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# Parental expectation of early childhood education: comparison between China, Japan, and Korea

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**Abstract** This study investigates 727 parents from China, Japan, and Korea by a self-devised scale and compares the differences in their expectation of early childhood education in cross-cultural backgrounds. The result shows that parents from the three countries have a positive attitude toward their children's development. The main effect of nations on such factors as individual development, close attention to diet, willpower training, moral judgment, and emotional exchange with adults is significant, while the two-way interaction between nations and child gender, nations and child age, and the three-way interaction between nations, child gender, and child age are not significant.

**Keywords** parental expectation, nations, child gender, child age, early childhood education, cross-cultural comparison

## 1 Introduction

Currently parental expectation of early childhood education is the focus of social psychology, child development psychology, and family education. It is an important factor that influences children's physical and mental development. Suitable expectation contributes a lot to the shaping of children's good qualities. However,

Translated from *Xueqian Jiaoyu Yanjiu* 学前教育研究 (Studies in Preschool Education), 2006, (4): 60–62

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if parents have extremely high expectation of their children's education, it would lead to a series of family and social problems that affect the healthy development of children. Song Baozhong and others investigated 1114 elementary, junior high school, and senior high school students' parents in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, China (Song et al, 2003). The result showed that parents' expectation of their children's education seemed to be getting increasingly higher, which harmed the development of children. In general, the level of parental expectation of their children's education is closely connected with their local culture and social development.

After reviewing and analyzing some previous literatures, we found that researches done by Chinese on parental expectation for early childhood education are more than those done by non-Chinese. Previous researches focused mainly on aspects of regional or demographic comparisons, but comparisons among different countries were very few. This article makes a cross-cultural international comparison from a socio-cultural perspective between three Asian countries, China, Japan, and Korea, which have East Asian cultures. In other words, it uses empirical studies to compare the differences in parental expectation of their children's education in various countries, and at the same time, to provide evidence for research on children's educational expectations and theoretical guidance for parents to treat children's education objectively, and avoid having high educational expectations so as to ensure healthy development of their young children.

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## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

This survey was conducted with 823 parents from China, Japan, and Korea. Of these 727 were effective samples, without missing values. Demographic distributed characteristics were as follows: 210 Chinese parents, accounting for 28.9%, from Beijing, Guangzhou, Lanzhou; 316 Japanese parents, accounting for 43.5%, from Tokyo; 201 Korean parents, accounting for 27.6%, from Seoul. Among them, 356 had male children (49.0%); 371 had female children (51.0%). The children's ages ranged from 3 to 6. As for Chinese children, there were 33 three-year-old children (15.7%), 92 four-year-old children (43.8%), 79 five-year-old children (37.6%), 6 six-year-old children (2.9%). As for Japanese children, there were 67 three-year-old children (21.2%), 115 four-year-old children (36.4%), 115 five-year-old children (36.4%) and 19 six-year-old children (6.0%). As for Korean children, there were 40 three-year-old children (19.9%), 74 four-year-old children (36.8%), 79 five-year-old children (39.3%) and 8 six-year-old children (4.0%).

## 2.2 Instruments of measure

The scale used in this study was drawn up and developed by AOYAGI Hajime (Waseda University, Japan) and Zhou Aibao (Northwest Normal University, China). Homogeneous reliability was used to test the scale's reliability and the alpha coefficient was 0.9587. At the same time, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) ensured the scale's construct validity.

## 2.3 Procedures

Parents from the three different countries were required to fill the scale of parental expectation for their children's early education. The scale was translated into three languages (they were translated into the original language once more to ensure accuracy of the translations). It contained 52 items (questions), for which parents must give answers ranging from 5 (extremely high expectation) to 1 (no expectation at all). Instructions were as follows: "Please read the questions one by one and circle the most suitable choice. Spending too much time on one question will make your choice difficult. After you read the questions, please ignore those that are inconsistent with your ideas or are difficult to choose; different answers can be given to the questions. Please read carefully each topic before answering."

## 2.4 Statistical methods

Exploratory factor analysis and multivariate analysis of variance were primarily used. Data analysis was completed by SPSS (ver.10.0) software.

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# 3 Results and analysis

## 3.1 Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was used to investigate the factor structure of the formal questionnaire. It adopted principal components analysis to extract common factors, obtained initial load matrix, and then used Varimax to derive ultimate load factors matrix. From EFA samplings, the index of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) appropriateness was 0.960 (KMO = 0.960). Bartlett's test of sphericity showed data suitable for factors analysis ( $X^2 = 20563.74$ ,  $Df = 1176$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Under the condition of unlimited factor numbers, factors were extracted and the result showed that there were 10 factors whose eigenvalues were more than 1; this explained 61.651 percent of the total variance. From scree plot, it was not hard to find that after the ninth factor, the slope line was very flat, thus it was appropriate to retain nine factors; nine factors explained 59.711 percent of the total variance.

