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ARE CHILDREN "AMONG THE GODS?" : PARENTAL IMAGES OF CHILDREN AND CHILDREARING IN JAPAN AND THE U.S.

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Abstract

This research focused on parental images of children, childhood, and childrearing among parents in middle class American (n = 85) and Japanese (n = 82) communities. Mothers and fathers of preschoolers completed a questionnaire about the proverb "Before seven, children are among the gods" ; metaphors of childrearing as analogous to cultivating a plant vs. domesticating an animal; descriptors of children as requiring parental effort, robust, selfish, lonely, and pitiable; and about parent's likelihood to intervene in conflicts between children aged 5 or younger and elementary school-age children. More American than Japanese parents considered the traditional proverb to still be relevant, and majorities of parents in both cultural groups thought that the proverb reflected children's inherent purity. The majority of parents in both cultural groups preferred the plant metaphor over the animal metaphor, with Japanese parents rating it higher than did American parents. The Japanese parents also reported images of children as more lonely and selfish than did Americans, and Japanese mothers rated children as more robust and lonely than did Japanese fathers. Finally, more American than Japanese parents reported that they would intervene in the verbal disputes and physical fights of their children; Japanese fathers were particularly non-interventionist in orientations. The results showed that images, proverbs, descriptors, and parents' orientations toward intervention all varied between the cultural groups, and suggested that the study of child images provides a valuable window on cultural orientations toward child development.

Key words : Parental images, Proverbs, Metaphors, Japanese, American, Childrearing, Parental beliefs

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Parental Images of Children and Childrearing in the U.S. and Japan

"Images," defined by Chen (1996, p. 114) as "visual or mental representations expressed in sayings, proverbs and symbols, or inferred from cultural practices," vary according to child characteristics, adult personality, and culture (Hwang, Lamb, & Sigel, 1996). This paper compares parental images of young children in middle class Japanese and American communities. Shwalb and Chen (1996) previously reported on the Japanese portion of the data.

Parental images are important influences on child development because how parents think about their children affects how parents treat their children (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). Parental cognition also forms an aspect of the "developmental niche" (Harkness, 2002), which structures child development in each culture. Scholars from several disciplines have been interested in parental thinking for many decades, but only recently have theorists drawn connections between parental thinking and child development (Harkness & Super, 1996). Hwang, Lamb and Sigel (1996) provided the best review to date of "parental images" as a specific research area. But their anthology of multidisciplinary reports on cultural images of children and childhood was more of a call for research and theory than a review of an established research domain or theory.

In Japan, there is a long tradition of understanding children in terms of parents' *jidokan* ("view of children"), and only in recent years have scholars begun to look systematically at parental views (Hendry, 1986). The present study reports data on a very specific set of parental images, as an exploration of small samples in two societies: Japan and the United States. Comparative studies between Americans and Japanese have been common (e.g., Azuma, 1996), perhaps because of the assumed differences in cultural values and traditions, shared modernism and material affluence, and availability of research funding.

Our study looked at four issues related to parents' images of children in Japan and the U.S. First, it considered the contemporary relevance of the traditional Japanese proverb, "before seven, among the gods" (*nanatsu mae wa kami no uchi, or* 七ツ前は、神のうち). This saying has been quoted by numerous scholars (Hara & Wagatsuma, 1974; Hendry, 1986; Hara & Minagawa, 1996) and is usually interpreted to mean that the Japanese have a positive image of young children as almost sacred (Chen, 1996). In analyzing proverbs about children from around the world, Palacios (1996, p. 77) stated that proverbs are images that are "marked by their relation to daily life, practical experience, common sense, and popular wisdom." Palacios concluded that proverbs tend to be more connected to "the past and to tradition" (p. 95) than to current thinking. Knowing that scholars to this day still assume that the "before seven, among the gods" proverb reflects Japanese values, we wanted to know how relevant the proverb is in contemporary Japan. Further, while we did not expect non-Japanese to know the proverb, by asking American parents about the proverb we were able to explore its trans-cultural relevance as common sense or wisdom.

The second topic of our study was about images of children as either plants to cultivate, or as animals to train. Chen (1996) discussed the plant metaphor as related to children's need to be nurtured and cared for, just as a young tree or garden plant requires attention. In addition, just as a tree may need to be pruned if it grows in the

wrong direction or shape, the plant metaphor includes the need to correct children when they are misguided. Based on a content analysis of documents dating back several centuries, Chen concluded that the plant metaphor typifies traditional Japanese parental views of how to raise children. An alternative metaphor, which Chen believed would be more prevalent in the U.S. than in Japan, was that parents view childrearing as akin to training a domesticated animals, according to principles of learning and conditioning. To assess their ideas about the metaphors, we asked parents to rate the viability of each metaphor and to give a preference for either the plant or animal metaphor.

