rural residents. In terms of residents' satisfaction with basic living conditions, satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and concerns about future unpredictable events, the subjective QOL of urban and rural residents in Dehui City and its differences are analyzed.

## **2. Data and methods**

### **2.1. Research areas and data resources**

Dehui City is located in the northern part of Jilin Province, in the hinterland of Songliao Plain, with an area of 3 435 km<sup>2</sup>. It is a county-level city under the jurisdiction of Changchun, the capital of Jilin Province. It administers 10 towns, 4 townships and 4 sub-districts: Jianshe Sub-district, Shengli Sub-district, Huifa Sub-district, Xiajiadian Sub-district, Daqingzui Town, Guojia Town, Songhuajiang Town, Dajiagou Town, Dafangshen Town, Chalukou Town, Zhuchengzi Town, Buhai Town, Tiantai Town, Caiyuanzi Town, Tongtai Township, Biangang Township, Wutai Township and Chaoyang Township. The total population is 830 000, of which the agricultural population is 680 000, accounting for more than 80%.

The questionnaire survey was conducted by random sampling. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, and total 482 valid questionnaires were obtained, 194 questionnaires from urban residents and 288 questionnaires from rural residents. They cover all the four sub-districts in the downtown area and 27 villages in 10 townships (Buhai Town, Guojia Town, Songhuajiang Town, Dafangshen Town, Caiyuanzi Town, Dajiagou Town, Tiantai Town, Biangang Township and Wutai Township) of Dehui City.

### **2.2. Indicators and classification standard of subjective QOL**

Through questionnaire survey about residents' satisfaction with basic living conditions, satisfaction with emotional relationships and concerns about unpredictable conditions in the future, the subjective satisfaction of urban and residents with QOL was investigated (Li, 2009). As shown in Table 1, the satisfaction of residents with basic living conditions (SB) is measured from food, clothing, housing, employment, education, medical care, and entertainment; the satisfaction of residents with emotional relationships (SE) is measured from the relationships with spouses, parents, children, neighbors, colleagues, leaders and friends; and the concerns of residents about unpredictable things in the future (SU) is measured from life and

property, security situation, sources of income, marital persistence, pension issues, medical expenses and children’s education expenses. The evaluation of the residents on SB and SE is divided into five levels. If residents are very dissatisfied with basic living conditions or emotional relationship, they will choose Level 1 as the indicator’s value. On the contrary, they will choose Level 5. The degree of residents’ SU is divided into four levels. Level 1 represents ‘very concerned’ and Level 4 represents ‘not concerned at all’. If one indicator did not suitable for certain resident (e.g. unmarried one was not able to make evaluation on the marriage relationship), the value of the indicator was assigned as 0, which do not affect the overall evaluation of the subjective QOL.

Table 1. Indicators to measure subjective QOL of residents in the questionnaire

Components of subjective QOL	Indicators
Satisfaction with basic living conditions (SB)	(1) Number of garments (2) Clothing quality and style (3) Quantity and quality of staple food (4) Intake of vegetables, fruits and milk (5) Housing area (6) Housing hardware facilities (7) Residential comfort level (8) Convenience of public transportation (9) Convenience of intercity transportation (10) Comfort level of work environment (11) Work intensity (12) Compulsory education in the region (13) Adult vocational training in the region (14) Medical conditions in the region (15) Coverage and reimbursement ratio of medical insurance (16) Public entertainment facilities
Satisfaction with emotional relationship (SE)	(17) Relationship with spouse (18) Relationship with parents (19) Relationship with children (20) Relationship with neighbors (21) Relationship with colleagues (22) Relationship with leaders (23) Relationship with friends
Satisfaction with unpredictable situations in the future (SU)	(24) Loss of life and property (25) Deterioration of public security (26) Loss of economic sources (27) Breakdown of marginal relationship (28) Lonely when getting old (29) Unaffordability of major illness (30) Unaffordability of children’s education cost

Referring to the “bucket effects”, the comprehensive subjective QOL (SI) is divided in five levels. Table 2 shows the detailed classification criteria according the value of above mentioned 30 indicators in table 1.