The nine factors ultimately included 49 items, and their dimensionality attributes were as follows. The first factor, known as individual positive development, contained 15 items, which reflected children's positive developments. The second, called peer relationship, consisted of 5 items, reflecting parental expectation of their children to get on well with others in kindergarten schools. The third, called attention to diet, included 5 items, which reflected parents' expectation that kindergarten schools were concerned with young children's diet. The fourth, called willpower training, had 5 items, which reflected parental expectation that children could receive willpower training. The fifth, called moral judgments, contained 4 items, which reflected parents' hope that children could develop a capacity of distinguishing clearly between right and wrong. The sixth, described as experiencing life course, with 5 items reflected parents' expectation that their young children could understand dignity and the spirit of collaboration and facing difficult activities. The seventh, called active attention, included 4 items, which reflected parents' expectation that teachers could show attention to their children. The eighth, called emotional exchanges with adults, includes 3 items, which reflected parents' expectation that there were some places to ensure intercommunication among children, teachers, and parents. The ninth, called collective life, included 3 items, which reflected parents' expectation that children could learn to live harmoniously with others.

### 3.2 Analysis of nations, gender difference, and child age on the nine factors

The result of multivariate test (Wilks'  $\Lambda$ ) showed that the main effect of the *nations* was significant,  $F(2,725) = 6.114, p < 0.001$ . The main effects of gender difference and child ages were not significant,  $F(1,726) = 0.990, p > 0.05$ ;  $F(2,725) = 1.032, p > 0.05$ . The interactions of *nations* and gender difference; *nations* and child age; gender difference and child age; *nations*, gender difference and child age were not significant,  $F(2,725) = 0.723, p > 0.05$ ;  $F(2,725) = 1.005, p > 0.05$ ;  $F(2,725) = 0.957, p > 0.05$ ;  $F(2,725) = 1.168, p > 0.05$ .

Table 1 shows that the differences of *nations* for individual positive development, attention to diet, emotional exchanges with adults were very significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), and willpower training and moral judgments were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The interactions of *nations* and gender difference; *nations* and child age; gender difference and child age; *nations*, gender difference and child age were not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, a post hoc test for *nations* was made and the result showed that for individual positive development, the expectation of Chinese parents was significantly higher than that of Japanese and Korean parents, and the expectation of Korean parents was significantly higher than that of Japanese parents ( $p < 0.001$ ). For peer relationship, the differences between the three nations were not significant. For attention to diet, the expectations of

Chinese and Korean parents were significantly higher than that of Japanese parents ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the comparison between Chinese parents and Korean parents reached the significant fringe. For willpower training, the expectation of Chinese parents was significantly higher than that of Japanese parents ( $p < 0.01$ ), and the comparison between Chinese parents and Korean parents reached the significant fringe, while the difference between Korean parents and Japanese parents was not significant. For morality judgment, the expectation of Chinese parents was significantly higher than that of Japanese parents ( $p < 0.01$ ), and also significantly higher than that of Korean parents ( $p < 0.001$ ); the difference between Japanese parents and Korean parents was not significant. For experiencing life course, the expectations of Chinese parents and Korean parents were more than that of Japanese parents ( $p < 0.01$ ), and the difference between Chinese parents and Korean parents was not significant. For active attention, the expectations of Japanese parents and Korean parents were significantly higher than that of Chinese parents ( $p < 0.001$ ), the difference between Japanese parents and Korean parents was not significant. For emotional exchanges with adults, the expectation of Chinese parents was significantly higher than those of Japanese parents and Korean parents, but the expectation of Korean parents was significantly higher than that of Japanese parents ( $p < 0.001$ ). For collective life, the difference between the three nations was not significant.

**Table 1** Tests of between-subjects effects of nationalities' categories on nine factors (summary)

Variable	Factors	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Nations	Individual positive development	2	396.260	8.960	0.000
	Peer relationship	2	2.460	0.535	0.586
	Attention to diet	2	101.840	15.970	0.000
	Willpower training	2	32.680	4.760	0.009
	Moral judgment	2	9.370	3.410	0.033
	Experiencing life course	2	11.820	2.490	0.083
	Active attention	2	6.720	1.344	0.262
	Emotional exchanges with adults	2	48.330	14.360	0.000
	Collective life	2	0.945	0.292	0.747

## 4 General discussions

### 4.1 Common ground of parental expectation of the three nations

From the scale scores of various factors, the parental answers focused on two options: extremely high expectation and general expectation (each item's average between 4 and 5). Parents from the three countries had positive expectation on

nine factors; they all expected children to develop in a positive way and keep favorable peer relationships. In addition, attention could be paid to children's diet and children could have willpower and the ability to make moral judgments. They could also understand the course of a life, receive teacher's attention, have exchange with adults, experience the fun of collective life, and understand the rules of collective life.

