

Beliefs of East Asian Adolescents Regarding Maternal Love and Moral Autonomy

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Abstract

The Belief in Maternal Love (BML) is a cultural belief, in which the mother is regarded as a generous and a great entity. In this study, the relationship between the BML and moral autonomy in family relationships was examined. Participants were 646 college students in East Asia (Beijing: 195, Seoul: 217, Tokyo and Nagoya: 234, Mean age: 20 years). Results indicated that the factor structure of BML of participants in the three societies was similar. The stronger the BML, the stronger was the attitude of self-sacrifice for the family. However, the correlation between BML and the unilateral acceptance of parental authority was not significant. Moreover, there was a slight negative correlation with the individualistic attitude of prioritizing personal demands over family demands. These results suggest that BML is a cultural belief that does not restrict individualistic moral attitudes, but that it exists independent of it.

Key Words: East Asian adolescent, Belief in maternal love, Self-sacrifice, Moral development

1. Background

The belief in maternal love refers to a collection of ideas such as, “All women are always good mothers; mothers must love their children under all circumstances; children being loved by their mothers always grow-up happy.” In this cultural belief, the “Mother” has a special and sublime existence (Egami, 2013; Ohinata, 2000). According to Ohinata (2000), the belief in maternal love developed historically in the political and economical systems peculiar to Japan, and it has no scientific basis.

Belief in maternal love consists of four factors. Namely, “to regard a mother’s reproductive ability as being identical to her ability to rear children,” “to regard a mother’s child rearing at home as an absolute necessity,” “to regard mothers as an affectionate idealized existence similar to the Holy Mother,” and “to believe that mothers grow through child rearing.”

In present-day Japan, these beliefs related to maternal love has resulted in negative phenomena such as mothers taking on most of the responsibilities of child rearing, and having infant-care neurosis. Also, women tend to quit their jobs soon after marriage, or after giving birth. Moreover,

married women who are unable to have children have a higher incidence of depressive psychosis (Ohinata, 2000).

Is this belief in maternal love unique to Japan? Similar to Japan, there are other East Asian societies that are based a Confucian moral structure and that are collectivism in comparison to Western societies. People in these societies have developed their self-concept based on mutual dependence and emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Moreover, they have a moral system in which social roles and emotional attitudes within the group are important (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). If the belief in maternal love is associated with the role of a woman, wife, or mother, then this belief should also exists in Chinese and Korean societies.

However, there are large historical, religious and social differences between Japan, China, and Korea. In Japan, the belief in maternal love impacts life-style and prevents individuals from acquiring their identity, because maternal love conflicts with an individual's social orientations in Japan. Although the belief in maternal love is a common cultural conviction in East Asia, we expect that there are differences between the three countries in the relationship between maternal love and the social orientation of individuals.

The purpose of this study was to find commonalities and differences between young people in East Asia, especially those in China, Korea, and Japan, by examining differences in the belief in maternal love and in individual's social orientations, especially from the viewpoint of moral autonomy.

This study defines moral autonomy as a multi-dimensional process of development that includes a variety of roles in social relationships, as well as the right to be independent and become well-being as individuals (Shuto & Ninomiya, 2002). Therefore, this study is designed to assess moral judgments regarding rights and obligations of young people.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

A total of 646 participants, Japanese university students living in Tokyo and the outskirts of Nagoya (n=234), Chinese students living in Beijing (n=195), and Korean students living in the outskirts of Seoul (n=217) were investigated (mean age was 20 years in all samples).

2.2 Measures

The questionnaire consisted of scales on the following concepts that were developed through consultations between the author and Chinese and Korean students studying in Japan.

2.2.1 Belief in maternal love.

We created 17 items that represented four elements related to the belief in maternal love. These included items such as: "It's impossible for a mother not to love her child;" "As the sex that produces children, it's natural for women to dedicate themselves to nurturing their children;" "If a mother cannot dedicate herself to nurturing her child, there will be a negative impact on the child's growth;" "A mother should dedicate herself to nurturing her child, rather than working, until the

child is 3 years old;" "Even if a child becomes delinquent, a mother can make her child correct his or her misdeeds;" and "A woman who decides not to produce a child seems somewhat cold." Participants responded to each using a 5-point rating system.

