

## Children of Myanmar Who Behave like Japanese Soldiers: A Possible Third Element in Personality

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**Abstract**—Among more than 750 cases of persons in Myanmar (formerly Burma) who as children claimed to remember a previous life, 24 said they had been Japanese soldiers killed in Burma during World War II. Unlike most Burmese subjects of such cases none of these children stated any personal names or addresses that might have permitted verification of their statements. However, they showed habits of dress, food preferences, industriousness, insensitivity to pain, and other behaviors unusual in Burma, but typical of Japanese people, especially Japanese soldiers during their occupation of Myanmar (Burma). The oppressive rule in Burma of the Japanese Army during World War II makes it unlikely that any Burmese parent would instigate or encourage a child to behave like a Japanese soldier. Genetic factors cannot account for the children's unusual behavior because all of them were (with two exceptions) born after 1945, when there were no Japanese in the villages of Burma. The behavioral features of these children suggest a third factor (additional to genetic ones and known environmental influences) in personality.

**Keywords:** Myanmar (Burma)—Japan—previous lives—parental influence

### Introduction

Children who claim to remember previous lives can be found easily in Myanmar (until 1989, Burma). Fielding Hall (1898/1922) drew attention to such children more than a century ago. Subsequently, Spiro (1970) mentioned them fleetingly, but did not examine any case in detail. Since 1970 the authors and others have investigated more than 750 such cases in Burma. The authors have published reports of numerous cases of these children (Keil & Tucker, 2000; Stevenson, 1983, 1997, 2001a).

Beginning usually between the ages of 2 and 5, children of this type make statements about a deceased person whose life they claim to have lived. They

usually continue talking about the previous life until the ages of 6–8. During the years when they are making statements about the previous life they almost invariably show behavior that is unusual in their family but which corresponds to the statements the child makes. For example, children who describe being killed by a man with a sword may show a phobia of swords and large knives (Stevenson, 1990). In the features mentioned, cases of the reincarnation type in Burma resemble cases of this type in India and elsewhere (Stevenson 1966, 1974, 1986).

In many cases in Burma we have verified a child's statements and found most of them correct for a particular deceased person. For example, in one series of 230 Burmese cases, 185 (80%) cases were "solved" in this sense (Cook et al., 1983). Burmese cases also show a high incidence of acquaintance between the child's family and that of the concerned deceased person. Indeed the child and deceased person often belong to the same family, immediate or extended, or the same village. This means that Burmese children usually have abundant means of learning normally about the persons whose lives they claim to remember. Most of the statements of the Burmese children therefore provide little scientific evidence of any paranormal process. (However, their cases may sometimes provide such evidence in the occurrence of relevant birthmarks and birth defects among them [Keil & Tucker, 2000; Stevenson, 1997, 2001a].)

The undesirability of having a "Japanese child" in a Burmese family derives from the history of Burma during World War II. To understand this reluctance requires knowledge of Burma under the Japanese Army during the years 1942–45.

### **Burma under the Japanese Army in 1942–45**

The British conquered Burma during three wars of the 19th century. From 1885 until the 1930s they governed it as a dependency of their Indian Raj. In 1937 the British separated the government of Burma from that of India. At this time they also took some small steps toward self-government for Burma. When the Japanese entered World War II in December 1941, they quickly overran southeast Asia, and they drove the British out of Burma early in 1942. The British were not able to regain Burma until the spring of 1945 (Allen, 1984; Htin Aung, 1967; Slim, 1961).

When the Japanese began their invasion of Burma, they represented themselves as liberating the Burmese from their British oppressors. They had said they would make Burma independent (Htin Aung, 1967). Once in control of Burma, however, they treated it like a conquered province. Their needs became the law, and they enforced that law rigidly.

They controlled the entire economy. They requisitioned the livestock and sometimes conscripted the villagers to work for them. Several writers have described the callousness and cruelty of the Japanese in Burma. Referring to the Japanese soldiers one Burman wrote: "... these militarists surpassed all others the Burmese had ever known. The brutality, arrogance and racial pretensions of these men remained among the deepest Burmese memories of the war years"

(Ba Maw, 1968: 180). Another Burmese writer stated: "The period of Japanese military rule lasted only three years, but to the Burmese people it was more irksome than sixty years of British rule . . . The Japanese imposed a reign of terror" (Htin Aung, 1967: 301). The Japanese military police (Kempeitai) were notoriously arbitrary and cruel. Their interrogations included such tortures as pulling out fingernails (Nu, 1954; Rodriguez, 1983; Russell, 1958). Persons caught committing a minor crime, such as stealing a can of fish, might be beheaded (Russell, 1958). Anyone who annoyed a Japanese soldier or policeman could have his face slapped (Htin Aung, 1967). Nu (1954: 89) estimated that by 1944 "ninety-five percent of Burmans no longer respect[ed] the Japanese."

