

# The Meaning of Life and Values in Northeast Asia

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What is the meaning of life? What values are fundamental and shared across cultures? What perceptions of life values are unique to a given society? When Pew Research Center carried out a Global Attitudes Survey in 2021, the results of this survey became the subject of great media and public interest in South Korea. Of the 17 countries with advanced economies, it was only in South Korea that ‘material abundance’ ranked first. In most of the other countries, ‘family’ ranked first. The possible reasons for this became the topic of heated debate within South Korea’s academic community. It was pointed out, in particular, that the design of the survey (in which people’s subjective responses were later coded, rather than presenting multiple-choice questions) may have led to misrepresentation or distortion of respondents’ subjective meanings in the data processing stage.

In an attempt to further explore the issue of how the meaning of life may be perceived differently according to country or region, researchers at Seoul National University Asia Center carried out another survey on values, entitled “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities.” In this survey, the residents of 15 major cities (12 of which were located in Asia) were asked a series of questions relating to social values and their contribution to one’s meaning of life.

This edition of *News from Northeast Asia* presents the results and insights obtained from the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities.” The overall design of the survey – along with the analytical methods used and some preliminary interpretations regarding what values are believed to be

essential to the meaning of life in Asia’s cities – are introduced by Dong-Kyun Im, of the Department of Sociology at Seoul National University, in “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities – Analysis of the Results on Values and the Meaning of Life.” In “Meritocracy in Asia: Beliefs in Its Ideals and Reality, and Life Satisfaction,” Yong Kyun Kim, of the Department of Political Science & International Relations at Seoul National University, examines how the ideal and reality of meritocracy, as well as the dissonance between the two, have an impact on life satisfaction for Asia’s urban residents. Finally, Jungwon Huh, based at Seoul National University Asia Center, uses the survey results to shed light on how young adults residing in Seoul regard family and

children in a way that is strikingly different from those residing in cities outside of Northeast Asia.

A vast amount of data was obtained from the 2022 “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities,” and the three pieces comprising this edition represent the preliminary results of analysis undertaken on just a fraction of this data. Researchers affiliated with Seoul National University Asia Center aim to carry out further in-depth analysis on the survey data to provide new insights on the topic of values for Northeast Asia, and indeed all of Asia, in the future.

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# SNUAC

Seoul National University Asia Center



The Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) is a research and international exchange institute based in Seoul, South Korea. The SNUAC’s most distinctive feature is its cooperative approach in fostering research projects and international exchange program through close interactions between regional and thematic research programs about Asia and the world. To pursue its mission to become a hub of Asian Studies, SNUAC research teams are divided by different regions and themes. Research centers and programs are closely integrated, providing a solid foundation for deeper analysis of Asian society.

## Social Values Survey in Asian Cities: Analysis of the Results on Values and the Meaning of Life

Dong-Kyun Im

Seoul National University Asia Research Center, along with Korea Research, conducted a survey in 2022 on social values and the meaning of life. As part of this survey, participants were asked to rate the importance of 11 options relating to one’s meaning of life. The results of the survey and the subsequent application of multiple correspondence analysis undertaken on the results provide some interesting implications of the perception of values amongst the city dwellers of Asia. Admittedly, comparisons between countries based on the survey data need to be approached with caution. For example, there may have been slight differences in the nuances of the survey form, which was translated into 12 different languages. In addition, because the survey was targeted only at the residents of major cities, the results cannot be seen to represent the opinions of each country as a whole. Nevertheless, there are interesting patterns that can be observed between the countries of Asia, which may be further explored in the future to obtain key insights into the similarities and differences in perceptions regarding ‘value’ in Asia.

The “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities” was carried out in 15 cities: Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, Singapore, Taipei, Hanoi, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi, Riyadh, Jerusalem, Ankara, London, Paris, and New York. The size of study subjects is 10,500, which consists of 700 adults per city. The participants of the survey were first asked to rate the importance of the following 11 options in terms of their contribution to one’s meaning of life: (1) family, (2) occupation and career, (3) material well-being,

(4) relationships with close acquaintances, (5) health, (6) freedom, (7) hobbies and recreation, (8) education or learning, (9) romantic relationships, (10) new experiences, and (11) faith. In addition, participants were also asked to select the three most important options among the 11 and rank them in terms of their significance.

