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## SACRED OR SELFISH? A SURVEY ON PARENTAL IMAGES OF JAPANESE CHILDREN

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### Abstract

This study examined several common images of Japanese children and child development. Images, closely related to parental ethnotheories, were defined as visual, mental representations which may be expressed in sayings, proverbs, and symbols, or inferred from customs or practices. A sample of 53 mothers and 29 fathers of urban middle class elementary school children completed a one-page questionnaire concerning their *jidokan* (view of children). Very few had heard the traditional saying, "before seven, among the gods," although most felt that this proverb still applied to today's children. Most believed the proverb referred to the inherent purity of young children. A majority of parents reported that child-rearing is more analogous to the metaphor of cultivating a plant rather than to that of training an animal. Among five descriptors of children, many parents agreed that children "take a lot of work," are "selfish," and are "prone to loneliness," while few described children as generally "robust, not fragile," or "pitiable." Finally, parents stated that they would intervene more often in children's disputes if (1) the dispute were physical rather than verbal, (2) the children were their own rather than neighbors', and (3) the children were preschoolers rather than school-age. The results were discussed in relation to cultural stereotypes and to norms of Japanese child development and child-rearing.

### INTRODUCTION

What is your image of a typical Japanese child? The title of this article may have already influenced your response, but try anyway to do the following. *Take one minute, and imagine a behavioral sequence involving that prototypic Japanese child.* Our goal in this paper is to have you compare the image you have just created with those suggested by a small sample of Japanese parents.

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We express our deep appreciation to the parents, teachers, children and PTA of the Hirabari Municipal Elementary School of Nagoya for their cooperation. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to David Shwalb, Koryo Women's College, Sagamine, Komenoki-cho, Nisshin-shi, Aichi-ken, 470-01, or Shing-Jen Chen, Faculty of Education, Hokkaido University, Kita 11 Nishi 7, Kita-ku, Sapporo, 060.

We consider “images” as did Chen (1996, p. 113), to be “visual, mental representations (‘pictures in the head’) as can be provoked by sayings, proverbs and symbols, or inferred from customs or practices.” The image you just created should vary according to several factors, such as whether or not you (1) are Japanese, (2) live in Japan, (3) have ever visited Japan, (4) are the parent of a Japanese child, (5) are a parent, etc. Many other variables probably influence such images (gender, age, etc.), although no data are available to test such assumptions.

It is important to study images for two reasons. First, since images are related to parental beliefs and ethnotheories about children (Harkness & Super, 1996), they are important influences on child development. Adult beliefs about childrearing, their own children, or children in general, affect parenting behavior and therefore the lives of children. When these beliefs are generalized within or across cultures, they appear in the developmental goals and priorities of society and parents. In Japanese, a popular expression is used to convey the idea of images of children: *jidōkan* (“child-view”). Research on *jidōkan* has been common in Japan among scholars of developmental psychology, history, education and anthropology, and has shown that views on children have changed historically. We sought here to evaluate some common notions about children which have evolved over Japan’s long history.

Another reason to study images of children is to encourage readers to think critically about images. In the course of a half-century of cross-cultural studies on Japanese children (D. Shwalb & B. Shwalb, in press), researchers, journalists, and other writers have created a generalized image of Japanese children. Previous research and media images probably contributed to the prototype you created at the beginning of this paper. We think that while many images in English-language publications are quite valid, they lack empirical support. And even when not supported by objective evidence, an image may be transmitted (like a rumor or stereotype) in scholarly publications, and become accepted as truth. We ask you to consider whether your images of Japanese children, or those you have read about in scholarly publications, are truth, fiction, or something in between.

### The Young Japanese Child as “Among the Gods”

Many scholars have referred to the Japanese saying, “before seven, among the gods” (*nanatsu made wa kami no uchi*). This expression may be interpreted in many ways, but most often it has been said to reflect the Japanese view that children under the age of seven are pure and innocent (Arai, 1992; Hara & Wagatsuma, 1974). The following is a sampling of writings concerning the *nanatsu made* saying.