Table 2. Classification of subjective QOL of residents

First classification criterion	Second classification criterion	Level of subjective QOL	SI
if all the value of indicators $\geq 3$	if average of value indicators $\geq 4$	High	5
	if average value of indicators $< 4$	Relatively high	4
if not all the value of indicators $< 3$	if average value of indicators $\geq 4$	Medium	3
	if $3 \leq$ average value of indicators $< 4$	Relatively low	2
	if $2.5 \leq$ average value of indicators $< 3$	Low	1
	if average of value indicators $< 2.5$		

### **2.3. Regression models of influencing factors on subjective QOL**

Objective factors such as economy, society, and environment, as well as residents' own abilities, are generally considered to be important aspects that affect residents' subjective quality of life (Zhang, 2015; Ram, 2009; Hacker, 2003; Lauzadyte-Tutliene, 2018). With residents' subjective QOL index (SI) as the dependent variable and the economic foundation of the households, the diversification of family income, the family economic expenditure, the degree of social security and the improvement degree of regional environment as independent variables, the paper will establish multiple regional model to identify the main factors affecting the subjective QOL of residents. The specific indicators include proportion of household durable goods, source composition of household income, main types of household expenditure, types of insurance that residents have, and improvement of environmental facilities in the area where residents live.

## **3. Results**

The analysis in this section includes three aspects. Firstly, it analyzes the difference of SB, SE and SU between urban and rural residents. Secondly, it analyzes the difference of the comprehensive level of subjective QOL of urban and rural residents and its spatial characteristics according to the classification of SI. Third, from urban and rural residents as a whole, urban residents and rural residents, three regression models were established to analyze the factors affecting the subjective QOL of residents and the differences between urban and rural areas. The analysis of these three aspects can comprehensively illustrate the overall level, urban-rural differences, spatial characteristics and influencing factors of QOL in Dehui city.

### **3.1. Overall evaluation of subjective QOL and its urban-rural differences**

The satisfaction of urban and rural residents with QOL was investigated through questionnaire survey to measure the gap between “ideal state” and “reality situation”, thus evaluating the subjective satisfaction. The residents' overall satisfaction with the basic living conditions, emotions and unknown conditions is generally good, 34.5% of the residents are relatively satisfied, 20–25% of the residents are very satisfied and 20–25% of the residents feel in general. The residents of the three parts above cover about 80% of the total number of surveyed residents. In terms of categories, urban and rural residents' satisfaction with emotions is similar and close to the overall level, and more than 80% of them feel very satisfied and relatively satisfied with emotional relationships. The satisfaction of urban residents with basic living conditions and their concerns about unpredictable things in the future are significantly better than those of rural residents. In terms of specific data, 93.8% of the urban residents feel vary satisfied, relatively satisfied and in general with the basic living conditions, while only 76.6% of the rural residents feel very satisfied, relatively satisfied and in general with the basic living conditions. More than 50% of the urban residents are not concerned at all or not very concerned about the unknown situation, while less than 30% of the rural residents have the same degrees of concerns.