Because the survey targeted 15 cities, it is not an easy task to visualize how each of the cities responded to each of the 11 items using tables or graphs. Therefore, in order to more effectively examine the differences between cities, multiple correspondence analysis was used. This is a methodological approach that can effectively visualize the number of people that selected a given option as the most important one in terms of meaning of life, allowing country-by-country comparisons. The results of the analysis are illustrated in Figure 1.

The distance between two cities or two options in Figure 1 represents the degree of correspondence, which was measured by focusing on ‘relative importance.’ For example, in the case that Option A was selected by the greatest number of survey respondents of a given city as one of the three most important options regarding the meaning of life, if the proportion of respondents who chose A is relatively low compared to other cities but the proportion of respondents who chose B is relatively high (although the absolute proportion is low), then that city is displayed as being closer to B. More specifically, the way to interpret the graph is as follows. After connecting a line from two points on the graph to the origin,

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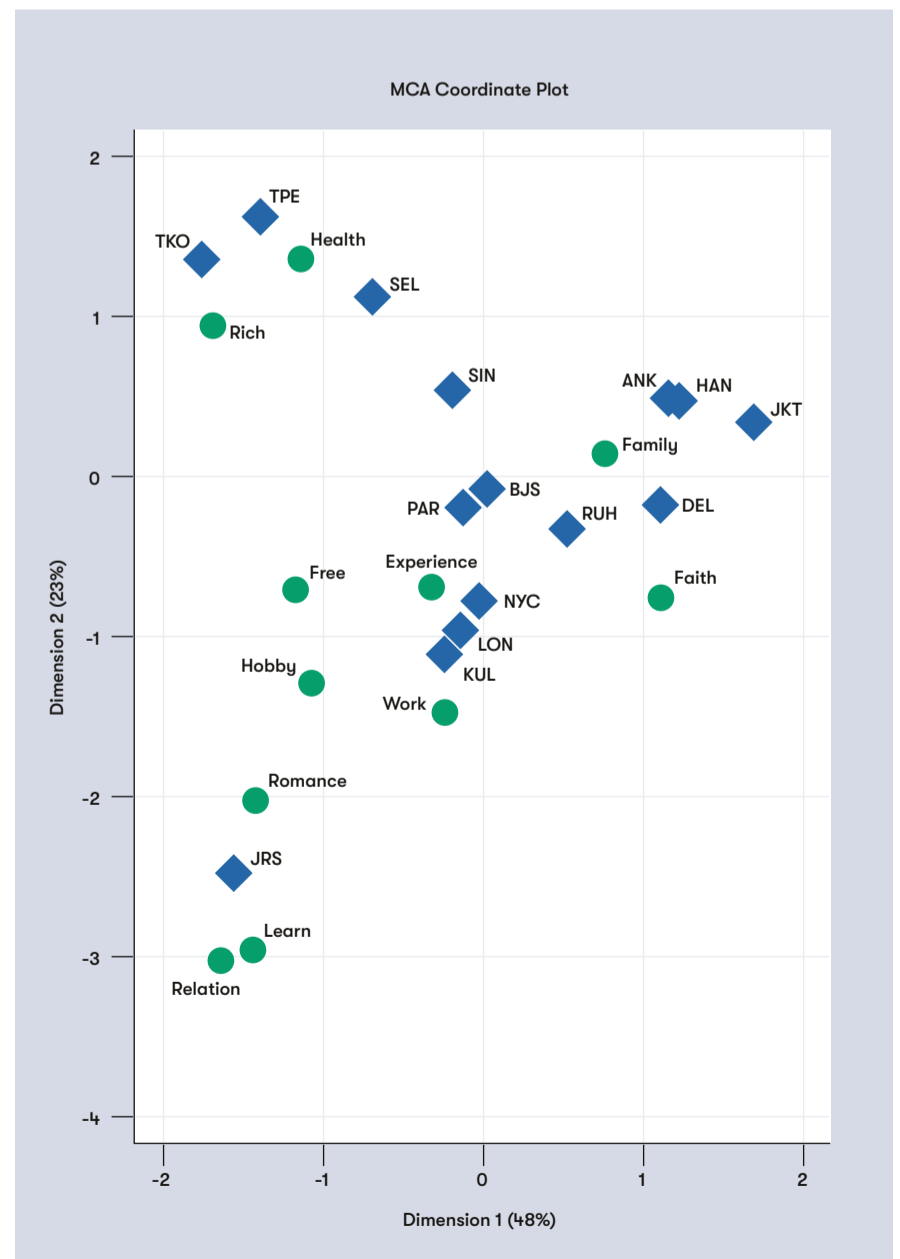