“... the Japanese of the 19th and early 20th century believed that a child is closely related to kami (supernatural beings or spirits) until the seventh birthday. Other sources indicate that this belief may have originated before 900 A.D... In the context of such traditional beliefs children under seven are often indulged, and are still treated by some with respect and even awe... But according to the traditional Japanese viewpoint, an inherently pure and sin-free child is gradually corrupted by the adult world... (Hara & Minagawa, in press).

“I am tempted to suggest that an analogy may be drawn between a child in a tantrum and a god in the Japanese pantheon who vents his anger by causing trouble for humans. Both the child and the god are expected to be placated and quieted down by some sort of pacifier. Indeed, the folk belief has it that a child is a god's gift or a god himself to be looked after...” (Lebra, 1976, p. 144).

“At age 6, the child was officially admitted as a member of the clan...The most important stage came at age 6; at this time the child was first recognized as an independent human being and member of the community. ‘The first six years are in the hands of the gods,’ or so the traditional saying goes, referring to the instability of life during this first period...” (Yamamura, 1986, p. 30).

“‘Until seven, amongst the gods’ runs the saying, and care was to be exercised with this special being. Much ritual and ceremony accompanies the first seven years of development. ...Children are also described as ‘favours from the gods’ and ‘bestowed by the gods’ and as such to be accorded appropriate care and attention...” (Hendry, 1986, p. 16).

This saying, reported by Yanagida Kunio (1949) and others, has in a sense become part of the conventional wisdom regarding Japanese images of children. Many scholars assume that the Japanese have a benevolent view of children, and that this modern-day view *resulted* in part from the traditional view of children as sacred. We asked parents here about the saying, *nanatsu made wa kami no uchi*.

#### Japanese Children as Delicate Plants to be Cultivated

If you visit any Japanese elementary school you will notice a garden in which children (in classroom or grade-level groups) plant and cultivate plants. School children are also assigned to raise individual potted plants, and to bring these plants home at vacation time. Coincidentally, at some all-female Japanese junior colleges (McVeigh, 1995), teachers may refer to students as potted plants, in the sense that the goal of junior college socialization is to *cultivate* delicate beauties. Chen (1996) has referred to plant cultivation as a metaphor for childrearing. Citing documents which date back to the 1600s, he suggests that a second image of the Japanese child is as a plant-like being, to be groomed and nurtured like a small tree or flower. For example, Chen discusses a 1615 writing by Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (reported by Yamazumi, 1979), in which a newborn was likened to the sprouting of a seed-leaf. After two or three years of careful nurturance, supporting stakes are placed in the ground, and the defective branches are cut away. At age 4 or 5 it is the responsibility of an adult to “prune the branch of selfishness” (Yamazumi, 1979, p. 41), so that the child does not grow selfish in the future. This metaphor also suggests that children are selfish by nature although they can be corrected by adults.

Chen (1996) claims that because of the long-term historical prevalence of this cultivation model, there has been little acceptance for a contrasting “animal training” approach to childrearing (Miller, 1983). The animal training model is best represented

within psychology by principles of learning and conditioning. Childrearing documents more often indicate a Japanese view of children as fragile seedlings in need of adult care. We asked our sample about both the plant cultivation and animal training images of children and childrearing.

### The Child as Vulnerable, Lonely and in Need of Adults

As delicate flowers Japanese children might be seen as needing a close relationship with their parents. A close parent-child attachment is generally viewed as natural (Bowlby, 1969), but a third common image of Japanese children consists of a very close mother-child relationship. For instance, separation of infants from mothers during the Strange Situation procedure (Takahashi, 1986) produced such high levels of distress that the paradigm had to be altered for use in Japan. Other researchers have noticed that compared with Western samples Japanese parents and children are more likely to co-bathe, co-sleep, and maintain a generally close physical relationship (Caudill & Plath, 1966).