The memorable features of the Japanese soldiers were not all negative. The Burmese people had to acknowledge that the Japanese soldiers were hard-working, well-disciplined, and brave.

At the beginning of World War II (in Asia) the Burmese nationalists sided with the Japanese in the hope of obtaining independence through them, but in the last phase of the war they changed sides and joined the British. As the British defeated the Japanese in the early months of 1945, the Japanese Army retreated in some disorder. Many stragglers remained behind. The British Army captured some of them, and the Burmese villagers captured others and killed some. The attitude of the villagers toward the retreating Japanese depended on their previous relationships with the units of the Japanese Army in their area. Most of them had tried to stay out of the way of the Japanese soldiers. In general, the Japanese were endured when not actively disliked. Thousands of citizens of Rangoon (now Yangon) expressed jubilation when the British Army returned there in May 1945 (Slim, 1961).

### **Methods of Investigation**

#### *Ascertaining the Cases*

We did not learn of the (approximately) 750 Burmese cases of children who claim to remember a previous life by means of a systematic survey. Instead, we learned about them in several informal ways: from friends and correspondents of interpreters and assistants in Burma; from Burmans who took an interest in the research and looked for cases in their area; and from villagers who, watching us study one case, told us of another known to them. The subset of 24 subjects behaving like Japanese soldiers became included in the larger group spontaneously; we did not ask informants to look especially for such cases.

#### *Investigating Individual Cases*

The cases were investigated by means of interviews, often lengthy ones, with firsthand witnesses (usually the subject and his or her parents). Sometimes an

assistant interviewed informants before we did. When this happened we could note the consistency or variations in the informants' statements.

I.S. met and interviewed 14 of the subjects. J.K. obtained information about another five subjects. Information about the remaining five subjects derived from notes made by assistants in Burma. All of these assistants had worked with us for several years as interpreters and assistants. In the 14 cases for which I.S. interviewed the subjects, he also interviewed at least two older informants, usually including one or both of the subject's parents.

When we learned that a subject had said he (or she) had been a Japanese soldier in a previous life, we gave particular attention to eliciting information about "Japanese-like" behavior. The informants gave much of the relevant information spontaneously. According to them, the subject's behavior differed markedly, often startlingly so, from that of his or her siblings or other Burmese children. The field notes show, however, that some of the information came from questions by the interviewers. We developed a list of items about which we hoped to obtain information. The field notes show that we had focused attention on "Japanese-like" behavior more in some cases than in others.

We had no formal control group with which to compare the subjects of these cases. We compared them with the other children of their own families and communities, usually villages or towns.

## Results

### *Location of the Cases*

We found the cases of this group particularly in the triangular area of upper Burma enclosed by lines between Mandalay, Meiktila, and Pyawbwe. The major battles and most of the casualties of 1945 took place in this region, but we draw no conclusion from this regarding the cases of the present group, because in this region of Burma we were most active in finding and investigating cases. One of the persons most helpful in identifying cases for us lived in Pyawbwe, and another assistant, U Nu, lived near this region, in Taunggyi. They notified us of many other cases, in addition to the ones involving Japanese soldiers, in this region.

### *Demographic Features of the Cases*

Because 16 of the subjects were born before 1960, most of the subjects were adults when we first studied their cases. Seven were children or teenagers. The youngest subject was 6 years old, the oldest was 53. The mean age of all 24 subjects when we first met them was 24 years (S.D. = 10.74). The median age was also 24 years.

Among the 24 subjects, 16 were male and 8 were female. The female subjects were thus claiming to have lived a previous life as a male. The proportion of claimed sex change in the group was closely similar to that for other Burmese cases, which was 33% in a series of 230 cases (Stevenson, 1986). One of us

has published elsewhere a detailed report of a Burmese girl who claimed to remember the life of a Japanese soldier who was killed near her parents' home (Stevenson, 1977).

The parents of the subjects were all Burmese and all were Theravadin Buddhists.