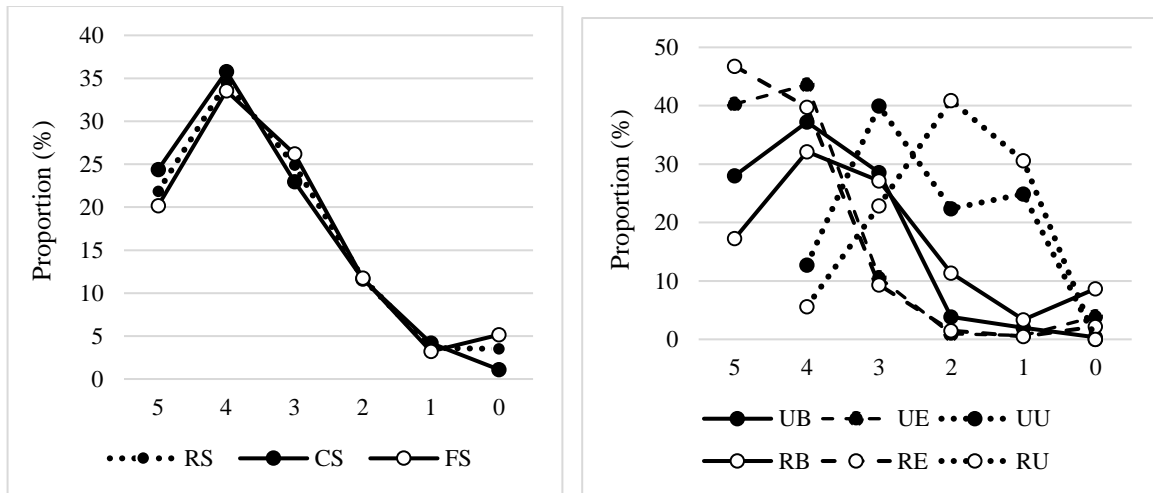


Fig. 1. Subjective satisfaction of urban and rural residents (left) and satisfaction of the three categories (right)

Note: RS is satisfaction of urban and rural residents as a whole, CS is satisfaction of urban residents, FS is satisfaction of rural residents; UB, UE, UU and RB, RE, RU are urban and rural residents' satisfaction with basic living conditions, emotions and unpredictable situations in the future.

There are significant differences in the satisfaction with basic living conditions between urban and rural residents, and employment, education and medical are the key areas. In the basic living conditions, the evaluation of clothing, food, housing and transportation which are closely related to life is relatively high. The evaluation of 95.9% of the urban residents is general and above, while 87.9% of the rural residents feel in general and above. It shows that as the family's economic level continues to improve, residents have the ability to freely choose their own QOL, and the standards for QOL can be improved based on subjective wishes. Employment, medical care, education, *etc.* require more external supply. Long-term social and economic policies with a focus on development in cities have led cities to provide more jobs, medical facilities and educational resources than rural areas.

The objective differences between urban and rural residents in terms of owning these resources have affected subjective feelings. The percentages of urban residents who rate "general and above" for employment, education and medical care are 92.3%, 93.0% and 89.4%, respectively. The percentages of rural residents are 60.4%, 61.8% and 78.7%, respectively. There is a huge gap in subjective satisfaction in the aspects of employment and education.

Urban and rural residents are not optimistic about the future unpredictable situation, and rural residents' satisfaction is relatively low. Urban and rural residents have different degrees of concern about future unpredictable events. The percentage of urban residents that are not concerned at all and not very concerned about the seven conditions that may arise in the future is about 50%, while the percentage of rural residents is about 30%. Rural residents are more worried about the possible instability in the future.

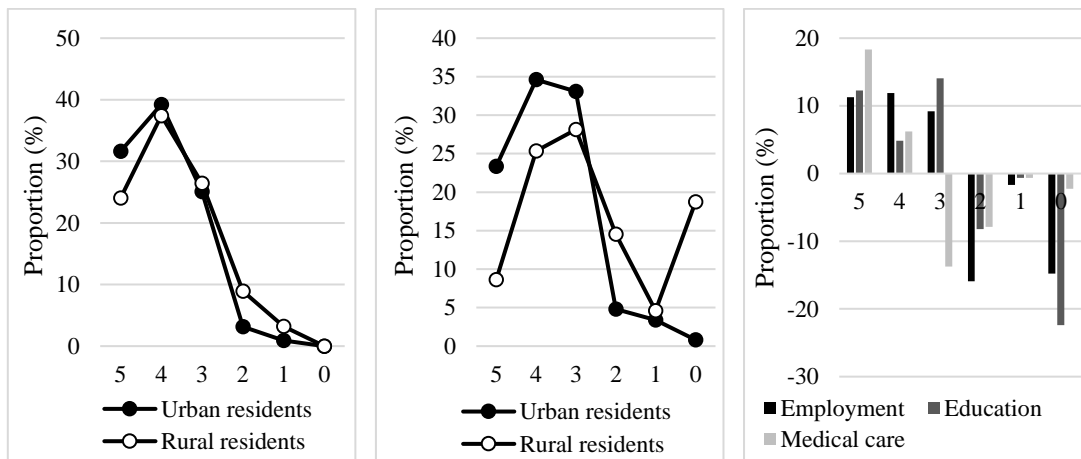


Fig. 2. Subjective satisfaction of urban and rural residents with clothing, food, housing and transportation (left), satisfaction of urban and rural residents with employment, education, medical care and entertainment (middle) and difference in satisfaction with employment, education and medical care (right)

The focus of the urban and rural residents' concerns about unpredictable things is almost the same, and economic factors and regional environment have become the root cause of residents' unrest.