One common parental explanation for such closeness is that Japanese children are prone to loneliness. *By nature* the child is lonely when left alone, so it seems natural for adults to feel sorry for their lonely children and to accompany the child at such moments when the child is most vulnerable (bathing, going to sleep, etc.). Perhaps the most common images of the Japanese parent-child relationship among non-Japanese concern dependency and interdependency. In Japan dependency is considered natural, and we may add as common images those of vulnerability and loneliness. Particularly in modern times, since most Japanese families have only two children, parents are particularly sensitive to the loneliness of children.

### Japanese Children as 'Not to be Disturbed'

If young Japanese children are indeed "among the gods," it may seem natural to some that children should not be interfered with by mortals such as their parents. As Hara and Minagawa (in press) describe it, the "sin-free child is gradually corrupted by the adult world." In such a context it may be best to take a hands-off approach towards children. A common observation by Westerners who visit or conduct research in Japan is that Japanese seldom punish children and almost never use physical punishment (Lanham, 1966). We asked our sample a few hypothetical questions about situations in which adults might intervene between children. According to the "do not disturb" image, we predicted that adults would not prefer to intervene.

The pilot survey reported here concerned each of the above four images of Japanese children. The data do not confirm or disprove any of the images—the survey was intended to generate discussion than to draw definitive conclusions.

## Method

### *Participants*

Fifty-three mothers of elementary school children, and 29 fathers from the same families, participated in the survey. Of these 54 reported that they had lived most of their lives in Aichi Prefecture (where the survey was conducted) and 28 responded that

they had lived longest outside of Aichi. The location of the school was a relatively new middle-class residential area on the eastern edge of Nagoya, the fourth largest city in Japan.

### *Procedures*

Addresses of participants were collected at a school-wide PTA meeting, and questionnaires were mailed to each family and returned by mail (return rate=91%). A translation of the single-page questionnaire is provided in the Appendix.

### **Results**

#### *The "Among the Gods" Proverb*

Parents were first asked whether or not they had heard the traditional saying, "before seven, among the gods." Only 19% of mothers and 7% of fathers reported that they knew this proverb (we report percentages here since the *ns* of mothers and fathers differed). Of those few who knew the saying, some said they had read it somewhere, but most stated that they could not recall when or how they first heard it. Most parents therefore were not familiar with this saying.

When asked what the saying meant, majorities of mothers (60%) and fathers (76%) thought that it meant that "young children are pure," while smaller percentages (33% of mothers and 14% of fathers) thought it meant "children are more god-like than human." Very few (only 7% of mothers and 10% of fathers) related the expression to the view that "the fate of young children is unstable, as they are prone to accidents and illness."

There was a relatively even division between parents who thought that this saying is relevant today, as 49% of mothers and 38% of fathers agreed that it still applies. To explain these choices, most of those who agreed said that the basic nature of children cannot change. Many who disagreed stated that children today are no longer pure, due to corrupting environmental influences and to the increasingly complex lifestyles of young children.

Finally, when asked to suggest a contemporary saying analogous to *nanatsu made wa kami no uchi*, only 13% of mothers and 17% of fathers offered any idea. Almost all of these parents offered the same proverb, *mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made* ("the spirit of the three-year-olds lasts until age one hundred").

#### *The Plant Cultivation vs. Animal-Training Metaphors*

Using a 5-point (0=not applicable; 4=applicable) most mothers and fathers rated the image of animal-training as non-applicable as a metaphor for childrearing (mean rating=1.35 for mothers, 1.05 for fathers). Surprisingly, the plant cultivation image was usually not rated as applicable either (mean rating=1.90 for mothers, 1.40 for fathers). The distributions of these ratings are presented in Table 1. Given a choice between these two images, however, most mothers (67%) and fathers (60%) preferred the plant cultivation analogy. Still, a sizable number of parents opted for the animal-training image.

Table 1 Plant Cultivation and Animal-Training Images of Childrearing :  
Distributions (%) of Parents' Ratings

	Ratings: 0	1	2	3	4
Plant Cultivation Image :					
Mothers	30	11	17	23	19
Fathers	38	23	12	15	12
Animal-Training Image :					
Mothers	32	30	15	17	6
Fathers	50	15	19	12	4

Note. Rating of 0=" Does not apply " ; Rating of 4=" Applies."