#### *The Interval between the Presumed Date of Death and the Subject's Birth*

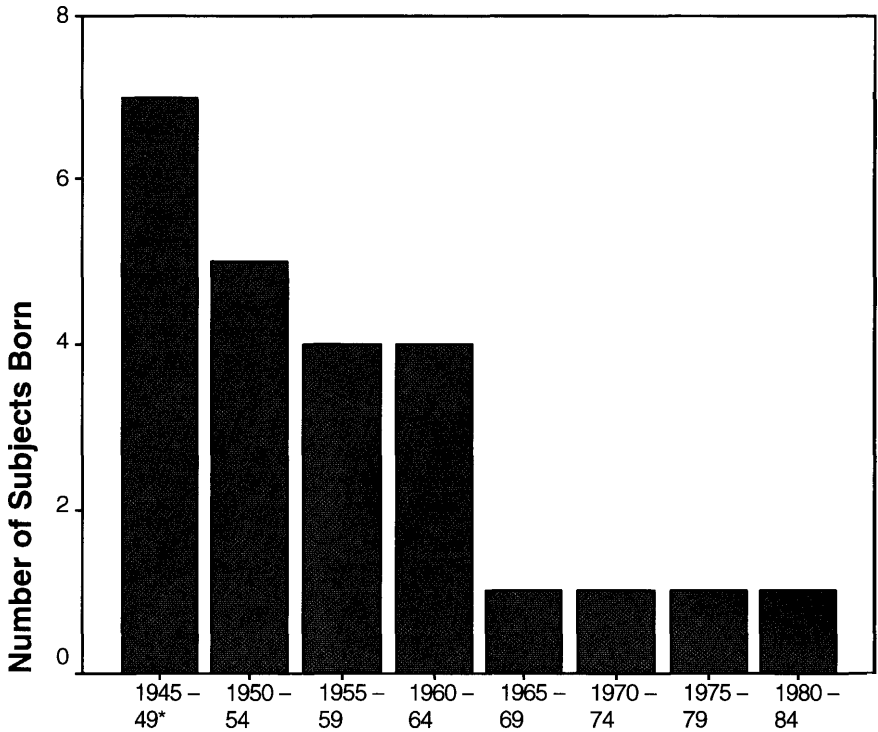
The Japanese Army suffered some casualties when it first invaded Burma in early 1942. During the next 3 years Japanese soldiers would be occasionally killed. For example, one Burmese subject remembered the verified life of a conscripted bullock-cart driver whom the Japanese executed (shot by a firing squad) after the driver had killed a Japanese soldier who was tormenting him (Stevenson, 1997). Most of the deaths of Japanese soldiers, however, probably occurred at the time of the renewed fighting in the late winter and spring of 1945. Even though we have not identified any of the Japanese soldiers of whom the children of this group spoke, we can state with confidence that the dates of death in the presumed previous life must have been in the years 1942–45 with no death later than May 1945. (The British captured Rangoon on May 2, and Japanese resistance had effectively ended by then.)

For many years after 1945 there were no Japanese persons in Burma apart from diplomats, a few businessmen, and, during occasional visits, members of the Japanese War Graves Commission.

If we assume that the Japanese soldiers of whom these children were speaking had been killed in about 1944–45, we can calculate the intervals between the deaths of these soldiers and the births of the children claiming to remember their lives. The oldest subject of the group was born in late 1943 or 1944. One subject was born in 1945; all other subjects were born later. The youngest was born in 1980. (These dates are not necessarily precise; they depended on the informants' memories.) Therefore, half of the subjects were born within less than 10 years after the presumed death, and the other half were born during the following 2.5 decades (Figure 1). The median interval was 10.8 years, which is appreciably longer than the median interval of 1.7 years between death and presumed rebirth that occurred in 125 verified Burmese cases of this general type (Stevenson, 1986).

#### *Identifying Statements Made by the Children*

Only two of these children stated a personal name. (In one of these cases, two different although somewhat similar names were recorded.) Perhaps more importantly, no child of the group gave any adequate address in Japan. At most, when asked where they came from, they would say "Tokyo" or perhaps "Hokkaido," but little or nothing more. Sometimes they mentioned family members, for example, a wife and children (also without names) or a civilian occupation, such as that of a confectioner. Some could say whether they were conscripted or volunteered to join the Japanese Army. A few said they could remember their rank in the army. Most said they remembered how they had died



### 5 Year Periods During Which Subjects Were Born

\* One subject who was probably born in 1943-44 is counted in this group.

Fig. 1. Birth years of the subjects shown in intervals of 5 years.

in the previous life. The deaths were nearly always violent and sometimes (in the case of stragglers) preceded by torture inflicted by the Burmese villagers. Most described being shot or blown up, two described being burned alive (by villagers), and one said he had cut his throat at the zoo in Rangoon, which the British had just captured.