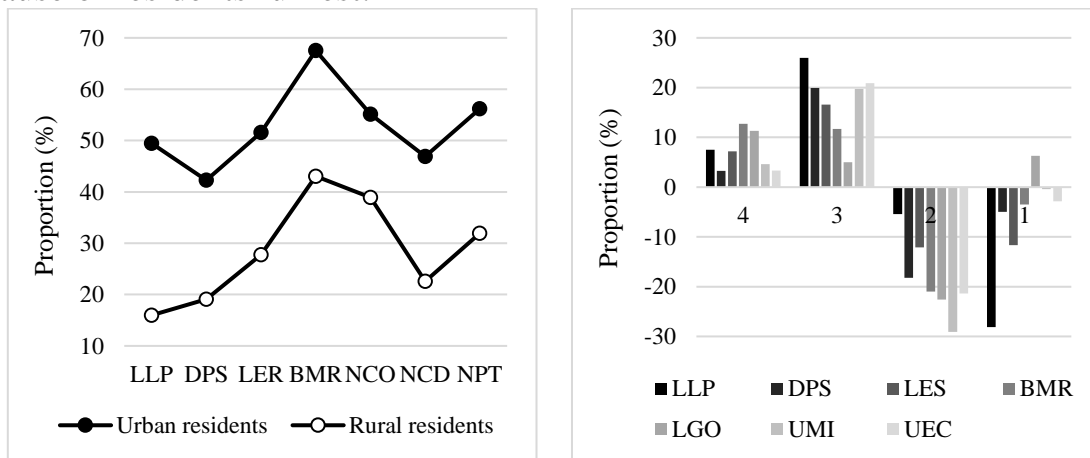


Fig. 3. Proportion of urban and rural residents' optimistic about the unpredictable future (Level 3–4) (left) and differences in satisfaction with various conditions (right) Note: LLP, DPS, LES, BMR, LGO, UMI and UEC represent six aspects of the unpredictable future, mentioned indicators in Table 1 from indicator 24 to 30.

“Life and property suffering losses”, “security situation deteriorating, and crime rate rising”, “being unable to pay for major medical expenses” and “losing work or economic sources” have become the top four issues that urban and rural residents are relatively concerned and very concerned, and about 50% of urban residents and 75% of rural residents respectively expressed concern about these conditions. Increasing the economic supply of households and improving the regional security

environment have also become a breakthrough in improving the subjective quality of people's livelihood.

### 3.2. Classification and spatial characteristics of subjective QOL

According to the criteria for the classification of residents' subjective QOL, among the 482 respondents, the proportions of respondents at high, relatively high, medium, relatively low and low levels are 5.8%, 11.2%, 68.3%, 13.7% and 1.0%, respectively. The proportion of residents with subjective QOL at a medium level is close to 70%. Among the residents at high and relatively high levels, the proportions of urban residents are 85.7% and 75.9%, respectively; and among the residents at medium, relatively low and low levels, the proportions of rural residents are 68.1%, 63.6% and 100.0%, respectively. Urban residents are the main constituent groups of high-subjective QOL residents. From the perspective of the proportion of urban and rural residents at each level in their respective surveyed objects, among the urban residents, the proportions of high, relatively high, medium, relatively low and low levels are 12.4%, 21.1%, 54.1%, 12.4% and 0.0%, respectively; and among the rural residents, the proportions are 1.4%, 4.5%, 77.8%, 14.6% and 1.7%, respectively. About 35% of the urban residents think their subjective QOL at high and relatively high levels, while only about 5% of the rural residents think their subjective QOL at high and relatively high levels. The subjective QOL of most rural residents is not ideal.