### General Images of Children

Parents were asked next to characterize "children in general" using five descriptors. The distributions of their 5-point scale rating of these images are presented in Table 2. Among the five, the most applicable image of children was that "they take a lot of work" (mean rating=3.11 by mothers, 2.95 for fathers; 0=not applicable, 4=applicable). Many parents also rated children as "selfish" (mean=2.69 for mothers, 2.55 for fathers) and "prone to loneliness" (mean=2.86 for mothers, 2.25 for fathers). Fewer parents thought that children are "robust, not fragile" (mean=1.84 for mothers, 1.40 for fathers), and very few parents rated children in general as "pitiable" (mean=0.84 for mothers, 0.88 for fathers).

Table 2 General Characteristics of Children :  
Distributions (%) of Parents' Ratings

	Rating: 0	1	2	3	4
Characteristic :					
Takes a lot of work (Mothers)	2	4	23	23	48
(Fathers)	7	7	14	28	44
Robust, not fragile (Mothers)	22	14	32	20	12
(Fathers)	32	14	36	18	0
Selfish (Mothers)	6	10	24	29	31
(Fathers)	15	0	21	43	21
Prone to loneliness (Mothers)	2	6	34	20	38
(Fathers)	18	3	29	36	14
Pitiable (Mothers)	63	12	14	4	8
(Fathers)	69	3	10	3	14

Note. Rating of 0=" does not apply " ; rating of 4=" applies."

### Adult Intervention in Children's Disputes

Asked the general question, "Do you think adults should intervene in children's fights or arguments?" most parents (75% of mothers and 88% of fathers) responded "No." This issue was pursued further by asking for yes/no responses according to the child's age (infant/preschooler vs. school age) and the respondent's relationship to the children (neighborhood non-family vs. one's own children).

Several trends and group differences are apparent in the distributions of "Yes"

(pro-intervention) responses listed in Table 3. First it is clear that both men and women, irrespective of their relationship (family/non-family) to the child or the age of the child, report a stronger preference to intervene when the dispute is a physical fight rather than a verbal argument. Second, with the exception of fathers' responses concerning verbal arguments, the trend was toward stronger preferences for intervention among younger (preschool) than older (school-age) children. That is, contrary to our hypothesis, the tendency to 'not disturb' the child was clearer with regard to older children. A third trend observable in Table 3 is that, with the exception of verbal arguments among older children, mothers had a stronger preference for intervention than fathers.

Table 3 Preferences for Intervention Among Children :  
Proportions Who Chose Intervention in Different Situations

	Verbal Arguments		Physical Fights	
	Neighborhood/In-Family		Neighborhood/In-Family	
Mothers, about :				
Younger Children :	35	27	75	69
Older Children :	6	15	61	62
Fathers, about :				
Younger Children :	12	8	48	48
Older Children :	12	12	32	40

## Discussion

This small-sample survey took place in a middle class section of one Japanese city. Participants were parents of elementary school children, and this self-selected group might be more concerned with childrearing issues than are other parents. Most questionnaire items used a forced-choice format, which restricted the range of responses. Therefore the following interpretations are tentative, and intensive follow-up data collection is planned to clarify the issues raised here.

### *What is it to be "Among the Gods"?*

We were surprised by the lack of familiarity among parents with the proverb "before seven, among the gods." This proverb is widely cited by childhood historians, but may be of greater historical interest than contemporary relevance. Not only did few parents know the proverb, but some even jotted in the questionnaire's margin "I have no idea what this saying is about, so it is difficult to answer your questions!" The proverb is usually quoted in relation to traditional rather than modern Japan, yet writers tend to use it to reinforce their depiction of modern parents' positive view of children.