Fig. 1 (above): Results of the multiple correspondence analysis demonstrating the relationship between the 15 cities that participated in the survey (diamond) and the 11 options associated with the meaning of life (dot). The names of the cities are abbreviated as follows: Tokyo - TKO, Seoul - SEL, Singapore - SIN, Taipei - TPE, Beijing - BJS, Jakarta - JKT, Ankara - ANK, Hanoi - HAN, Riyadh - RUH, London - LON, New Delhi - DEL, New York - NYC, Paris - PAR, Jerusalem - JRS, Kuala Lumpur - KUL. (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023)

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the smaller the angle between the two lines, the higher the probability of the two points being selected at the same time; a larger angle indicates a relatively lower probability of the two being selected together. For example, the ratio of “health” and “material well-being” (labeled as “Rich”) being selected together with “Seoul” (labeled as “SEL”) was found to be relatively high, but the correspondence with “faith” was relatively low. The fact that the angle between “Seoul” and “family” is close to 90° indicates that the correspondence was found to be of an average degree – that is, the mean with respect to all cities.

Overall, a similar pattern could be observed for the cities of Northeast Asia and Singapore, with the exclusion of Beijing. In the case of these cities, “health” and “material well-being” were regarded as being relatively more important, and “faith” less so. It could also be observed that respondents from Tokyo (22.3 percent) or Taipei (17.0 percent) were more likely to choose “material well-being” as an important component of the meaning of life, compared to Seoul (13.7 percent).

One of the key criticisms of South Korean society that emerged as a result of the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Survey was that Koreans were only interested in material wealth and placed little value on enhancing the well-being of one’s inner self. A simple additional analysis was therefore conducted to see the extent to which such criticisms could be confirmed through this

survey. The average of respondents’ answers about the significance of three factors – (1) hobbies and recreation, (2) education or learning, and (3) new experiences – to their meaning of life was compared against the importance of material well-being. Variables were then constructed by calculating the difference, with higher values indicating that respondents had regarded material well-being to be more important than the other, non-material options. The average of these values by city is shown in Figure 2.

The graph presented in Figure 2 illustrates that, among the 15 cities, respondents from Tokyo and Seoul placed the highest relative importance on material well-being. Interestingly enough, in the case of Seoul, the absolute degree of importance placed on material well-being is indeed higher than in other cities, but it is not overwhelmingly high: Seoul was fourth out of 15 cities. However, since the degree to which hobbies and recreation, education or learning, and new experiences were seen to contribute to the meaning of life is relatively low for Seoul (12th out of 15 cities), the gap between the two types of values was greater than in most other cities. In other words, in the case of Seoul, the importance of material well-being appears to be relatively more prominent because the degree of meaning gained from the non-material sphere is seen to be relatively insignificant.

The analysis of the data from the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities” is ongoing, and only some preliminary results were presented in this piece. Differences between countries are based on cultural differences,