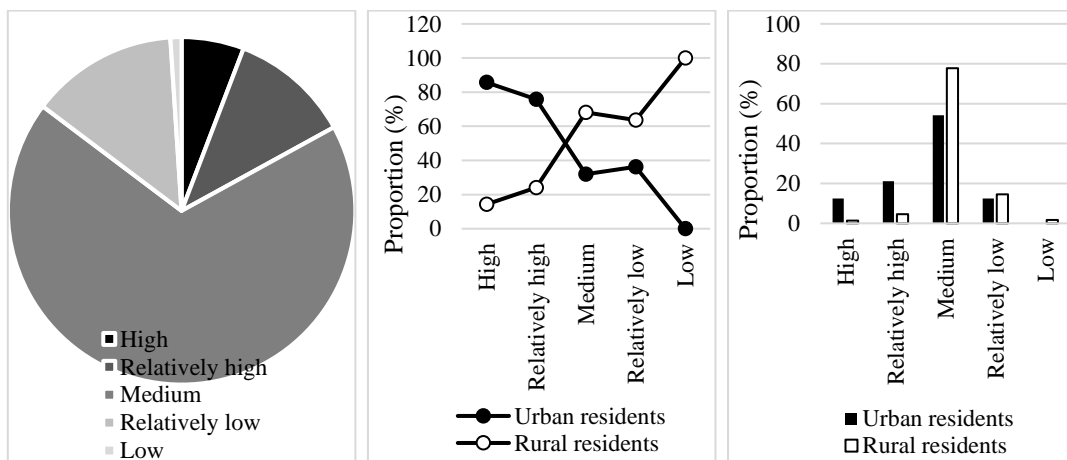


Fig. 4. Classification of subjective QOL of residents (left), proportion of urban and rural residents at each level (middle and right)

Since the proportion of residents with subjective QOL at high and low levels is 6.8%, when sub-district and township/town are used as classification units, three levels of relatively high, medium and relatively low are adopted (1). The subjective QOL of urban residents is higher than that of rural residents. The subjective satisfaction of residents in the Jianshe Sub-district and Shengli Sub-district, as the municipal districts that were built earlier, is higher than that of Huifa Sub-district and Xiajiadian Sub-district. Therefore, Jianshe Sub-district and Shengli Sub-district represent a relatively high subjective QOL of urban residents (2). The subjective QOL of rural residents declines from south to north, and the subjective satisfaction of rural



residents close to the downtown area of Dehui and the provincial capital Changchun is slightly higher than that in the western and northern regions (3). The area where the subjective QOL of rural residents at a relatively low level has a high degree of geographical overlap with that where residents have a low satisfaction with education, medical care and employment, including Dajiagou Town, Wutai Township, Biangang Township and Tiantai Town. The area where residents have a high degree of concern about unpredictable conditions overlap with the above-mentioned areas, in addition to more areas in the west and north, and the coverage is more extensive.

### **3.3. Influencing factors on urban-rural difference of subjective QOL**

The regression results of urban and rural residents shows that social security, household income diversification, regional environmental improvement, and family economic foundation have positive effects on residents' subjective QOL. The regression coefficients are 0.502, 0.484, 0.221, and 0.144, respectively. That is, by improving the social insurance and security system, developing channels for increasing household income, improving the regional environment, and improving the economic level of households, the subjective QOL of residents can be effectively improved. The family economic expenditure is negatively correlated with improving the subjective QOL of residents, and the regression coefficient is  $-0.112$ . Reducing household economic expenditure can improve the subjective QOL of residents (1). The regression results of urban residents are similar to urban and rural residents as a whole. Except the negative correlation between family economic expenditure items and the subjective QOL of urban residents, the improvement of other indicators is beneficial to the improvement of subjective QOL. According to regression coefficient, diversification of household income and regional environmental improvement are more significant indicators (2). The regression results of rural residents are significantly different from the above. Only the indicators such as social security (0.690) and regional environmental improvement (0.235) have positive regression coefficients, and the other indicators are negatively correlated with the subjective QOL of rural residents. The regression coefficients for indicators such as household income diversification, household economic expenditure and family economic foundation are  $-0.203$ ,  $-0.145$  and  $-0.125$ , respectively.