2.2.2. Attitude toward traditional gender roles.

We prepared 12 items that represented gender roles in traditional societies, in order to examine the validity of scores in the maternal love scale. All questions were related to matrimonial and parent-child relationships and included items such as; "A boy should be brought up to be manly and a girl to be womanly," "Home is the place where a man can recharge," "A father should be strong and a mother tender to ensure the growth of their child," and "When a husband and a wife have different opinions, the wife should follow the husband." The participants responded to each item on a 5-point rating system.

2.2.3. Prosocial orientation.

We prepared 25 items that represented positive concerns and roles in society, as well as prosocial behavioral volition and efficacy, evaluated on a 5-point scale. They included items such as; "I want to be a person whom people respect, even if I do not advance in the world," "Whatever I may do, schools and society will not change (reversal)," "Even if the world becomes a worse place, it's not my responsibility (reversal)," "Provided nobody finds out, we may violate rules (reversal)," "Opinions of young people do not achieve general recognition (reversal)," and "You have a role that you must play in this world."

2.2.4. Acceptance and rejection of parental authority related to personal rights.

We prepared eight scenes concerning parents' behavior that violated their children's privacy and human rights. Examples include; "Parents tap their child's telephone calls," "Parents read their child's diary and notebooks," "Parents hide letters addressed to their child," "Parents enter their child's room without permission," and "Parents select their child's wife or husband." The participants judged the wrongness of the parent's behavior on a 3-point scale and selected either acceptance or rejection of parental authority (whether the child or parents ultimately makes decisions when the child and parents are in conflict).

2.2.5. Morality of self-sacrifice.

We prepared seven stories in which an individual's needs are abandoned for the sake of his or her parents' happiness. Examples of the stories are as follows.

"Family business: Mr. D, a university student has been studying to be an engineer. However, his father is an old man and finds it difficult to continue running his small factory in town. His father has been asking him to take over the factory. Mr. D has decided to take over the factory."

In another example,

"Marriage: Miss E is working at a company and has had a boyfriend for five years. One day,

her parents show her a photo of a man, who they want her to marry. At first, she refuses. However, because of her parents' insistence, she decides to marry the man after breaking up with her boyfriend of five years."

For each scene, we prepared two questions regarding the significance of the decision and the sense of obligation for self-sacrifice ("should a child take over his or her family business of generations and abandon his or her personal dreams?"). The participants answered using a 4-point scale.

2.3 Procedure

We executed the questionnaire survey at the universities that were sampled. The time required to complete the questionnaire was approximately 30 minutes.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of all variables in this study.

3.1 Belief in maternal love

We performed item-analysis of the scale in the three regions as a function of the participant's gender and selected 15 items that were common to both male and female in all three regions. Factor analysis confirmed the unifactor structure and items with a factor load greater than 0.4 were defined as scale items. The overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.79, whereas it was 0.72 for Chinese male and 0.82 for Japanese female.

A 3 X 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the average score of 15 items, with the region and gender as the independent variables, indicated that the main effects of region ($F_{(2/640)}=10.32, p<.01$; Korea > Japan, China) and gender ($F_{(1/640)}=4.02, p<.05$; Male > Female) were significant. Also, the interaction between region and gender had a significant tendency ($F_{(2/640)}=2.90, p<.06$). Gender differences were limited to in Japan.

3.2 Relationship between belief in maternal love and traditional gender roles

3.2.1 Measure of gender roles

A scale to measure traditional sex roles consisting of 12 items that were common to male and female in the three regions was constructed on the basis of item analysis. The overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.78, whereas it was 0.75 for Chinese female and 0.81 for Japanese male. A 3 X 2 ANOVA with regions and gender as the variables was conducted by using the mean value of the 12 items as the scale score. The main effect of region ($F_{(2/640)}=20.45, p<.01$) was significant. A multiple comparison indicated that affirmative attitudes on gender roles were largest for Chinese students (China > Japan, Korea). The effects of gender were also significant ($F_{(1/640)}=27.32, p<.01$), Male > Female.

