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THE CHILD REARING PRACTICES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FAMILIES IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

A questionnaire was conducted to investigate international student spouses' demographic data, living conditions with children, and what they think about child care and child rearing, and to rethink about Japanese child rearing through a comparison of their data and Japanese data.

Foreign mothers' attitudes toward child care and child rearing were very positive, while Japanese mothers were relatively negative. Foreign mothers had strong relationships with their neighbors through child rearing in their home country, whereas Japanese mothers have fewer people to support child rearing.

In order to raise the Japanese fertility rate, it is necessary to build up new communities in which many people from young children to the elderly can support child rearing.

Key Words: international student families, questionnaire, child rearing, collectivist society, nuclear family, individualist society

INTRODUCTION

The first author moved from the Research and Clinical Center for Child Development, Faculty of Education to the International Student Center, Hokkaido University in April 1991. At that time, the number of the international students was 323 (Asian Countries: 243; China: 115, Korea: 54, and others: 80) at Hokkaido University. The number has been increasing since then. In 2005, the total number of international students was 769 (Asian Countries: 613; China: 283, Korea: 107, and other countries: 156). About 70% of the international students were enrolled at the graduate level (doctor course: 336 and master course: 178).

Most of the graduate students from overseas had careers in their own countries before they came to Japan, such as professors, high school teachers, medical doctors, dentists, veterinarians, and government officers. Many of them have families; sometimes they had 3 or 4 children. Those type of students are quite new in Japan, because "Japanese

university students” are still “children” who need their parents’ mental and financial support. As there are very few Japanese students who have spouses and children, Japanese universities have not considered or supported international students with regard to raising or educating their children. Hokkaido University is not an exception.

As the number of international students increases, many problems have emerged, such as housing, pregnancy, delivery, child rearing, child’s education, illness in the family and so on. Hokkaido University established residence for student couples (20 rooms) in 1996 and for student families (40 rooms) in 1997. However, the university still does not deal with the soft type of the problems. As an international student advisor, I have to face those problems.

INVESTIGATION

Purpose of the Investigation

It seems very difficult to have and raise children in a foreign country, but I have heard many children were born in the families of international students. Even female students who were undertaking their doctorate thesis had babies.

One of the Japanese recent big issues is the declining of birthrate. As of January 1, 2005, Japan’s fertility rate; the average number of children a woman bears in her life time; is 1.39, which is one of the lowest rates in the world. The Japanese government has taken various measures to raise the fertility rate and enhance the desire to have children.

Married international students tend to have babies even in a foreign country, while Japanese women do not want to have children. I wonder why these differences exist?

Accordingly, the International Child Rearing Support Project Team of the Hokkaido Society for Children* conducted a questionnaire, firstly, in order to investigate international student spouses’ demographic data, living conditions with children, and what they think about child care and child rearing, and secondly, in order to rethink about Japanese childrearing through a comparison of international students’ data and Japanese data taken by the UFJ Institute (2003).

METHOD

We sent our questionnaire through campus mail to 136 international students, excluding undergraduate students, one year short term exchange program students, single accommodation residents, and the Faculty of Fisheries students in Hakodate (July-August, 2004). We provided Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean, and Spanish versions and asked them to answer in any of these languages for the descriptive answers.

RESULTS

Background of the Respondents

Forty-seven foreign mothers filled out the questionnaire: 34 from Asia, 3 from the Middle East, 6 from Africa, 3 from Europe, and 1 from South America. As for religions,

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14 mothers were Muslims, 10 Christians, 6 Buddhists, 3 Hindus, and 14 mothers without religious affiliation. Before coming to Japan, about 20% of them were housewives, 10% were students, and 60% had careers in their home countries, and currently, 43% are housewives, 40% are students, and 13% are researchers in Japan. Thirty-three mothers had one child, 12 had 2 children, and 2 had 3 children. Eighteen out of 47 gave birth in Sapporo. Most of them utilized "Hospitalization assistance for childbirth" with low cost for the delivery. Muslim women required female doctors for religious reasons.

Foreign Mothers' Attitudes toward Child Care and Child Rearing

In response to the question, "Do you think child rearing is enjoyable?", the answers were "rather enjoyable" (40%), "always enjoyable" (32%), and "sometimes enjoyable and sometimes painful" (28%). No answers for "rather painful" and "always painful". Most of them were enjoying their child rearing. For another question, "How did you feel about having a child before you gave birth?", their answers were very positive, such as "I liked children, and I had wanted to have children" (85%), "I had considered it natural to have children after marriage" (79%), and "I had considered child rearing enjoyable" (68%). Negative answers were very few: "I felt uneasy and without any confidence about having and raising children" (2%), or "Child rearing is hard and I had not wanted to be involved in it" (15%).