Tab. 3. Regression results of subjective QOL

	Non standardized coefficient (B)		
	Resident	Urban residents	Rural residents
Constant	2.622	2.328	2.902
The family income composition	0.468	2.072	-0.219
The economic foundation of the households	0.013	0.078	-0.120
The degree of social security	0.445	0.004	0.695
The improvement degree of regional environment	0.538	1.215	-0.265
The family economic expenditure	-0.216	-0.398	-0.138

The regression results of the whole urban and rural residents and urban residents are in line with subjective perception of the factors affecting QOL. The improvement of household economic conditions and external environment will inevitably improve the subjective QOL of residents. In the regression results of rural residents, the regression coefficients of the factors that characterize the diversification of income sources and the family economic foundation are negatively deviated from conventional knowledge. The main reason is that the proportion of household income in the per capita net income of farmers in Dehui City, as the main producing area of agricultural products, is as high as about 80% for a long time, and the income of farmers from other sources has a limited contribution to the total income of the family. Higher diversification of income sources also means less occupation of agricultural resources, more unstable of the income from the family business, and the lower satisfaction of farmers in obtaining other forms of income as migrant workers. In addition, the indicator that characterizes the economic foundation of the family is “the holding of main durable goods”. Durable goods require large household expenditure. The purchase behavior itself has both positive and negative attributes, so it will bring consumer a sense of difference in stages.

Social security and regional environmental improvement have played an important role in promoting the subjective QOL of urban and rural residents. The size of value of these two indicators will directly cause differences in subjective QOL between urban and rural residents. In terms of various types of insurance, such as medical care and employment, which are closely related to residents’ lives, the common feature of urban and rural residents is that they only have one type of insurance. The proportion of urban residents with two or more types of insurance is 36.6%, and the proportion of rural residents is only 17.7%. The coverage rate of various types of insurance for urban residents is significantly higher than that of rural residents. Among the items that characterize improved regional transportation and living conditions, most of the urban residents and rural residents consider that only one item has been improved. The proportion of residents who do not think the conditions of the area where they live are improved is about 60%. The proportions of urban and rural residents who consider two or more items have been improved are 24.7% and 11.1%, respectively.

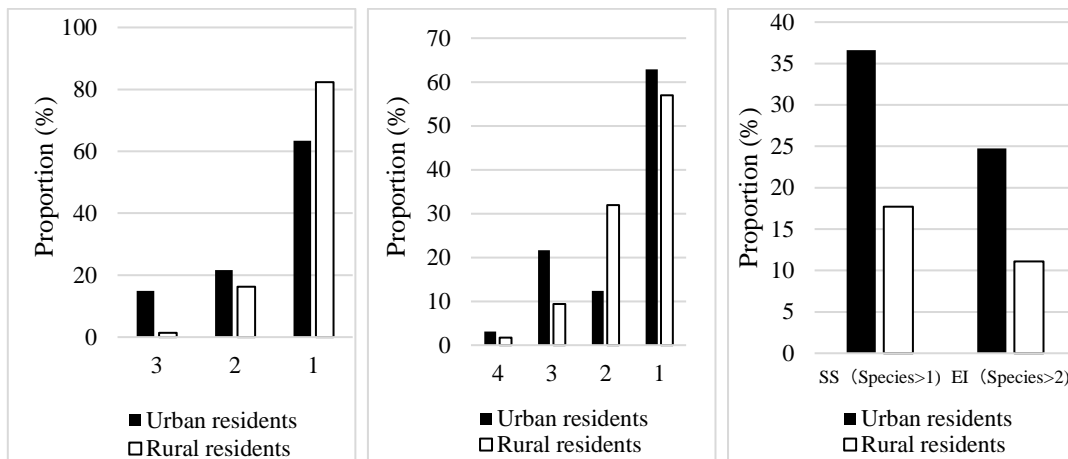


Fig. 5. The proportion of insurance owned by urban and rural residents (left), the proportion of regional environmental improvement categories (middle), and the proportion of urban and rural residents who have more than one type of insurance and consider more than two items of environment have been improved (right)

Urban infrastructure improvement and residents’ subjective feelings are better than those of rural in overall. For the factors that are significantly positive-correlated with the subjective QOL of residents, the urban areas provide better objective support, and the urban residents receive better subjective feelings. They have become important motivation for the subjective QOL of urban and rural residents.

