

# A Comparative Study of Korean and Japanese customs related to Pregnancy

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**Abstract** The cultural background of patients who require in nursing must be considered because it has effects on the quality of nursing care. Traditional customs regarding pregnancy in Korea and Japan were investigated and compared. Inherited customs in the two areas were very similar. Many taboos concerned the type of eaten food and behavior during pregnancy, and although obviously superstitions reflected underlying wishes for the safety of the mother and baby. Before the development of medical science, such customs whereas were the fruits of traditional wisdom.

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**Key Words** : traditional customs, pregnancy, Korean, Japanese, comparative study

## Introduction

The cultural background of patients must be considered in order to provide quality of nursing care. Traditional customs concerning pregnancy give us a unique glimpse into the most fundamental aspect of human culture. Both schools of medicine and nursing can benefit from investigations of the cultural traditions related to pregnancy. Improvements in nursing and medical technology have brought about significant improvements in the physical conditions of both the mother and baby, but advancements in medical technology have often overshadowed or neglected traditional values and customs concerning heart and traditional wisdom in childbirth and parenting. We therefore investigated traditional customs regarding pregnancy in Korea and Japan. A comparison is made of those customs and suggestions given as how to use the understanding.

## Definition of terms

1. Culture: The totality of group life of human beings who are members of a single society, which includes knowledge, religion, art, law, morals, and customs.
2. Customs: Traditional ways of doing things which

have been developed within a society been in effect for generations and are generally accepted by its members.

## Method

1. Choice of participants and areas

### a) Participants

Data first was collected from women 20 to 94 years old. The question arose as to which age group would have paid greater attention to the concerns of custom and tradition, therefore only persons over the age of 40 were chosen for our survey; 81 women in Korea and 75 in Japan who had undergone home delivery. Only women who were able to understand the purpose of this study were asked to participate.

### b) Areas <Figure 1>

(1) In Korea, 10 locations: Gumsan myun, Gungok myun, Daegok myun, Gisu myun, Myungsuk myun, Chinsung myun, Chyphyun myun, Moonsan myun, Gaedong myun, and Chinju City, Kyung sang namdo were surveyed.

(2) In Japan, 1 location: Tutu, Izuhara-cho, Tushima, Nagasaki Prefecture was surveyed.

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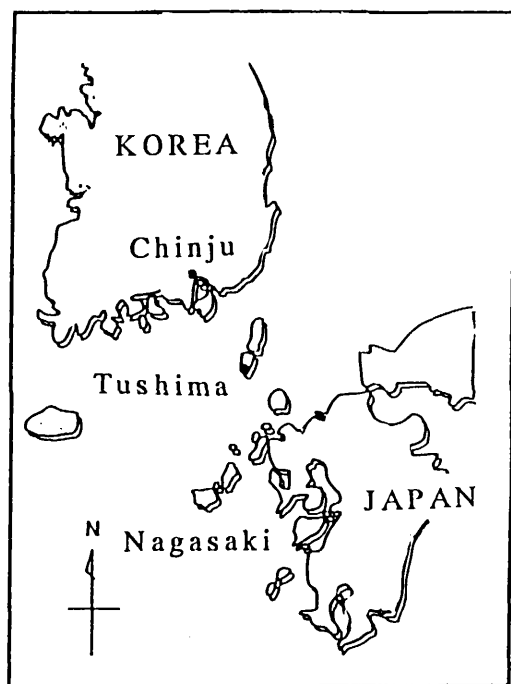


Fig. 1 The area of study

## 2. Data collection and method of analysis

The study design was that of a survey. The collection in Korea was done by a Korean researcher and her assistants, and in Japan by Japanese researchers and their assistants from March 1996 to June 1997. Researchers have visited to home of participants and asked some questions to them to fill out a questionnaire, assistance being provided when necessary. The average time spent with a participant was 40 minutes to 1 hour. A questionnaire was written in Korean, Japanese, and English to avoid linguistic confusion. There were 6 items on general characteristics, 2 on obstetric history, 6 on pregnancy, 13 on delivery, and 10 on after-delivery, and upbringing. There were a total of 37 open and closed questions. Data was analyzed for frequency, percentage, and mean using the SPSS (statistical package for social science).