All the respondents agreed with the statement "I think my children are really lovely", followed by "I think I am bringing up my children well" (87.3%), and "My husband and I share the same idea concerning child rearing" (87%). However, about half of them sometimes were at a loss regarding what to do about their children.

Foreign Mothers' Actual Conditions of Child Rearing

More than 80% of foreign mothers were breast-feeding. If they want to learn things they need to take care of and bring up children, they learn from "by talking with their husbands" (45%), "by asking their parents in their countries" (43%), "by getting information on the Internet" (40%), "by reading books on child rearing sent from their countries" (30%), and "by asking foreign students from their countries" (21%). Foreign mothers who responded to "by asking Japanese friends" were only 13%.

Foreign mothers' problems (troubles) with child rearing here in Japan were "difficulty in communicating with Japanese people" (36%), "their children cannot make friends" (28%), and "their children do not learn or speak their native language" (23%).

Relationship with Japanese Community

If the foreign mothers have difficulty in communicating with Japanese people, whom do they consult about child rearing, and who helps them with their child rearing? The top responses were "their husband" (83%), followed by "family or friends who live outside Japan" (40%), and "friends from their country" (34%). As for relationships with Japanese, "Japanese friends and college faculty" was 15% and "acquaintances in their neighborhood" was 9%. Whereas they consult or ask help to "persons related to hospitals or health centers" (34%), "persons who work at a nursery or kindergarten, or other children's parents" (28%), and "the child rearing support section at the ward office" (15%). Their

relationship with Japanese neighbors seems weak, however, they consult child rearing related organizations when they needed.

Living in the Sapporo area, 56% of the mothers have “people with whom they exchange greetings when shopping or going to or from the nursery or kindergarten” and 40% of them have “people who have a chat with them while the children are playing”, whereas there are few “people who take care of their children for them” (15%), “people who discipline their children” (23%) and even “no people with whom they interact through children” (38%). We asked the same questions if they were living in their own countries. Most of the items scored 75~90%(see Fig. 3). There are many people available for their child rearing in their home countries.

In response to a question, “Do you have any experience of joining in gatherings or organizations in your neighborhood?”, they have joined “gatherings held by organizations of people from their country” (53%) and “gatherings held by international exchange organizations” (43%), but as for the gatherings held by local Japanese, their participation is relatively low: “gatherings of Japanese parents” (30%) and “activities in their local community” (21%).

Comparison with Japanese Data

Japanese data were taken by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare consigned it to UFJ Institute and carried out an investigation(January-February, 2000). Two thousand parents (2,000 fathers and 2,000 mothers) who had preschoolers were asked to fill out the questionnaire.

About the balance between mothers' own activities and child rearing (Fig. 1), Japanese mothers hoped that “their own activities and child rearing were the same level in priority”

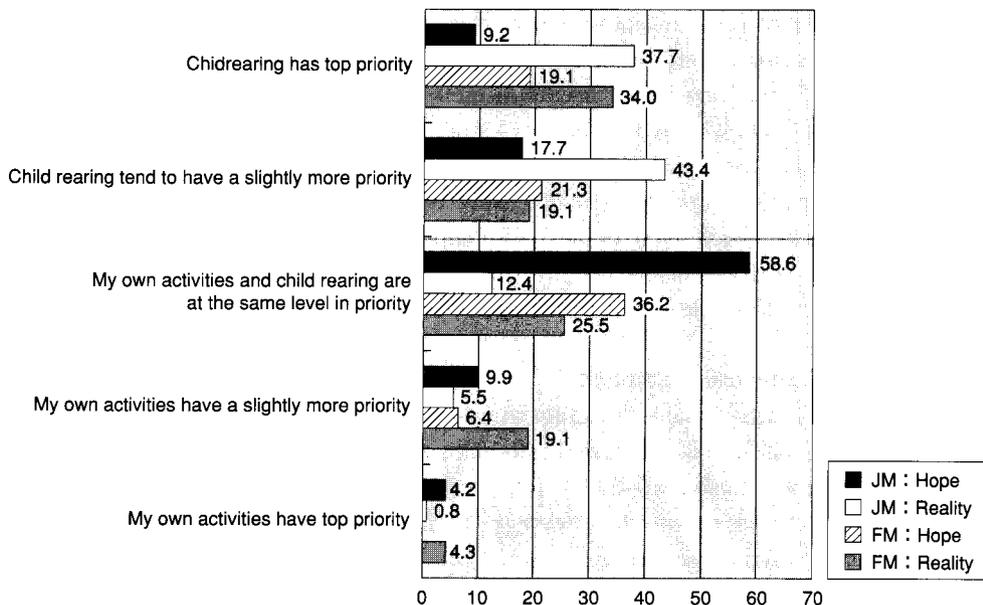


Figure 1 Balance between mothers' own activities and child rearing: comparison of Japanese mothers' and foreign mothers' hope and reality