Insufficient financial resources are common phenomena in agricultural counties. The downtown area, as the core of the region, is usually the economic priority development zone under the dual structure. The gap between urban and rural infrastructure, income level of residents, and opportunities for human and social development has gradually widened (Chen, 2016). The infrastructure and soft environment of rural development are constrained. The city’s priority fiscal expenditure policy has led to the inability of urban and rural residents to share the achievements of economic and social development (Zhang, 2014). Due to the differences in urban and rural hard and soft conditions, the relevant supply for rural society can only be maintained at a relatively low level. The rural society security system is not perfect. The gap between urban and rural social security coverage is large. Compulsory education resources are distributed unequally between urban and rural areas. The basic medical and public health services are unequal between urban and rural areas. The housing of primary health care institutions in rural areas is dilapidated and the shortage of medical equipment is serious, so the demand of farmers for social security, medical care, and children’s education cannot be effectively met (Zhang, 2018).

#### 4. Conclusions

Through the statistical analysis of 482 questionnaires, the results show that the differences in subjective QOL between urban and rural residents in Dehui are significant, and the factors affecting subjective QOL are also different.

1. Although urban and rural residents have similar higher level of satisfaction with emotional relationship, their differences in satisfaction with basic living conditions and attitude towards the unpredictable situation in the future are obvious. On the whole, 43% of urban residents have high and relatively high levels of quality of life, while the same levels of rural residents has only 6%. From the spatial perspective, the subjective QOL of rural residents close to the downtown area of Dehui City and the provincial capital Changchun City is higher than that of residents living in other areas of Dehui City.

2. The degree of social security, the composition of household income, the improvement of regional environment, and the family economic foundation have a positive impact on the subjective QOL of the urban residents, while the family economic expenditure is a factor with negative impact. There are fewer factors that have positive effect for rural residents, except the degree of social security and regional environmental improvement.

3. This study has important implications for the government's decision to balance urban and rural development. Government should increase the financial tilt of rural areas and focus on improving the employment, education and employment of rural residents, so as to improve the subjective QOL of rural residents, narrow the development gap between urban and rural areas, and promote the high quality development of society.

4. How to set and select more comprehensive, systematic and effective indicators to interpret the subject QOL of residents is a difficult problem in related research fields (Luo, 2000; Cimete, 2003). In this paper, the material and spiritual aspects that are closely related to the life of the residents are selected. However, these are still insufficient for measuring the satisfaction of residents on the subjective scale. The focus of future research is still on improving the system of evaluating the subjective QOL of urban and rural residents to lay a basis for correct evaluation of subjective QOL of residents and its differences (Wang, 2018; Liu, 2018).

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## **MIESTO-KAIMO SUBJEKTYVIOSIOS GYVENIMO KOKYBĖS SKIRTUMAI DEHUI MIESTE**

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### **Santrauka**

Subjektyvioji gyvenimo kokybė (SGK) atspindi gyventojų mąstymą ir jų gyvenimo būklę. Straipsnio tikslas yra palyginti miesto ir kaimo gyventojų SGK ir nustatyti svarbiausius šiuos skirtumus lemiančius veiksnius. Dehui mieste (Kinija) buvo apklausti 482 miesto ir kaimo gyventojai bei įvertinta SGK trimis požiūriais: gyventojų požiūris į gyvenamąsias materialines sąlygas, pasitenkinimas emociniais ryšiais, nuomonė apie ateities sąlygas. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad egzistuoja reikšmingi skirtumai tarp kaimo ir miesto gyventojų gyvenimo sąlygų ir susirūpinimo ateities sąlygomis požiūriu. Kinijos valstybinėms institucijoms pasiūlytos veiksmingos priemonės mažinti šiuos skirtumus.

*Reikšminiai žodžiai: subjektyvioji gyvenimo kokybė, kaimo-miesto skirtumai.*

*JEL kodai: I31, O18, Q12.*