#### 4.2 Differences in parental expectation in the three countries

As can be seen in table 1, for individual positive development, willpower training, moral judgment, attention to diet, and emotional exchanges with adults, the countries had very remarkable differences, and a post hoc test found differences between the three countries. From the general trend of the results, Chinese parents showed higher expectation than Korean and Japanese parents in eight factors except the active attention, which was significantly lower than those of Japanese and Korean parents. Among those eight factors, six factors were significantly higher in Chinese parents than in Korean and Japanese parents. Therefore, it is seen that Chinese parents had the highest expectation of their children's education. The expectation of Korean parents was higher than that of Japanese, which was the lowest.

#### 4.3 Possible reasons for similarities and differences between the three countries' parental expectation

First of all, China, Japan, and Korea share Chinese culture characteristics and Confucianism, and these three cultures belong to East Asian culture (Zhao, 2001). Confucian culture is the foundation of the three countries, but to expect one's child to become an outstanding person is the mutual ideology of Chinese nationalities, which is the specific reflection of Confucian ideology (Ding, 1999). Thus, the choices selected by parents from the three countries tend to be consistent. They chose the options beneficial to the children's development. The degree of those options is either extremely high expectation or general expectation. Secondly, previous research showed (Yang et al, 1999) that China, Japan, and Korea were having few children in families, and the phenomenon of liking for a particular kind of food, being strong self-willed, dictatorial in doing things, but yet being coward and timid, and lack of exchanges with their peers were mutual issues in children. The various problems suggest that Chinese parents pay more attention to children's individual positive development, diet, willpower training, moral development, and emotional exchange between children and adults than Korean and Japanese parents do. It is worth mentioning that the social structure of few children in families is the cause of parents' concern for the collective life; they

wish children to respect and experience their life. Thirdly, from the macrolevel perspective, the level of economic development may be a major factor. Since World War Two, China, Japan, and Korea have made significant economic progress: Japan located in northeast Asia is the first economic superpower in Asia and the world's second largest economic superpower country; with its GDP equal to 19.2 percentage of the world's GDP and 70 percent of Asia's GDP, it has entered the post-industrial era and into the ranks of the developed countries. As early as in 1990, its per capita income surpassed \$30 000. Korea is a new industrial power; among the medium developed countries, the country has been ranked third in Asia and 11th in the world, with a per capita GDP reaching \$10 000. China has become a developing country with accelerated growth. It is the second economic power in Asia, the seventh in the world, but with just over \$1 000 per capita income. Therefore, there exists a huge difference between these three countries on the level of economic development; the highest level of economic development is in Japan, followed by Korea, and then China (Shi, 1999; Su, 2005). This result is inverse to the parental expectation. Similarly, some researches have also proved that mothers from different cultural backgrounds and economic levels have different educational concepts (Rubin and Mills, 1987). In a developing country like China, parents' income is low, so are the living standards. They are still on survival and development stage; they have an urgent feeling to wish their children to become giants (or VIPs), thus from early childhood they have higher expectancy; they hope children will develop good qualities, lay a good foundation for their future, and be able to engage in good work and live well in the future. While the economic developments of Japan and Korea are better and the parents of the two countries also have high expectancies of their children, but their hopes are not so high compared with those of Chinese parents (Song et al, 2003).

To sum up, cultural origins and economic level are the two main factors that influence parental expectation for early childhood education. These factors cannot be ignored. Therefore, to solve the problem of high parental expectation of children's education, we should deal with this problem from the perspective of social development. Rationalization of parental expectation of their children's education cannot be separated from economic development of the whole society. Parents should rationally look at this issue, avoiding excessive expectation from children, and instead give them a relaxed environment for their healthy physical and mental growth.

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## 5 Conclusions

First, parental expectations of early childhood education in the three countries are embodied in such aspects as individual positive development, peer relationship,

attention to diet, willpower training, moral judgments, experience of life course, active attention, collective life, and emotional exchange with adults.

Second, the differences of *nations* on factors of individual positive development, attention to diet, willpower training, moral judgments, and emotional exchange with adults are significant.

Last, the interactions of *nations* and gender difference; *nations* and age; gender difference and children's ages; *nations*, gender difference and child age are not significant.

**Acknowledgements** The authors are grateful to Mrs. Zhang Shuiyun, Assistant Professor of English of the Lanzhou University, for her help in translating the manuscript from Chinese into English.

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