3.2.2 Correlation between belief in maternal love and gender roles

Table 2 shows the results of a Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients conducted on the scores of belief in maternal love and gender role. There was a significant ($p<.01$), moderate

positive correlation. In particular, there was a strong correlation in Japan.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations

		Beliefs in Maternal Love (Range= 1 - 5)			Attitude toward gender roles (Range= 1 - 5)	
		n	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Japanese	Total	234	3.13	0.58	2.88	0.65
	female	122	3.02	0.59	2.73	0.64
	male	112	3.24	0.55	3.03	0.63
Korean	Total	217	3.29	0.49	2.78	0.57
	female	138	3.27	0.51	2.66	0.53
	male	79	3.34	0.45	2.99	0.58
Chinese	Total	195	3.08	0.47	3.16	0.48
	female	139	3.09	0.44	3.13	0.46
	male	56	3.05	0.55	3.24	0.53
Total		646	3.17	0.53	2.93	0.60
		Importance of self-sacrifice (Range= 7 - 28)			Obligation of self-sacrifice (Range= 7 - 28)	
		n	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Japanese	Total	234	22.59	3.34	18.53	2.48
	female	122	23.39	2.68	18.54	2.11
	male	112	21.72	3.76	18.53	2.83
Korean	Total	217	24.36	2.44	19.23	2.14
	female	138	24.28	2.47	19.14	2.02
	male	79	24.52	2.39	19.39	2.34
Chinese	Total	195	18.46	3.11	17.89	2.10
	female	139	18.65	3.11	17.85	2.02
	male	56	17.98	3.06	18.00	2.29
Total		646	21.94	3.84	18.57	2.32
		Prosocial orientation (Range= 1 - 5)			Acceptance of parental authority (Range= 0 - 24)	
		n	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Japanese	Total	234	3.57	0.58	5.37	2.85
	female	122	3.73	0.51	5.24	2.50
	male	112	3.40	0.61	5.51	3.20
Korean	Total	217	3.70	0.42	5.54	2.59
	female	138	3.75	0.32	5.52	2.40
	male	79	3.63	0.54	5.58	2.92
Chinese	Total	195	3.62	0.39	6.66	3.38
	female	139	3.64	0.38	6.70	3.26
	male	56	3.58	0.43	6.55	3.68
Total		646	3.63	0.48	5.82	2.99

3.3 Correlation between the belief in maternal love and moral autonomy

3.3.1 Moral autonomy by region and gender.

(a) Prosocial orientation

We analyzed scores of the 25 items related to prosocial intention and adopted 15 items that were common to both men and women in all 3 regions. The overall α coefficient was 0.74, whereas it was 0.69 for Chinese men and 0.80 for Japanese women. A 3 X 2 ANOVA with regions and gender as the variables was conducted by using the mean value of the 15 items as the scale score. The ANOVA indicated that all the effects were significant. The prosocial orientation of Korean students was significantly higher than that of Chinese and Japanese students ($F_{(2/640)}=3.89, p<.05$) and female had significantly higher prosocial-oriented intention than male ($F_{(1/640)}=19.61, p<.01$). A multiple comparison indicated a significant difference between the genders ($F_{(2/640)}=4.56, p<.05$) in Japan. Moreover, the prosocial-oriented intention of Japanese men was significantly lower than that of both sexes in the other regions, with the exception of Chinese male.

(b) Obedient acceptance of parental authority

We grouped judgments about parental misdeeds and authority acceptance into four classes such that the score increased as the acceptance of parental authority increased (3: "Parents' deed isn't bad - Parents have entitlement of decision," and 0: "Parents' deed is very bad - Young people have entitlement of decision.") We totaled the points for the 8 items and assumed that the total score reflected the obedient acceptance of parental authority. The overall α coefficient of the scale was 0.72. A 3 X 2 ANOVA with regions and gender as the variables indicated that the main effect of region ($F_{(2/640)}=9.40, p<.01$) was significant. In general, participants tended to reject the authority of parents who invade their child's privacy and human rights. However, the Chinese students accepted parental authority more than Korean and Japanese students.

(c) Self-sacrifice for the family

In the case of importance of self-sacrifice for the family, 1 point was given for "Not important at all" and 4 points for "Very important." In the case of obligation toward self-sacrifice for the sake of the family, 1 point was given for "No obligation at all" and 4 points for "Obligation is quite natural." The total number of points for the seven stories was assumed to be the score for each participant. The α coefficient for the score in terms of importance of self-sacrifice for the sake of the family was 0.77 overall and that for obligation of self-sacrifice for the sake of the family was 0.68 overall.