#### *Contacts between the Subject's Family and the Japanese Army*

As mentioned, the Burmese villagers, in general, seem to have had as little as possible to do with the Japanese soldiers. Some trade and occasional employment or compulsory service were inevitable. We only learned of two instances in which something like a friendship developed between Burmese persons and the occupying Japanese. In the first of these cases the subject's mother had been a cook for a group of Japanese Army officers. One of the officers had died, and she afterwards dreamed of him and believed that he had been reborn as her son. The Japanese Army officers for whom she cooked liked the boy, and they often

took him to their quarters where he played during the day. In this case the concerned deceased Japanese Army officer must have died in 1943 or 1944, and the boy who was presumed to be the officer reborn was probably born in late 1943 or 1944. In the second of these cases, the subject's father had worked voluntarily for the Japanese and told us that he "became most friendly with them."

#### *Distance between Subject's Birthplace and Place Where Japanese Soldier Died*

As mentioned, we have not identified by name any of the Japanese soldiers whose lives the children claimed to remember. In a few cases the subject himself or herself stated where the soldier had died. These places were usually close to the subjects' birthplaces. For example, in one case the informants stated that the subject was born about 10 meters from where a wounded Japanese soldier had shot himself. In a case of female twins who both said they had been brothers and officers in the Japanese Army, the distance was also 10 meters.

In some cases the mentioned distance was greater. One subject said that she, as a Japanese soldier, had been killed outside her village, about 400 meters from her birthplace. Another subject remembered being killed near a monastery, which is about 2 kilometers from the subject's birthplace. The subject's father went to the area of the monastery to gather firewood; and the subject said that he, as a discarnate personality, followed his father home. Another subject (already mentioned), also claimed to have followed his father home, after committing suicide in the zoo at Rangoon; he was born at Magyibin, which is 1.5 kilometers from Pyawbwe and about 400 kilometers north of Rangoon. The subject's father had in fact visited the zoo in Rangoon before his wife became pregnant with the subject.

#### *Unusual Behavior of the Children*

*Japanese-like behavior.* These children exhibited a wide variety of unusual behaviors much of which we could describe as "Japanese-like." By this we mean that the traits are found more often or more fully developed among Japanese persons than among Burmese persons. We do not consider any of the traits, except nostalgia for Japan, to be exclusively Japanese. Their importance in these children derives from the contrast between their behavior and that of other Burmese children.

Table 1 lists the traits with explanatory notes about relevant details. We adopted a simple scoring system in which we judged the strength or prominence of a trait in the child. For example, if a child merely said he or she wanted to go back to Japan, he or she received a score of 1 for "nostalgia for Japan." If, however, the child lay on the ground writhing and crying to return to Japan, he or she received a score of 3 on this item. On the item concerned with learning to speak Burmese we gave the subject a score of 1 if he or she seemed backward in learning to speak Burmese and a score of 3 if he or she spoke some language other than Burmese. (This was presumably Japanese, but there were no Japanese persons or other speakers of Japanese in the area who could verify this.)

TABLE 1  
 Tabulation of Traits Typical of Subjects  
 Claiming Previous Lives as Japanese Soldiers

Trait	Examples and Possible Ratings
Nostalgia for Japan/wish to return to Japan	1 for just saying: "I want to go back to Japan" 3 for lying on the floor and crying to be returned to Japan
Preference for Japanese clothing	1 for reluctance to wear the Burmese <i>longyi</i> 3 for wearing trousers, belt, and boots
Annoyance w. British/American Persons	1 for regretting loss by Japan of a football match with British or Americans 3 for expressing anger when British/Americans mentioned
Complaints about heat in Burma	1 for grumbling about the heat in Burma 2 for stripping from the waist up in order to keep cool
FOOD: Raw or partially cooked fish; raw eggs FOOD: Sweet foods FOOD: Strong tea FOOD: Burmese food is too hot/spicy FOOD: Other	These items rated according to intensity of desire for Japanese food or rejection of Burmese food
LANGUAGE: Speaking a strange language	3 for speaking a language other than Burmese (conjectured to be Japanese)
LANGUAGE: Resistance to learning Burmese	1-2 for lateness in speaking Burmese
LANGUAGE: "Foreign" accent	1 for persistence of "foreign" accent in adulthood
RELIGION: Reluctance or refusal to observe Burmese religious practices?	1 for reluctance or refusal to show obeisance to Buddhist monks 2 for refusal to go to Buddhist temples
RELIGION: Unusual religion practices?	1 for worshipping while standing up
Unusual postures	1-3 for sitting on floor with buttocks resting on heels
Insensitivity to pain	1-2 according to insensitivity to pain 3 for rubbing salt in wounds to show how little affected by pain
Hardworking	1-3 according to greater industriousness than Burmese children
Cruelty and harshness	1 for slapping faces 3 for pulling limbs off live frogs
Unusual behavior at sight of airplane overhead	1-3 for a) either expressing the hope that the airplane would take subject back to Japan or b) showing fear and running for cover
Physical appearance	Has anyone commented that S "looks" Japanese or has Japanese features? 1-3 according to judgment of similarity mentioned by informants