We next considered parental images of the "nature" of children. Chen (1996) had described Japanese children as being particularly prone to "loneliness," and the title of his article ("Positive Childishness") highlighted what he saw as a humanistic and benevolent view of the nature of Japanese children. At the same time, Japanese children go through a period of "negativism" (Ujiie, 1997, p. 467) and are as much of a challenge to raise as are children in the U.S. Past U.S./Japan comparisons have frequently emphasized the close physical and emotional relationship between Japanese mothers and children as "symbiotic harmony" (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000, p. 1121) and contrasted this harmony with American-style "generative tension." We chose the images of children as requiring adults' efforts, and as robust, selfish, lonely, and pitiable, to explore which images would be most relevant in each cultural group.

Finally, parents responded to a set of hypothetical situations by indicating how they would react to children's conflicts. These questions required parents to conjure up images of children of different ages (and of their own children vs. children in general) in either physical or verbal conflicts. We were most interested in whether the child's age group or the type of conflict would mediate parental intervention. The "until seven, among the gods" proverb had been interpreted as reflecting a hands-off parental view of children, in accordance with the traditional belief that young children should not be interfered with (Hara & Minagawa, 1996). That is, Japanese believed that children should be left to the gods to express their own positive nature. We anticipated some variability in response to these latter questions, but expected that Americans would be somewhat more interventionist, especially with preschool children, the traditional "among the gods" age group in Japan.

Method

Participants in the American sample were 52 mothers (mean age = 33.3 years) and 33 fathers (mean age = 34.2 years) of preschoolers (age range = 3-5 years) from the suburban middle-class communities of Provo and Orem, Utah. The Japanese participants were 53 mothers and 29 fathers, from a middle-class neighborhood in the city of Nagoya. A two-page questionnaire (see Table 1) first asked parents several questions about the traditional Japanese proverb: "Until age 7, children are among the gods." The second set of questions concerned two metaphors: childrearing as analogous to cultivating plants and as analogous to raising animals. Parents next rated five images of children, as "requiring a lot of work," "robust," "selfish," "lonely," and "pitiable." The fourth set of questions concerned intervention in verbal disputes and physical fights between children in either preschools or elementary schools. Parents completed the

Table 1 Questionnaire Items

1. Your age _____ 1B. Mother/Father (circle one)
2. Ages of your sons: ___ ___ ___
3. Ages of your daughters: ___ ___ ___
4. What town do you now live in? _____
4A.For how many years? ____years
5. Have you ever heard the proverb "Until age 7, children are among the Gods?"
Yes/No
5A. If you answered "yes" to #5, when and from whom did you hear it?_____
6. What do you think this saying means?
(please circle one choice)
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_____
7. Do you think this proverb still applies today?
Yes/No
7A. Why or why not?_____
8. If you know a similar to saying to that in #5, please write it here: _____
9. How do these images apply to childrearing?

Image	Doesn't apply at all (0)	1	2	3	(4) Applies perfectly
a. Childrearing is like cultivating a plant	0	1	2	3	4
b. Childrearing is like raising animals	0	1	2	3	4

9A. Which of these two images do you think applies more to childrearing?
(choose only one)
a. like raising animals
b. like cultivating a plant

10. Please rate the following on a 5-point scale; 0 = "strongly agree" ; 4 = "completely disagree")
In general, children to me:

To me, children···	Strongly agree (0)	1	2	3	(4) Completely disagree
a. take a lot of 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 be lonely.	0	1	2	3	4
e. are pitiable.	0	1	2	3	4

11. In general, do you think adults should intervene in children's fights or arguments?
Yes/No

11A. Should somebody intervene in the following situations?

a. verbal dispute among neighborhood children (infant/toddler or preschool age)?	Yes	No
b. verbal dispute among neighborhood children (school age)?	Yes	No
c. physical fight among neighborhood children (infant/toddler or preschool age)?	Yes	No
d. physical fight among neighborhood children (school age)?	Yes	No
e. verbal dispute among your own children (infant/toddler or preschool age)?	Yes	No
f. verbal dispute among your own children (school age)?	Yes	No
g. physical fight among your own children (infant/toddler or preschool age)?	Yes	No
h. physical fight among your own children (school age)?	Yes	No

questionnaire in ten minutes at preschool PTA meetings, with a return rate exceeding 90% in both countries.