## Results

### 1. General characteristics of the participants (Table 1)

The ages of the Korean women ranged from 52 to 89 years. The largest age group consisted of women in their 1970s (average 68.0 yrs). The ages of the women in Japan ranged from 48 to 94 years. The average age was 73.9 years. The Japanese women were older than Korean women, the average age

difference being 5.9 years. The majority of the Japanese participants had elementary school educations, whereas the majority of the Korean ones had not been educated in any formal school. Most women reported themselves Buddhist; 87.7% in Korea, 84.0% in Japan. The average length of residency was 43.9 years in Korea and 70.8 years in Japan. 52.0% of the Japanese women's husbands were farmers or fishermen, and 92.6% of Korean women's husbands were farmers.

Table 1 General characteristics of the women studied

	Korean women(N:81)	Japanese women(N:75)
Average age	68.0	73.9
(Range)	(52-89)	(48-94)
Education level		
Could write & read only	41(50.6%)	-
Elementary school	5(6.2%)	54(72.0%)
Middle school	7(8.6%)	11(14.7%)
Others	28(34.6%)	10(13.3%)
Religion		
Buddist	71(87.7%)	63(84.0%)
Others	10(12.3%)	12(16.0%)
Average length of residency(years)	43.9	70.8
Occupation of husband		
Farmer or fisherman	75(92.6%)	39(52.0%)
Others	6(7.4%)	36(48.0%)

### 2. Obstetric characteristics (Table 2)

The average age at marriage was 21.3 in Japan, and 18.0 in Korea, the Korean marital age being 3 years younger. The average number of deliveries was 5.0 in Korea, and 4.4 in Japan.

Table 2 Obstetric characteristics of the study participants

	Korean women(N:81)	Japanese women(N:75)
Average age at marriage	18.0	21.3
(Range)	(15-25)	(15-30)
Average number of deliveries	5.0	4.4

### 3. Customs related to pregnancy (Table 3 for medicines, Table 4 for foods, Table 5 for behavior)

Korean women reported the medicines avoided during pregnancy were cold and herbal ones such as ginseng (42.0%). Only one Japanese (1.3%) reported that medicines should be avoided during pregnancy. As to observing taboos concerning food and drink, 82.7% of the Korean women and 16.0% of the Japanese answered YES. Duck, other birds, pork, shark, horse and dog meat were items pregnant women should avoid in Korea. Whereas blue-colored fish was taboo in Japan, and octopus in both

countries. Concerning observation of behavioral taboos, 79.8% of the Korean participants and 34.7% of Japanese answered YES. In both countries, pregnant women should not attend funerals, look at fire. Korean taboos tended to involve emotional stability, Japanese taboos physical wellness. The number of the Korean women were reported taboos significantly higher than those of Japanese.

**Table 3** Medicines to be avoided during pregnancy

	Korean women(N:81)	Japanese women(N:75)
Some	34(42.0%)	1( 1.3%)
None	27(33.3%)	73(97.3%)
Others	20(24.5%)	1( 1.3%)

**Table 4** Foods to be avoided during pregnancy

	Korean women(N:81)	Japanese women(N:75)
Some	67(82.7%)	12(16.0%)
None	14(17.3%)	62(82.7%)
Others	-	1( 1.3%)

**Table 5** Behavior to be avoided during pregnancy

	Korean women(N:81)	Japanese women(N:75)
Some	64(79.8%)	26(34.7%)
None	17(20.2%)	48(64.0%)
Others	-	1( 1.3%)

## Discussion

### 1. General background of the participants

Most of Japanese women were elderly, older by an average 5.9 years than the Korean woman. The study participants had all undergone home delivery with or without health care providers. In Japan, traditional customs regarding pregnancy, delivery, and upbringing changed markedly in the 1960s. This change occurred when the place of delivery shifted from the home to a health care institution<sup>1)</sup>. The Japanese women in this study gave birth between 1930 and 1950, before this modification took place and therefore were still influenced by traditional customs. Furthermore, Tutu was an isolated fishing village, not affected by modern technology until recent year, so its own traditions were well preserved. In Korea, home delivery was overtaken by hospital delivery in the 1960s and 1970s. In the pilot test the random sample questioned women whose ages ranged 20 to 89 years old. Those in their 40 and 50

had experienced home or institutional deliveries, institutional delivery being higher for those in their 40 than in their 50. For the purposes of this study of traditional customs, only women who had had a home delivery were selected for participation.