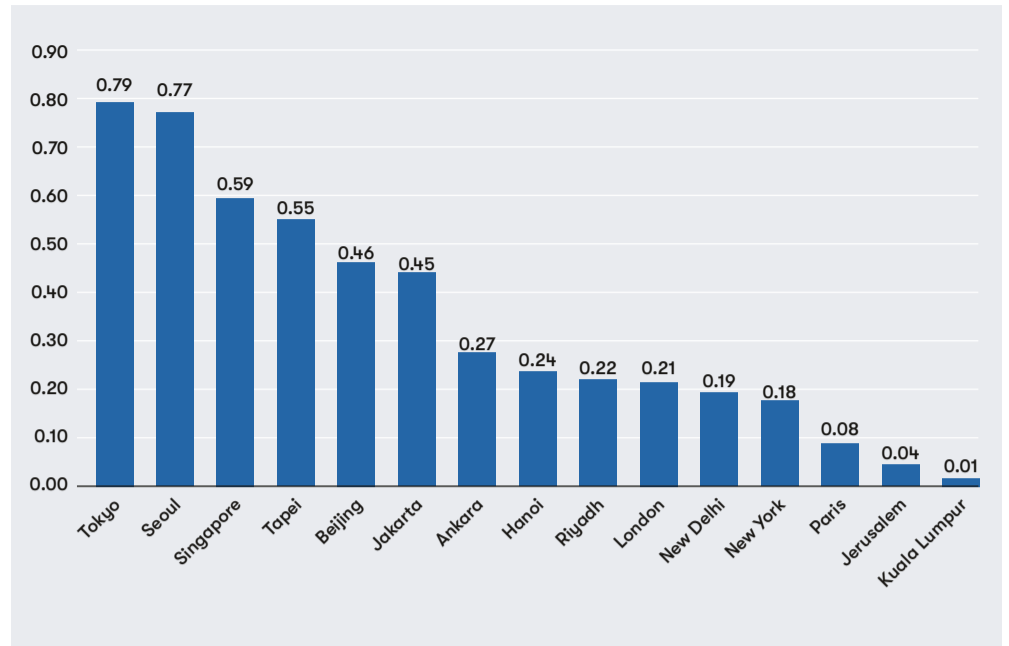


Fig. 2 (above): Values indicating the difference between the average of respondents’ answers about the significance of three categories – (1) hobbies and recreation, (2) education or learning, and (3) new experiences – were to their meaning of life compared against the importance of material well-being, according to city. (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023)

and so we must be careful about making any absolute value judgments. Nevertheless, the findings of the survey seem to suggest that the residents of Northeast Asian cities tend to regard material well-being and health as key elements of their meaning of life, and such residents place relatively less importance on the activities that may enrich their lives in . Perhaps this is because the latter are regarded as something that

can or should only be achieved when the former is sufficient. This mindset and other implications obtained from the survey will require further investigation in the future.

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## Meritocracy in Asia: Beliefs in Its Ideals and Reality, and Life Satisfaction

Yong Kyun Kim

How is belief in meritocracy related to satisfaction with life? If one sympathizes with the meritocratic principle that prizes should be distributed according to talents and efforts, but also believes that society does not adhere to this principle in practice, then how does this influence evaluations of one’s current life? This piece explores this question using the results of the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities.”

Two keywords that have been the subject of heated debate in Korean society over the past decade are “fairness” and “meritocracy,” a result of the younger generation speaking out against society’s existing compensation structure. This trend is reflected in the responses to questions regarding meritocracy and life satisfaction in the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities.” The rate of fairness being mentioned as a value to be pursued was low in all societies, but ten percent of respondents from Seoul chose fairness as the most important value. On the other hand, five percent of respondents from Tokyo and less than three percent of respondents from other cities mentioned fairness as the most important value that society should pursue.

How, then, does the tendency to pursue fairness based on meritocracy relate to an individual’s degree of satisfaction with life? The questions regarding meritocracy that were asked as part of the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities” consisted of four questions about whether one agreed with the principles of meritocracy, and an additional four questions about whether one believed that her society operated according to those principles of meritocracy. The first four questions concern the ideals of meritocracy; the other four questions measure the respondents’ belief in the reality of meritocracy. The survey questions were designed based on the hypothesis that the greater the difference between one’s

ideal of meritocracy and reality, the lower her life satisfaction would be. The analysis presented in this article focuses on the results of responses from a total of nine cities based in Asia, including four countries in Northeast Asia (Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China), four countries in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam), and one country in South Asia (India).

First, Figure 1 shows the distribution of the average ideal (Y-axis) and reality (X-axis) of meritocracy, as well as the average degree of life satisfaction by city (font size). The tendency to believe that meritocracy is desirable was highest in Hanoi, but it was surprisingly low in Seoul and Tokyo. The tendency to believe that society operates according to meritocracy was high in New Delhi and Hanoi, and it was low in Seoul and Tokyo. In particular, Seoul showed a much lower score than other cities in this regard. Life satisfaction by city was highest in the following order: New Delhi, Beijing, Jakarta, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Taipei, Tokyo, and Seoul. What is interesting is that, excluding Beijing, there is a clear regional pattern in which life satisfaction is highest in South Asia, lowest in Northeast Asia, with Southeast Asia located in the center.

In order to see how the gap between the ideal and reality of meritocracy is related to life satisfaction, the gap between the ideal and reality was calculated in terms of the difference and ratio between the two, and life satisfaction in each city was also calculated. The life satisfaction levels were traced, and as expected, a clear tendency for life satisfaction to decrease as the gap between the ideal and reality increased was observed. Life satisfaction was highest in New Delhi, where the gap between the ideal and reality was the lowest. Meanwhile, life satisfaction was lowest in Seoul, where the gap was the largest. Here, too, regional patterns are evident. Excluding Beijing, the gap becomes bigger and life satisfaction becomes lower in the following order: South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia.