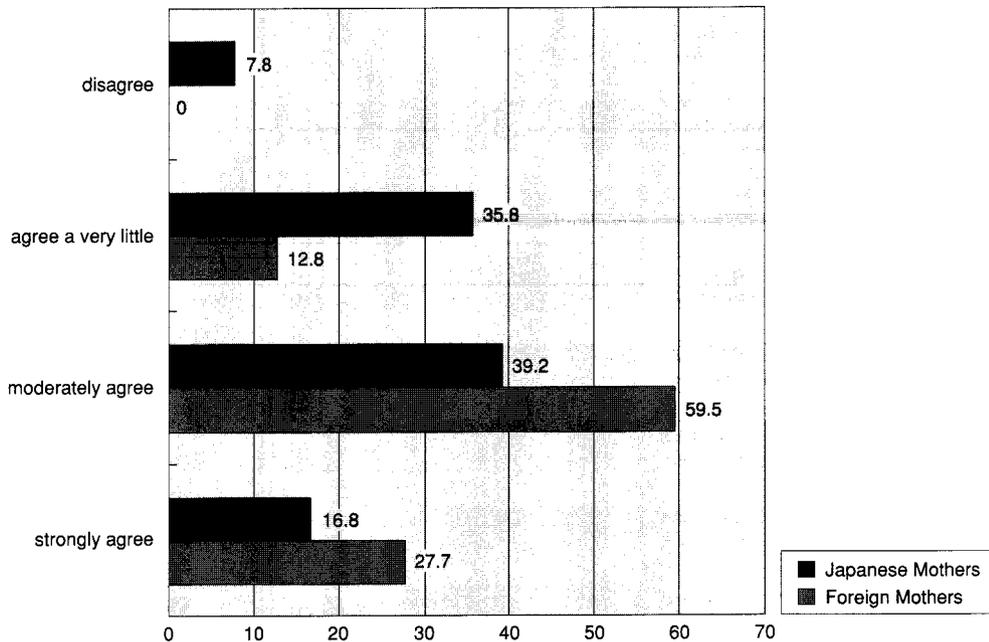


Figure 2 Japanese mothers' and foreign mothers' self-evaluation of child rearing (Agreement rate for the statement: "I think I am bringing up my children well.")

(59%), this is much higher than the foreign mothers (36%). In reality for Japanese mothers, child rearing tend to have more priority (81%: top priority 38% and slightly more priority 43%), whereas for some foreign mothers, their own activities tend to have more priority (23%: top priority 4% and slightly more priority 19%), their own activities and child rearing were the same level (26%), and child rearing tend to have more priority (53%: top priority 34% and slightly more priority 19%).

As for the self-evaluation of child rearing (Fig. 2), foreign mothers were very positive: for the statement "I think I am bringing up my children well", 28% of mothers agreed strongly and 60% moderately agreed. However, Japanese mothers' self-evaluation was very negative: 17% of them agreed strongly and 39% moderately agreed.

Whereas foreign mothers share the same policy concerning child rearing with their husband (87%), fewer Japanese parents share the same policy (70%).

Foreign mothers had strong relationships with their neighbors through child rearing in their home country. When compared with Japanese mothers (Fig. 3), as with "there are people whom I consult about child rearing", 92% of foreign mothers, but only 74% of Japanese mothers said yes, for "there are people with whom I make a trip that includes each other's children", foreign mothers: 77% and Japanese mothers: 43%, and for "there are people who take care of my children for me", foreign mothers: 89% and Japanese mothers: 57%.

