

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Facial Features of Burmese with Past-Life Memories as Japanese Soldiers

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Abstract—More than 2,600 cases of children with past-life memories have been found all over the world, and there are a number of cases in which a person's physical features corresponded with his/her past-life memories. These features included birthmarks, birth defects, physiques, postures, facial features, etc. This paper explores the possibility that in international cases, where subjects claim to have lived in foreign countries in their past lives, there can be a correlation between past-life memories and their current facial features. The subjects in the present study were Burmese who claimed to have past-life memories as Japanese soldiers during World War II. According to Ian Stevenson and Jürgen Keil, who investigated these cases, some of the subjects were said by Burmese people close to them to look more Japanese than Burmese. The present study investigated whether Japanese people judged facial pictures of these subjects as more Japanese-like than those of Burmese who claimed to have past-life memories as Burmese.

Keywords: past-life memory—mind–body connection—facial feature—Japanese—Burmese

Introduction

Ian Stevenson, founder of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, studied children's reports of memories from past lives for more than 40 years. In his two-volume book (Stevenson 1997a) and elsewhere (Pasricha, Keil, Tucker, & Stevenson 2005, Stevenson 1993, 1994, 1997b), he and his colleagues presented cases in which a person's physical features corresponded with his/her past-life memories. These features included birthmarks, birth defects, physiques, postures, facial features, etc.

In international cases, in which subjects claim to remember past lives spent in another country, facial features can be particularly interesting

because sometimes people around the individuals judge that their faces look foreign to them. In this situation, it is helpful to clarify how people from the foreign country look at the facial features. If they also say the subjects' faces look like theirs, we will have additional grounds to suggest a correlation between physical features (facial features) and past-life memories.

Stevenson and his colleagues found 24 Burmese individuals who claimed to remember lives as Japanese soldiers who died in Burma (present Myanmar) during World War II (Stevenson & Keil 2005). When they were young, many of them showed a number of traits typical among Japanese, but usually not observed among Burmese: They complained about the hot climate and the spicy food of Burma. They would not wear Burmese clothes (longi), and would not observe Burmese-style postures in rituals. They also showed a strong desire to go back to Japan.

Some of these individuals were said to look more Japanese than Burmese. Because Stevenson took pictures of many of them, we can investigate whether these subjects really looked Japanese-like, as people whom Stevenson consulted claimed. If they did, or if Japanese people as well as Burmese people agree that they look more Japanese than Burmese, we will have reason for considering more seriously the connection between facial features and the claimed "past-life" memories. Stevenson was already aware of the importance of facial features in this context and presented pictures of some of the Burmese subjects, stating that "the peoples of these two nations [Japan and Burma] may have distinctive facial characteristics; a significant difference may exist, even though I cannot discern it and others who say they can discern it cannot describe it" (Stevenson 1997a).

In this paper, I will show that the Japanese consulted in this study did judge that the Burmese subjects who claimed to have past-life memories as Japanese soldiers (J-B cases) look more Japanese-like than those who claimed to have past-life memories as Burmese (B-B cases), so we have some evidence that facial features can be linked to past-life memories. I do not make any claim about the possible origin of the existence of such a correlation, but I do claim that the present findings suggest the importance of conducting further inquiry on this topic.

Methods

Picture Data

The picture data used in the present study were collected by Ian Stevenson and his colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s. Of the 24 J-B cases, 18 have pictures of the subjects, and I used all these pictures. For a control group I chose 18 B-B cases. There were 39 pictures available for this group. In

order to avoid a possible bias in selecting pictures for the control group, I used the combination of sex in past and present lives and the age when the pictures were taken as key features: I made pairs of a J-B picture and a B-B picture based on these two features so that they corresponded to each other as closely as possible. The attempt to choose pictures for the B-B group closely corresponding to those of the J-B group significantly reduced possible choices. But when there was more than one possible choice for the B-B group, I made a choice based on the case number, a six-digit number assigned to every case, and selected the picture of the case with the smallest number. This procedure yielded the 18 pairs shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Pairs of J-B Cases and B-B Cases

	Combination of Sex "Past Life" → "Present-Life"	AGE WHEN PICTURE WAS TAKEN	
		Japanese-Burmese Group (J-B Group)	Burmese-Burmese Group (B-B Group)
Pair 1	Male → Male	16	19
Pair 2	Male → Male	6	6
Pair 3	Male → Male	16	20
Pair 4	Male → Female	17	21
Pair 5	Male → Female	27	28
Pair 6	Male → Male	30	20
Pair 7	Male → Male	20	20
Pair 8	Male → Male	22	29
Pair 9	Male → Male	8	8
Pair 10	Male → Male	18	18
Pair 11	Male → Female	26	27
Pair 12	Male → Female	34	38
Pair 13	Male → Male	24	29
Pair 14	Male → Male	24	27
Pair 15	Male → Male	30	35
Pair 16	Male → Female	19	20
Pair 17	Male → Female	16	16
Pair 18	Male → Female	17	23

To protect the confidentiality of the subjects, the following measures were taken: (1) The pictures were shown to Japanese people without giving them any information about the people in the pictures other than their ethnicity; (2) The pictures were edited using an image manipulation program, Gimp for Mac (2.8.4p2), so that hairstyle, clothes, or the background would not give any clue as to the identity of the subject (all images were converted to black and white, and the background and clothes were painted in the same shade of color as that of the subject's hair); and (3) Each of the edited pictures was shown on a computer screen for only 10 seconds, during which time participants were busy judging how "Japanese-like" the pictures looked to them. Furthermore, the pictures were taken more than 20 years ago, so the people in the picture would not be recognizable to anyone who does not know them well.