A majority of parents attributed the same meaning to the proverb as have most scholars, that little children are "pure" by nature. But since most did not know the proverb it is doubtful that the saying itself has any influence on their images of children. In addition, the questionnaire did not ask parents directly whether they view children as pure or impure, so we cannot know whether parents think the proverb reflects current thinking about children. Few parents made the interpretation that chil-

dren are "more god-like than human," and we do not expect that in 1996 parents consider preschoolers to be super-human or sub-human. The smallest percentage of parents interpreted the saying to mean that children's fate is "unstable as they are prone to accidents or illness." Particularly in modern Japan, with the hazards of infectious diseases and infant mortality largely averted (Hara & Minagawa, in press) the fate of children is indeed stable. Therefore the view of childhood as an unstable period seems obsolete.

About half of the parents reported that the proverb is still applicable today, yet many parents disagreed. As some wrote, children today may be less pure than in the past and more quickly corrupted than in the past by modern vices. What then should we conclude about these data? First, the proverb was unknown to most parents in our sample. Second, the proverb, even if parents understand it, may not be seen as applicable in modern society. Third, there are individual differences in how parents understand the proverb and whether they think it is true.

#### *Children as Plants or Animals?*

The two metaphors or childrearing posed to the mothers and fathers were those of children as plants to cultivate, and as animals to train. We should also consider alternative images of childrearing in future research. Chen (1996) has proposed a "river crossing" image in which the parent guides rather than instructs the child. The data here were limited to parents' feelings about only two possible metaphors.

As expected, many parents responded unfavorably to the image of childrearing as akin to raising animals. This mechanistic view of children seems out of place in Japanese society, and the data showed that most parents reject this imagery. More surprisingly, there was only slightly more support for the plant cultivation image. Either this cultivation metaphor (which was not defined on the survey form) was unclear to the participants, or they may prefer some other metaphor or image which was not offered as an option.

Given a choice between the two, most parents preferred the plant cultivation image, yet one in three parents opted for the animal-training image. This shows that there are individual differences in parental thinking, and that it is an overstatement to say that the sample rejected the animal-raising view. A sizable minority of parents in fact responded positively to this image.

#### *Five Characteristics of Children*

The data showed to some extent that the parents were not entirely humanistic, benevolent child-worshippers. One hears nowadays in Japan about childrearing anxiety, revulsion towards one's own children, and of an increasing incidence of child abuse (Hara & Minagawa, in press; Kawai *et al.*, 1994). So it was natural that several parents would rate children using negative descriptors. The five characteristics listed on the questionnaire represented a small subset of descriptors, and were chosen based on our theoretical interests. These do not encompass all possible parental descriptors of children.

Most parents agreed that "children take a lot of work," which is not a favorable

image. The connotation of the expression *te no kakaru sonzai* is not as negative as to say that "children are a burden," but it is perhaps closer to the expression, "children are a big chore." The second most applicable statement, according to parents, was that children are "selfish" (*wagamama*). This expression is to some degree related to the words willful, spoiled, self-centered, or babyish, and it is used also to describe selfish adults (D. Shwalb & B. Shwalb, 1996). Again many parents reported an image of children which is not socially desirable. Are children selfish because they are "among the gods"? Or is selfishness permitted because children are among the gods? These questions should be addressed in follow-up research.

As had been predicted (Chen, 1996), a majority of parents agreed with the image of children as "prone to loneliness." We interpret this finding as indicative of an empathic view of parents toward children, and assume that they also feel a need to protect them from loneliness. Is "loneliness" itself socially desirable? Loneliness might be seen as a part of human nature, and also might be related to the dependency Japanese consider natural (Doi, 1973). It would be interesting to see whether parents in other societies perceive this same loneliness among children. We wonder whether loneliness is more noticeable in societies with smaller family sizes, closer parent-child bonds, or weak social support mechanisms.

Few parents rated children as "robust, not fragile," which might reflect a decline in the physical fitness of today's children. It might also coincide with the idea of cultivating children as fragile flowers. The questionnaire did not differentiate between images of boys and girls, and the issue of gender differences in images of children (e. g. as robust vs. fragile) requires further study. Parents were empathic in seeing their children as potentially lonely, but they seldom applied the image of "pitiable" to children. Both mothers and fathers (with a few exceptions) rejected the pitiable image. Children may be needy in Japan, in the sense of social support, but most parents would probably consider their children as fortunate (*shiwase*) to live in a comfortable, safe and affluent environment.