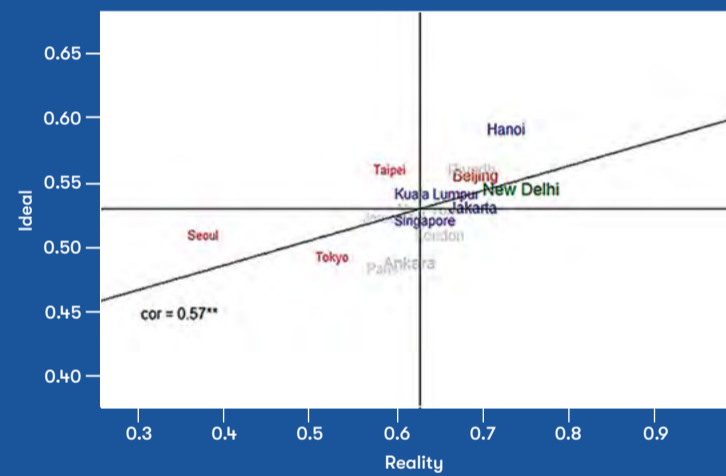


Fig. 1

Fig. 1 (top): City average values for ideals and reality of meritocracy and life satisfaction. (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023).

Fig. 2 (centre): Effects of the gap between the ideal and reality of meritocracy on life satisfaction (at the level of the individual). (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023).

Fig. 3 (below): Effects of the ideal and reality of meritocracy, respectively, on life satisfaction (at the level of the individual). (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023).

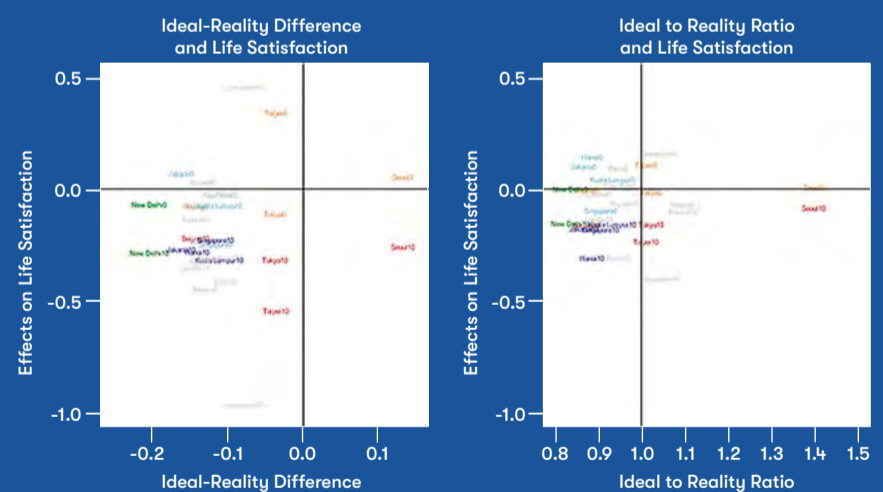


Fig. 2

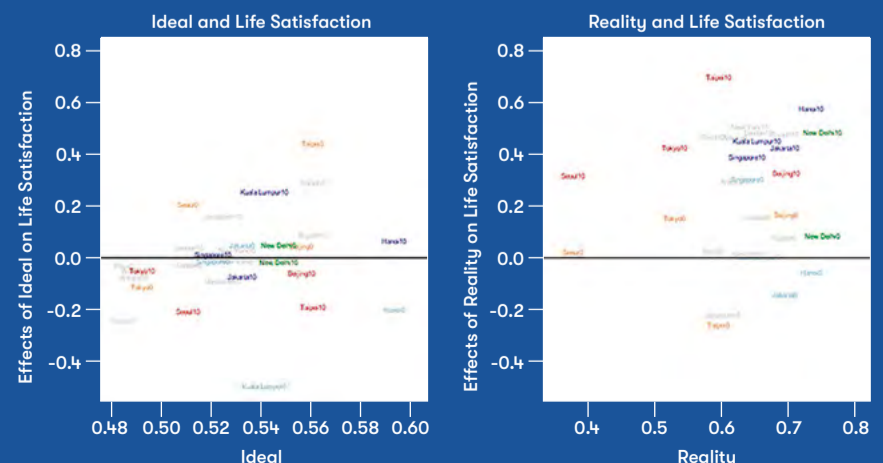


Fig. 3