Results and Discussion

Young Children as "Among the Gods"

As presented in Table 2, equal numbers of American and Japanese parents reported having heard the traditional Japanese proverb. This was surprising because Americans presumably do not use this particular saying (Chen, 1996). In addition, more American parents than Japanese parents believed the proverb was "still relevant today." A majority of both American and Japanese parents attributed the meaning of the proverb to children's pure nature, although Japanese parents' responses varied more between children as "pure," "god-like," and "having an unstable fate." These results indicated that the image of children as pure is strong in both the U.S. and Japan, and that while it may have had one traditional meaning in Japan, the proverb's meaning now depends on the individual parent.

The findings that most Japanese parents did not know the proverb, and that most did not think it was currently relevant, confirmed the view of Palacios (1996) that proverbs are more about past traditions than about present thinking. But what accounted for the cross-cultural relevance of a proverb that was presumed to be unknown outside of Japan? As Palacios also noted, proverbs carry wisdom and common sense, and a proverb could be relevant across cultures or even universally without being used outside the originating culture. There may be something common to American- and Japanese-style parental beliefs that includes an image of purity in early childhood. For instance, some Western beliefs mark age 7 or 8 as the "age of reason" or "accountability" (Hart, Newell, & Sine, 2000), and in early childhood children are thought to be more innocent and lacking in responsibility for their actions.

Table 2 The "Among the Gods" Image, and the Plant and Animal Metaphors: Comparisons of Frequencies

Item	American		Japanese		X^2	p
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
Has heard proverb: "Children are among the gods until age 7"	12	73	12	70	0.01	NS
Thinks the proverb "Children are among the gods until age 7" is still relevant	73	5	37	45	49.77	< .001
Defines "Children are among the gods until 7" as "children are god-like"	1	81	21	61	26.91	< .001
Defines "Children are among the gods until 7" as "children are pure"	74	8	54	28	26.91	< .001
Prefers plant metaphor over animal metaphor	52	27	52	30	3.15	NS

Metaphors of Childrearing

As also shown in Table 2, two-thirds of parents in both the American and Japanese samples reported that childrearing was better depicted by a metaphor of plant cultivation (nurturing, guiding) than a metaphor of domesticating or raising animals (controlling, training). This similarity contradicts Chen's (1996) speculation that the animal husbandry metaphor would be more appealing to Americans as relevant to behaviorist or "mecha-

nistic" childrearing. In fact, Table 3 shows that American parents agreed more strongly with the plant metaphor than did the Japanese, while there was no group difference in ratings of the animal-raising metaphor. Just as there are individual and intra-cultural differences in parent-child relationships (Azuma, 1996), the data showed variability in parental use of metaphors.

Parents are likely to invoke various metaphors of childhood and childrearing, which include but are not limited to the plant and animal metaphors studied here. For instance, Chen (1996) has suggested a metaphor of "river crossing," in which parents who are emotionally close to their children cross a river together with their children and parents who are more detached from children urge them to cross the river alone. Elsewhere, Aronsson and Sandin (1996) discussed alternative metaphors including children as devilish and parenting as botany, which differs from the plant metaphor in allowing children to grow freely rather than correcting or guiding them. Our future research will focus on a wider range of childrearing metaphors.

Descriptors of Children

Almost all parents rated children as "a lot of work," and parents in both the U.S. and Japan rated "pitiable" and "robust" as least descriptive of children (see Table 3). One difference between the American and Japanese samples was that American parents rated children as *less* selfish and lonely than did Japanese parents. This finding confirmed Chen's (1996) prediction that Japanese would have a stronger image of children as "lonely" because they are highly empathetic, sensitive, and emotionally close toward their children. In addition, Japanese tended to rate children as more "selfish" than did Americans. This finding was not surprising given Ujiie's (1996) observations of negativism and willfulness in young Japanese children.

Table 3 Plant and Animal Metaphors, and Five Descriptors of Children: Mean Rating Comparisons

Item	American Mean (*SD*)	Japanese Mean (*SD*)	t	*p*
Metaphor of childrearing as like cultivating a plant	2.60 (1.08)	2.60 (1.08)	4.538	< .001
Metaphor of childrearing as like raising animals	1.43 (1.05)	1.43 (1.05)	1.193	NS
Children as robust	1.99 (1.01)	1.99 (1.01)	1.305	NS
Children as lot of work	2.76 (1.56)	2.76 (1.56)	-1.424	NS
Children as selfish	1.72 (1.19)	1.72 (1.19)	-5.155	< .001
Children as lonely	1.48 (1.38)	1.48 (1.38)	-6.004	< .001
Children as pitiable	1.28 (1.50)	1.28 (1.50)	1.784	.086