An ANOVA conducted on the importance of self-sacrifice score indicated that the main effect of the region ($F_{(2/640)}=194.79, p<.01$) was significant. The score was the highest for Korean students who regarded self-sacrifice for the sake of the family as important (Korea > Japan > China). The differences between the genders were also significant ($F_{(1/640)}=8.09, p<.01$; Female > Male). Moreover, the interaction between region and gender was significant. The significant difference between the genders was limited to Japan. The results of the ANOVA conducted on obligation toward self-sacrifice for the sake of the family scores indicated that only the main effect of the region was significant ($F_{(2/640)}=15.91, p<.01$), with the Korean students having the highest obligation toward self-sacrifice, followed by Japanese and Chinese students.

3.3.2 Correlation between belief in maternal love and moral autonomy.

Table 1 shows the coefficients of correlation for belief in maternal love scores, and the four moral autonomy scores. Overall, they were significantly and positively correlated, although the correlation was weak for the importance of self-sacrifice, obligation, and prosocial orientation. Belief in maternal love did not show a significant correlation with the unilateral acceptance of parental authority. The significant correlation between belief in maternal love and obligation to self-sacrifice was found in all three regions. In Chinese female, the belief in maternal love was significantly correlated with the importance of self-sacrifice. In Korea, a positive, significant correlation between the belief in maternal love and prosocial orientation was found in both male and female. This relationship could not be found in Japan and China. The belief in maternal love did not show a significant correlation with any of the scores related to moral autonomy in Chinese male.

Table 2. Correlations Coefficients with Beliefs in Maternal Love

	Japanese		Korean		Chinese	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Attitude toward gender roles	.70 **	.61 **	.52 **	.45 **	.49 **	.48 **
Prosocial orientation	.00	.10	.20 *	.39 **	.08	-.07
Acceptance of parental authority	-.04	.02	.14	.13	.12	-.01
Importance of self-sacrifice	.01	.05	.12	-.03	.31 **	.14
Obligation of self-sacrifice	.33 **	.39 **	.36 **	.19 +	.23 **	.10

+ $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

4. Discussion

This study confirmed that the belief in maternal love has a single-factor structure in all three regions, within each region, as well as in each gender under study. The internal consistencies of the scales were satisfactory. This study indicated that the belief in maternal love has a positive and moderate correlation with a affirmative attitude on traditional gender roles and that it is one of the cultural beliefs that are associated with social roles and obligations. It is necessary for future studies to analyze the structure of this belief and cultural differences associated with it in more detail.

Students from Korea had the strongest belief in maternal love. But there was no significant difference between male and female. In Japan, a significant difference between the genders was found in both the belief in maternal love and in attitudes on traditional gender roles with men having the stronger beliefs. It is possible that the negative phenomena related to child rearing seen in Japan are associated with these differences between the genders.

Belief in maternal faith showed a small, but significant positive correlation with prosocial orientation, most noticeable in Korean men and women. Many items in the prosocial orientation scale

used in this study were related to the role of self in society and measured “duty-based” morality (Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987) such as the social role of young people or a students. The result of this study suggests that Korean university students are most likely to develop these types of morals. They evaluated self-sacrifice highly and had a strong sense of obligation.

The relationship between the belief in maternal love and duty-based morality were clear in family relationships in both China and Japan, pointing to a greater belief in maternal love corresponding to the stronger sense of obligation toward self-sacrifice.

Rejection of parental authority reflects the “individual’s rights-oriented” morality of the students. Basically, students in the three regions did not accept parental authority that violated children’s privacy and human rights. Also, regardless of the region and gender, the acceptance of parental authority did not show a significant relationship with belief in maternal love. This study has shown that university students did not accept parental authority unilaterally, but judged it on the basis of moral related to the violation of privacy and children’s rights.

Moral autonomy refers to the multi-dimensional development allowing both duty and the rights of individuals within groups. This study suggests that the cultural belief in maternal love is associated with duty-based moral, but not with an individual’s rights-oriented moral. However, the strength of these relationships differed in different regions and genders. Social systems differ even between the nations of East Asia. The strength of the arrangement of social relationships is also different. It is thought that these lead to differences in the cultural context and caused diversities in the judgment of socio-moral judgments (Turiel, 2002).

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