#### *Should Adults Intervene Among Children?*

Parents in our sample were more likely to prefer intervention among younger than older children. We had thought that if parents considered children "among the gods" prior to age seven they might take a more hands-off approach with younger children than older children. This was not evident in the data. Instead these parents probably grant greater autonomy to their older children and keep a closer watch over younger children.

Parents preferred intervention more in cases of physical fights than for verbal arguments, in response to the severity of the situation. They were also more interventionist towards their own children than towards children outside the family, probably reflecting a sense of personal responsibility. In addition mothers were more likely to prefer intervention than fathers. "Hands-off" characterizes the philosophy of many Japanese fathers (Shwalb, Imaizumi, & Nakazawa, 1987), while mothers may be more willing to get involved with and between their children.

### *Concluding Questions to the Reader*

We hope that this paper provokes thinking about how to study parental images of children. Did any of the images reported by our sample correspond to the prototypic child which you conjured up at the beginning of this paper? If you are a non-Japanese, are the images emphasized here the same or different from images you have of children in your culture? Do you have sayings in any way analogous to “until seven, among the gods”? Would you respond differently in your images of children if you were told to imagine a boy, or a girl? If you are a parent, to what degree do your images reflect your view of your own children? Are these images mainly positive or negative? If you were to ask your own parents about their images of children, would their images differ from yours? How do the above images of Japanese children compare with those in the popular literature or mass media? Are your images, the images provided by our sample, or those in the media stereotypes or accurate? Do the images discussed here differ from those you have read in scholarly reports about Japanese child development or childrearing?

We hope that our pilot data and the subsequent research we are planning will provide clearer images of Japanese children, and more generally contribute to a understanding of parental thinking about children.

### Appendix : Childrearing Questionnaire

1. Have you ever heard the saying, “ Before seven, among the gods ”?
2. What do you think this saying means?
  - a. Young children are pure.
  - b. Young children are more god-like than human.
  - c. The fate of young children is unstable, as they are prone to accident and illness.
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. If you answered “ yes ” to # 1, when & from whom did you hear it?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you think this saying still applies today?  
Why or why not?
5. If you know a similar saying, please write it here.  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. How do these images apply to childrearing?  
(5-point scale, 0=doesn't apply at all ; 4=applies)  
Like plant cultivation : 01234  
Like animal-raising : 01234
- 6a. Which of these two do you think applies more to childrearing?  
a. Animal raising  
b. Plant cultivation (choose only 1)
7. In general, children to me... (rate on 5 point scale ; 0=doesn't apply at all, 4=definitely)
  - a. take a lot work : 0 1 2 3 4
  - b. are robust, not fragile : 0 1 2 3 4
  - c. are selfish : 0 1 2 3 4
  - d. are prone to loneliness : 0 1 2 3 4
  - e. are pitiable : 0 1 2 3 4

8. In general, do you think adults should intervene in children's fights or arguments?  
Yes/No
- 8a. Should somebody intervene in the following situations?
- a. a verbal dispute among neighborhood children (infant or preschool age)? Yes/No
  - b. a verbal dispute among neighborhood children (school age)? Yes/No
  - c. a physical fight among neighborhood children (infant or preschool age)? Yes/No
  - d. a physical fight among neighborhood children (school age)? Yes/No
  - e. a verbal dispute among your own children (infant or preschool age)? Yes/No
  - f. a verbal dispute among your own children (school age)? Yes/No
  - g. a physical fight among your own children (infant or preschool age)? Yes/No
  - h. a physical fight among your own children (school age)? Yes/No
9. Your gender : Male/Female
10. Your age : 20s 30s 40s 50s 60s 70s
11. Your son(s)' age (s) : \_\_\_\_\_
12. Your daughter(s)' ages (s) : \_\_\_\_\_
13. In what prefecture have you lived the longest? \_\_\_\_\_

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