Participants (Raters)

Forty-six Japanese who either lived in or who had stayed in Charlottesville, Virginia, participated in the study.¹ Twenty-one were males and 25 were females. Their mean age was 39.8 (SD = 9.5; range 28 to 63). I recruited them by personal introduction. They were shown a computer display on which the faces of the 43 Burmese appeared one by one. The pictures were ordered according to the numbers assigned randomly using Microsoft Excel for Mac 2011. They were pasted on a PowerPoint slideshow file with the age of the subjects when the pictures were taken. Each picture was shown for 10 seconds using the timer function of the PowerPoint application (for Mac 2011). The participants were asked to rate how Japanese-like the faces were using five-point Likert-type scale statements: (1) not Japanese-like at all; (2) not Japanese-like, (3) neither Japanese-like nor not Japanese-like; (4) Japanese-like; and (5) very Japanese-like.²

All participants provided written informed consent.

The research was approved by the University of Virginia Institutional Review board (IRB #2013-0333-00).

Results

The analyses were conducted based on the mean each subject obtained from the rating for Japanese-likeness.

SPSS 20 Statistics package for Mac was used for the analyses. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test revealed that the data distribution is normal in the J-B group (M = 2.80, SD = 0.59, range = 1.33 to 4.11) as well as in the B-B group (M = 2.36, SD = 0.56, range 1.11 to 4.06). The result of a paired-sample t-test showed that the J-B group and the B-B group differed

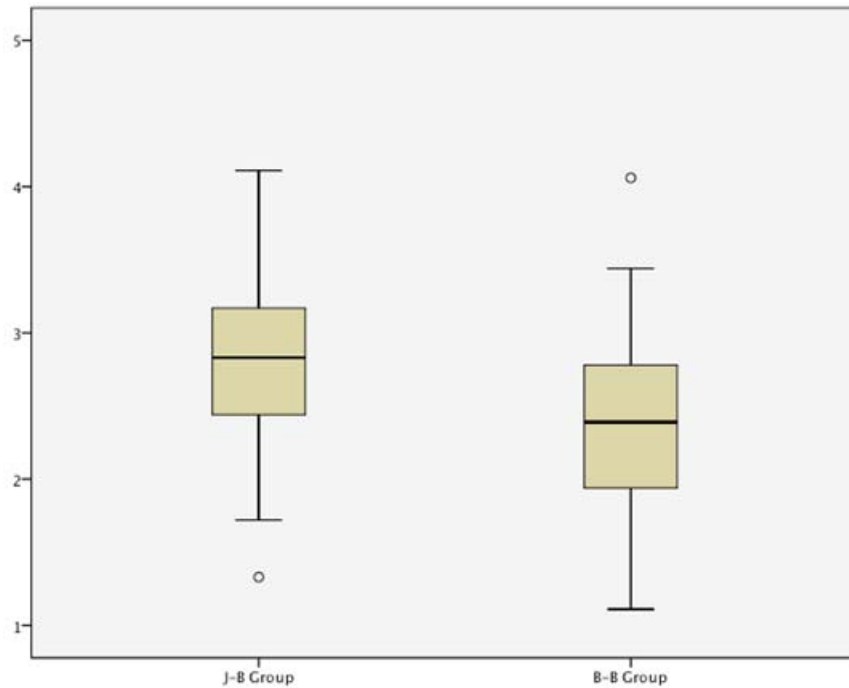


Figure 1. Difference of the rating for Japanese-likeness between the J-B and B-B groups (the circles indicate outliers).

significantly ($t = 10.634$, $df = 45$, $p < 0.001$, effect size = .85), with the former having higher scores. The box plot of the data is shown in Figure 1.

Discussion

It has been shown that the Japanese who participated in this study tended to judge the J-B subjects as more Japanese-like than the B-B subjects. Thus, we now have some grounds to suggest a correlation between past-life memories and facial features attributed to nationality.

In this study I relied on the subjective judgments of the participants. This raises an important but difficult question as to individual differences in judgment, which I cannot deal with here.³ One possible solution might be to use rapidly developing facial recognition technology (Akamatsu 1999, Burt & Perrett 1997, Cosmides, Tooby, & Kurzban 2003, Dupuis-Roy, Fortin, Fiset, & Gosselin 2005, Lu, Chen, & Jain 2005, Takigawa, Hosoi, & Kawade 2003, Yamaguchi 2002, Yoshikawa 1999). Especially promising

for the type of investigation being conducted here seems to be an analysis employed in Akiba (2001) for identifying differences among Asian faces. I would like to explore such possibilities in the future.

Notes

- ¹ The selection of the participants had to be made on the basis of convenience because of the relative scarcity of Japanese living in Charlottesville. According to the 2010 census data, only 73 (0.2%) of the total population of 43,475 were Japanese (<http://www.zip-codes.com/city/va-charlottesville-2010-census.asp>).
- ² To examine the possible influences of sex-change on facial features, they were also asked to rate how masculine or feminine the faces looked using a five-point Likert-type scale. Following an anonymous reviewer's suggestion, I do not report that part of the experiment in this paper. I believe that the exclusion of that part does not affect the main argument.
- ³ An anonymous reviewer pointed out the importance of knowing the actual facial features of the subjects and having scientific evidence (not anecdotal evidence) that these features are characteristic of Japanese rather than Burmese people, rather than that a group of selected Japanese participants judged things so. The present author believes that as an initial approach, the data based on unanalyzed subjective judgments of the participants is not without value and worth reporting as such. Identifying specific features for judgments is for the next stage and should be left for future research.

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