### 2. Customs concerning taboos during pregnancy

Certain foods were prohibited because they were believed to affect the fetus in some way. These were mostly meats in Korea and fish in Japan, this was caused by the geographical differences in the two locations. Most of the prohibitions stemmed from superstitions, e.g., the prohibitions on eating octopus and duck meat comes from the belief that octopus might cause fetal abnormality and duck meat create children with horns and webbed feet. Supernatural spirits also are believed to exist in some foods and that certain foods, if taken, cause emotional and physical disturbances<sup>2)</sup>. These types of prohibition reflect the traditional beliefs wisdom for having a healthy baby and complication-free delivery. 82.7% of the Korean women cited a food taboo, but only 16.0% of Japanese did. In conclusion, in Korea more food items are prohibited pregnant women. In Japan, the cultural background for the taboo on octopus, a molluscoid, is that' it might cause a physical abnormality in the child, or that the tentacle of the octopus might cause hard labor in delivery making it difficult for the baby to part from placenta. Octopus is a food commonly avoided throughout Japan<sup>3,4)</sup>, indicates that there is a homeopathic factor in this taboo<sup>3,4)</sup>. Japanese ancestors believed that spiritual powers existed in specific foods, and that certain foods might cause harm to the child and pregnant woman. There were always supernatural meanings inherent in the taboos. Blue colored fish and the shiitake mushroom were all believed to cause miscarriage. Some other foods were avoided because they were believed bad for women as they were hard to digest. Concerning the Korean cultural background regarding food taboos, even though there are superstitious factors present, the basic idea is that good emotional and physical management can be achieved by managing food<sup>2,5,6)</sup>. Most of the taboos have scientific explanation, rather they are related to social and moral factors, the main food prohibitions concerned uncleanness, and pregnant woman should not eat certain foods in order to retain emotional stability<sup>2)</sup>. The reason for prohibiting duck is that it would

cause the child's finger to be webbed, or mispositioned. Chicken was prohibited because it would cause the child's skin to become chicken-like. Similarly, shark meat was prohibited because it would make the child's skin coarse. Horse meat was prohibited because it would make delivery take 12 not 10 months, or cause a difficult delivery. Dog was prohibited because it might cause the child to behave like a dog, or become mute. Goat could make the child wild like the animal. Fowl would cause lewdness, pigeon could cause the child to have only two descendants, and eating squid and octopus would produce a baby with no skeleton. Pregnancy was considered an everyday affair as well as a natural physiological phenomenon in both countries. Because modern means of intervention were not available to these pregnant women, the only way to go have a smooth childbirth was not have a large fetus and one with no abnormalities, therefore many taboos were handed down to pregnant woman. In both countries, attending funerals or fire works was thought to make the baby spotted or to cause a birthmark, and stepping over reins would lead to hard labor. In the Korean taboos, the baby would be a thief if the pregnant woman climbed over walls, or hid things under her skirt. Preventing pregnant woman from getting into or seeing danger or fights and from attending wedding ceremonies were ways of maintaining emotional well being. If a pregnant woman violated the latter taboos, the child might have convulsions. Injunctions not to overwork, travel, move about, and climb high places, including stairs, were attempts to maintain physical and emotional tranquillity. Our comparison of these pregnancy taboos showed a similarity between Korea and Japan. As the whole, all these taboos were the manifestation of the traditional wisdom of these nations ancient societies and reflect the wish for the health and safety of mother and child<sup>3, 4, 7)</sup>.

### Conclusion

The birthing customs that were inherited in the areas of Korean and Japan were very similar. Many of the taboos on foods and behavior during pregnancy were obviously superstitions but they represented wishes for the safety of mother and child, and were the fruits of traditional wisdom used to protect the lives of the new mother and child in times before medical science had developed. The essence of these birth customs, regardless of differences in culture, is that people wished for an easy delivery.

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## 日韓における妊娠に関する慣習の比較研究

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**要 旨** 韓国（晋州）と日本（長崎県・対馬）において妊娠に関する慣習について調査し、結果を比較した。妊婦の食生活では、韓国では82.7%、日本では16.0%が禁食を伝承していた。禁食には類感呪術というべきものが多かったが、禁食の種類は両地域に共通性がみられ、両地域とも「このタブーをおかすと胎児に何らかの影響がある」という形での伝承であった。一方、妊婦の行動上の禁忌は、韓国では79.8%、日本で34.7%が伝承していた。行動上の禁忌の内容も両地域は非常に似かよったものであった。妊婦の禁忌には明らかに迷信であるものが多く含まれていたが、禁忌の背景には医療が未発達だった時代に母子の安全を願う人々の心があったと考えられた。

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