DISCUSSION

As stated above, 34 out of 47 of our respondents (72%) were from Asian countries. Hofstede (1991) described those countries as a collectivist society. "In most collectivist

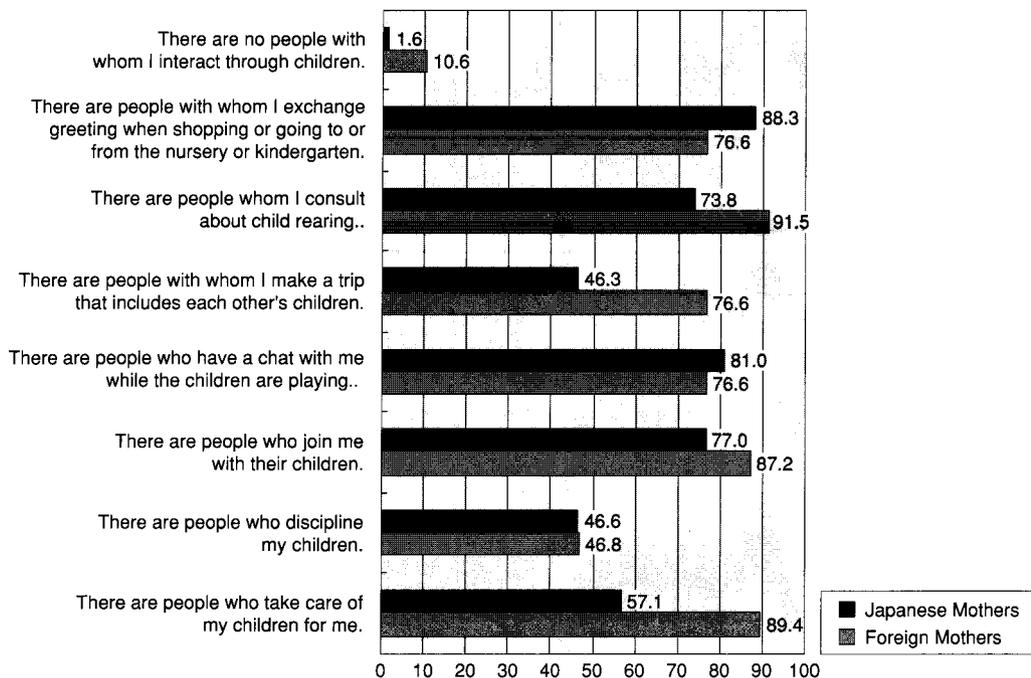


Figure 3 Japanese mothers' and foreign mothers relationships with neighbors through children in their countries

societies the 'family' within which the child grows up consists of a number of people living closely together; not just the parents and other children, but, for example, grandparents, uncles, aunts, servants, or other housemates. This is known in cultural anthropology as *the extended family* " (p. 50). Their data showed that there are many people to support their child rearing in the home or neighborhood. In the extended family, they may have experienced child rearing from their childhood. This is why they have confidence in their child rearing practices even in a foreign country.

Japan had been one of the collectivist societies for a long time, based on primary industries. According to the National Census, people who were engaged in primary industries were 54% of the total employees over 15 years of age in 1920. After World War II, when secondary industries developed, tertiary industries expanded. In 2000, people who were engaged in the primary industries were only 5%, secondary industries 30%, and tertiary industries 64%. During the course of changes in the industrial structure, many people migrated from agricultural and other rural areas to the big cities. Thus, traditional relationships based on the extended families and local communities collapsed. Those migrants formed nuclear families in the urban areas, but they cannot yet form strong relationships with the people living in the new communities. According to *Statistical Handbook of Japan (2005)*, members per household were 3.41 in 1970 and 2.67 in 2000. Elderly households were 3.3% in 1975, but they accounted for a sharply increased share of 15.8% in 2003. The number of one-person elderly households increased more than fivefold between 1975 and 2003. In 2003, four out of five one-person elderly households were women's. Japanese people have lost their vertical and horizontal relationships with other

people.

From our data, foreign mothers' relationships with Japanese were very weak. This is partly due to their language inability. However, this is also due to the Japanese people's inability to deal with other people in their neighborhood. Child rearing needs the support of many people. Most Japanese young spouses do not have people who take care of their children when they are sick. Mostly mothers have to go home from their workplace with sick children when contacted by the day-care center.

Hofstede (1991) found that Japan's individualism index was the 22nd out of the 50 countries and 3 regions. That fact symbolized that Japan was not a collectivist country any more. The 5 highest countries of the individualism index were USA, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and Netherlands. Those individualist societies have a Christianity (Protestant) backbone, and they have strong relationships with churches. They think of others as the Bible guides. In Japan, individualists are sometimes considered as egoists. Disciplines and morals as individualists are not fully developed yet. We need our own ethical guidance to be individualists if we give up collectivistic ideas and practices. We need to find a way to build up new communities in which many people from young children to the elderly can support child rearing.

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