The rating for "cruelty and harshness" referred to the conduct of the Japanese soldiers in Burma. We do not consider it a trait of civilian Japanese people.

Mr. Tosio Kasahara, a clinical psychologist of Tokyo, at our request studied the table and made no suggestions for its improvement (Table 1).

We had some expectations of developing a rating scale for the different traits listed in the table. We found, however, that readers of the field notes had too



much scope for personal judgments about an appropriate rating to assign for some of the traits. We are nevertheless confident that some of the subjects born more than a decade after 1945 (that is, in 1955 or later) showed as much Japanese-like behavior as subjects born earlier (that is, between 1945 and 1954).

*Cross-dressing by female subjects.* As mentioned, eight of the subjects were females and were therefore claiming to have undergone a change of sex from one life to another. The subjects in this group had as much Japanese-like behavior as the cases without this feature. Seven of these eight subjects showed a preference for boys' clothes when young.

*Play.* Informants for other cases, including those of Burma, have sometimes drawn attention to a subject's unusual play that corresponded to the vocation or the mode of death of the deceased person concerned in a case (Stevenson, 2000). Thirteen of the present subjects engaged in play at being a soldier. A fourteenth subject, a female, showed an unusual interest in guns, although she did not play at being a soldier. The informants did not report any child as having played at the civilian occupation that many Japanese soldiers would have had before enlistment in the Japanese Army.

#### *Relationships between Subjects and Other Family Members*

In general the subjects enjoyed harmonious relationships with other family members. We did not learn of any instance in which other members of the subject's family had rejected the subject because of their Japanese-like behavior. One subject showed extraordinary cruelty toward animals and a tendency to violence toward other humans, which repelled his family. The family's other members tried to persuade him to become gentler, but he did not respond to their entreaties. Another subject said he needed a pair of pliers to pull out the fingernails of playmates who annoyed him (in the style of the Kempetai). His family could not have approved of this.

Another subject boasted of being Japanese and as a child would say: "I am Japanese. What do you think of me?" At other times she complained of being treated by her family as a foreigner; this was unfair, because we felt that they loved her amply. When the Japanese War Graves Commission came to her area she proudly remarked: "They are our nationals."

In another case when the subject came home from school and found his parents seated in front of their house and chatting, he rebuked them for idleness, saying "Why do you not go and do some work? At home we have to earn our bread by working." In "my country," he said, "everyone goes to work when a siren sounds and remains at it until it sounds again." His parents responded to this behavior with forbearance and good humor.

#### *The Subjects' Adaptations to Their Situations*

In studying cases other than these, we have frequently observed that a subject's unusual behavior (matching the past life he or she describes) may persist long after he or she has forgotten all previously remembered images of

that life (Stevenson, 1987/2001b). This seemed particularly true of the children who said they had been Japanese soldiers. They seemed especially attached to Japanese styles of clothing. An extreme example of this occurred in an 18-year-old subject who habitually dressed as much like a Japanese soldier as he could: trousers, belt with large buckle, and boots; all this was quite different from the sandals and *longyi* tied at the waist worn by Burmese men and women. Another subject did not wear *longyis* until he was 15 years old. A third subject, whom we met when he was 24 years old, was then wearing a *longyi*, but he said that he still preferred wearing trousers and apparently did so when he could.

### Discussion

Before discussing alternative explanations of the cases, we will address problems concerned with their investigation.