[1]Ratings are for 5-point scale (0 = "strongly disagree"; 4 = "strongly agree")

For the two descriptors, "Children are robust," $F(1, 163) = 4.16$, $p < .05$, and "Children are lonely," $F(1, 163) = 7.16$, $p < .001$, there were significant gender-by-nationality interactions. Specifically, Japanese fathers (1.45) perceived children as less robust

than did mothers (1.92), whereas there was no difference between these perceptions by American fathers and mothers. For loneliness, Japanese mothers (2.87) perceived children as more lonely than did fathers (2.31), whereas among the Americans fathers (1.81) perceived children as lonelier than did mothers (1.28). Given the psychological and physical absence of many Japanese men from their families (Makino, Nakano, & Kashiwagi, 1996), we would expect men to be relatively less aware of or sensitive to children's loneliness and robustness.

Intervention in Children's Conflicts

Table 4 presents a consistent pattern: more American parents than Japanese parents reported that they would intervene in children's fights or disputes, regardless of the child's age or parent's relationship to the child (own child vs. children in general). The Japanese non-interventionist mentality, particularly among fathers, was predictable in light of their often noted non-confrontational approach to parenting (Chen, 1996; Makino, Nakano & Kashiwagi, 1998).

In the American sample there were no mother/father differences in likelihood to intervene in children's verbal disputes or physical fights. However, among the Japanese, mothers were more interventionist than fathers. Specifically, more mothers (20 of 53) than fathers (3/29) reported that they intervene in verbal disputes of children ages 5 or under, X^2 (1) = 6.97 $p < .01$; fights between children ages 5 or under (mothers = 40/53, fathers = 14/29, X^2 (1) = 6.17 $p < .05$); fights among school-age children (mothers = 32/53, fathers = 9/29, X^2 (1) = 6.46 $p < .05$); and in verbal disputes involving their own children ages 5 or under (mothers = 14/53, fathers = 2/29, X^2 (1) = 4.55, $p < .01$). Again we must consider the Japanese detachment of fathers and closeness of mother-child relations to understand why Japanese fathers were so non-interventionist. If Japanese fathers tend to lack responsibility for their children in daily life, it is not surprising that they

Table 4 Intervention in Children's Conflicts: Comparisons of Frequencies

Item	American		Japanese		X^2	p
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
Would intervene in children's fights and verbal disputes	52	25	16	66	40.51	< .001
Would intervene in preschool children's verbal disputes	51	33	23	59	17.92	< .001
Would intervene in preschool children's fights	82	3	54	28	25.88	< .001
Would intervene in elementary school children's verbal disputes	30	55	6	76	17.32	< .001
Would intervene in elementary school children's fights	82	3	41	41	46.45	< .001
Would intervene in *own* preschool child's verbal disputes	62	23	16	66	47.87	< .001
Would intervene in *own* preschool child's fights	84	1	51	31	36.15	< .001
Would intervene in *own* elementary school child's verbal disputes	46	38	11	71	31.46	< .001
Would intervene in *own* elementary school child's fights	81	3	45	37	31.17	< .001

would report standing back and allowing others to intervene in their children's conflicts.

Finally, it was notable that while more American parents thought the proverb of "until seven among the gods" was relevant than Japanese parents, they were also more interventionist in responding to questions about children's daily life. We had assumed that parents who thought the proverb was relevant would take a hands-off approach to childrearing, since the saying had implied to us that children were pure and somewhat under the control of the gods. But the Americans were both interventionist and agreed with the relevance of the proverb. Further research should examine the meaning of terms like "pure" and "intervention" in different languages, because parents in different cultures may interpret the meaning of proverbs, images, and situations differently.

Conclusions

There were limitations in this research with regard to sampling and instrumentation. The sample was middle-class, small, and limited to parents of young children in two highly modernized societies. More complex statistical analyses were precluded by the simplicity of the questionnaire, and the choice of items focused on limited sets of images, metaphors, and situations. However, the results confirmed the potential value of cross-cultural studies of parental images of children and childreaning.

Future research should consider a wider variety of metaphors, images, and situational variables, sample parents with children of various ages and in several societies, and develop measurements amenable to multivariate analysis. It will also be useful to study how images and the relevance of proverbs change as children get older. Even with its deficiencies, the present study showed that traditional proverbs about children can have contemporary relevance, that metaphors of childrearing transcend culture, that images of children vary between cultures and also between mothers and fathers, and that parents' tendency to intervene in the daily activities of their children may depend on cultural values and differ between mothers and fathers.

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