Most of the subjects were in their late teens or early adulthood when we investigated their cases. This means that informants were sometimes recalling what the subject did or said 15 or even 20 or more years earlier. In some cases, however, the unusual Japanese-like behavior was persisting at the time of our interviews. Persons unfamiliar with research on anomalies often believe that details of cases like these become embellished with the passage of time, sometimes to the point of making the testimony worthless. This is wrong. With the passage of time, details become lost, not supplemented. Alvarado & Zingrone (1997–98) showed this for out-of-the-body experiences, and we showed it for cases of the reincarnation type (Stevenson & Keil, 2000). We are far from recommending delays in investigating these cases; the loss of detail from delays is certainly undesirable. For the present investigation, however, it had the somewhat compensating advantage of allowing us to learn about the variations among the subjects in their acceptance of the Burmese (as opposed to the Japanese) way of life.

Objections may also be raised to the use of questions, especially leading questions, during our interviews. Some may condemn questions, especially leading ones, as corrupting the testimony. Experiments, however, have shown that questions, compared with a spontaneous report, increase the amount of correct detail communicated (Marshall, 1969; Marshall et al., 1971). Other experiments have shown that leading questions stimulated answers that were slightly more accurate than nonleading ones (Richardson, 1960). Uneducated villagers may be quite capable of resisting guidance implied in an interviewer's question. An example of this occurred with one of the subjects of this report. When the interviewer asked the subject (a female) whether she had any special feelings about Americans or British people, she replied that she did not, but she did dislike Indians, because one had killed her in the life she said she remembered. (In 1945 the advancing British Army had important contingents of Indian troops [Slim, 1961].)

We will next discuss five possible interpretations of the cases.

A genetic component seems the least probable explanation. After the summer of 1945 there were no Japanese persons in Burma who could have fathered the children. More importantly, we have no evidence that a syndrome of about a dozen unusual behavioral features can be transmitted genetically.

A second possible explanation suggests that the child's parents influenced it to imitate Japanese behavior. We know of one case in which a parent in Turkey imposed the identity of President John F. Kennedy on his son. (John F. Kennedy was much admired in Turkey.) The boy's father named him Kenedi (in the Turkish spelling), and the false identification, as the reincarnation of John F. Kennedy, persisted into the subject's adulthood (Stevenson 1987/2001b). This interpretation, however, seems highly improbable for the cases presented in this paper. Given the almost universal dread and loathing of the Japanese soldiers by the Burmese people, one cannot conceive that any Burmese parent would wish to have a Japanese child or a child behaving like a typical Japanese soldier of World War II. Nor could the Burmese children born after 1945 (as all but two of these subjects were) have had any models for their unusual Japanese-like behavior. After that date there were effectively no Japanese in Burma.

A third possible explanation is negativistic behavior on the part of the child. Even though children in Myanmar had, after 1945, no living model of Japanese-like behavior, memories and discussions of the Japanese persisted after they had left. Parents might scold a misbehaving child by saying he or she was "behaving like a Japanese." Repetitions of such rebukes might instigate the child to adopt the identity of a Japanese soldier. A child could assume this role in order to annoy its parents. It could obtain the ingredients for Japanese-like behavior by paranormal means, sometimes referred to as super-psi (Braude, 2003).

A fourth possible interpretation is that of "possession." According to this concept a discarnate personality assumes control of a subject's body. With colleagues one of us has published reports of two cases of this type (Stevenson, 1966/1974; Stevenson et al., 1989). In typical (but not all) cases that qualify for this designation, a sudden and seemingly complete change of personality occurs, and the new personality persists unmodified. Nothing like this was reported for the children who claimed to remember lives as Japanese soldiers. They showed no sudden change of personality. Instead the Japanese-like traits manifested gradually as the child grew older and could express them. Then the influence of parents and peers influenced them gradually to behave in conformity with normal conduct in Myanmar (Burma).

The informants for these cases interpreted them as instances of rebirth as conceived in Theravadin Buddhism. According to their belief, at the death of the Japanese soldier, an aspect of his or her personality would be reborn into the *petaloka* (place of the departed) where it would persist as a "spirit" until rebirth in the terrestrial realm (Law, 1936; Nyanatiloka, 1952/1980; Story, 1959/1975). Unlike the terrestrial realm no environmental influence modifies personality in the *petaloka*. This accords with our finding that Japanese-like behavior manifested as

strongly in some subjects born 10 or more years after the presumed death as it did in those born soon after death.

Not all unusual behavior can be explained by genetics and environmental influences, alone or together. This seems to be true of the unusual Japanese-like behavior we have described. If we can exclude other factors in the development of such behavior, the way is open to consider a possible third component in the development of personality. The word reincarnation is applicable here, although this term is difficult to define in behavioral terms. We wish to suggest that some aspects of the deceased person's personality—not necessarily all of them—are transferred in a way which cannot readily be explained by the alternatives we have discussed.

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