

# Depopulation in East Asia: An Opportunity to Rethink Long-Term Human-Nature Relationships

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## Introduction

First I would like to thank Hideaki Fujiki for inviting me to participate in this symposium. It is a great honour and I have been looking forward to meeting everyone and hearing the exciting talks scheduled throughout the weekend. I would also like to thank Mihiro Yasui and Masahiro Kashima for organising the New Generation Panel, and for their friendly support in preparing for this event. Finally, I would like to thank everyone for coming.

As a member of the New Generation Panel, today I want to talk about why I feel hope for the future – hope for the environment and for us humans. This may surprise you. My generation has inherited a huge burden: on the one hand we are facing environmental destruction in the form of pollution, biodiversity loss and global warming. On the other hand, our lives are subject to the turmoil and insecurities of a globalised economy. These issues are not limited to East Asia. That said, the role East Asia plays in manufacturing our modern lifestyles means it is and will remain a hot spot for environmental issues.

But my generation also finds itself in a unique situation: for the first time since the beginning of the dramatic population growth that accompanied the age of industrialisation, we are witnessing shrinking populations on a national scale – something I believe is a huge opportunity. Today, I argue that depopulation may be our chance to break the cycle of violence and destruction that imperialism and capitalism have created. I argue that depopulation opens a possible path from exploitation to reciprocity, from conflict to symbiosis.

## Imperialism, capitalism and hope for a better life

What drives humans to damage their environment -- the environment we depend on for our livelihoods? We humans are not that different from other animals or even plants in our search for resources, and in our ability to grow our communities by having children. Throughout history, this has often meant pushing the boundaries, exploring new places, and expanding our area of living so we could eat and thrive. Underneath lies what I believe is an idea fundamental to what it means to be human: our hope for a better life, and our hope for a better future – for ourselves and for our children. But this idea is not the cause of our environmental problems.

The fundamental hope for a better life is reflected both in our culture and in our economy. It is instrumentalised by two of the strongest forces that have shaped the world as we know it today: imperialism and capitalism. The hope for a better life was targeted by propaganda to justify militaristic expansion. It was also used to convince workers to accept the logic of capitalism as their only way to realize their aspirations. But as we all have witnessed, imperialism and capitalism generate conflict on multiple levels: armed conflict and atrocious wars, exploitation of both people and the environment to extract natural resources, and so-called externalities in the form of pollution, destroyed habitats and global warming. The hope for a better life was

translated into the imperative of economic growth at all costs. At first, the argument was that economic growth is necessary to development and necessary for improving living conditions. Subsequently the narrative changed. Population growth became a desired condition to fuel economic growth and profit by stimulating demand and supplying the necessary labour force.

Not everyone is convinced economic growth is the only solution for a better life. In fact, ecologists have pointed out for decades that our current economies and lifestyles are unsustainable. As the World Wildlife Fund has shown in its Living Planet Report, we are currently using the resources of one and a half planets. How can we reduce our resource consumption to within the limits of Earth? Researchers such as Giorgos Kallis argue we need degrowth –to downscale production and consumption and shrink our economies. A better life does not have to mean more consumption. Indeed, the argument is that we can reduce consumption while improving well-being – as the saying goes, “Enough is as good as a feast”. Degrowth calls for – and here I quote – ‘a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed’. However, a transition towards degrowth can be made more difficult by an increasing population. On the contrary, depopulation is widely associated with economic contraction. Does this mean Japan today and other countries in the future are already on the right way?

#### Depopulation: a blessing in disguise?

Why is depopulation feared? Rising human development, and especially the improved education and rights of women have lowered the birth rate. As a result, the structure of the age pyramid changes and countries’ total population peaks, then begins to fall. For example, Japan’s population this year fell by a record number of 270,000 – or the size of a medium-sized city. Both politicians and the media portray this as a phenomenon that needs to be stopped at all cost. They argue depopulation threatens economic growth as well as social systems that are built on a specific population structure – for example the pension system, where a majority of young people collectively support the retirement of previous generations. Also common are reports about rapidly aging and eventually disappearing rural villages. Already, schools and universities are closed for a lack of students, while employers complain about difficulties finding new workers. More than anything, however, depopulation signifies economic contraction and degrowth. These are not compatible with the broad political goals of economic growth and the dominant narrative of progress.

But depopulation may also hold the key to a better life and a better future. Peter Matanle and Roger Martin have coined the term depopulation dividend, and I will draw upon their work to argue that depopulation can have a number of environmental and socio-economic benefits. I further argue that depopulation provides an opportunity to re-think and re-shape our relationship with nature to achieve a shift from exploitation to reciprocity, from conflict to symbiosis.

According to Matanle and Martin, a key aspect of the depopulation dividend is environmental. Both Japan and Korea have ecological footprints that are much larger than their natural resources can sustain. This means both countries depend on the ecological services and natural capital provided by other countries. They must either reduce their population or their resource consumption by over 80%. We can see that the more the population is reduced, the less consumption must be reduced. This problem is not limited to Japan or Korea, but will also hit China in the future – just on a much larger scale. What about the disappearing villages? The loss of villages and abandonment of land does not indicate that the land itself is disappearing. Instead, these places will gradually be "taken back by nature". As a result, wildlife enjoys

increased habitat, with potential benefits to biodiversity conservation. In urban areas, reduced development pressure and a rise of vacant lots may provide a rare opportunity that would usually only present itself after the destruction of a war: the opportunity to ecologically retrofit cities with green infrastructure, making them more liveable and sustainable. A reduced population and reshaped landscape may allow Japan, which is currently importing over 60% of its food, to improve food, energy and water security from own resources. In turn, Japan could rely less on exploiting the resources of poorer countries.

Matanle and Martin also argue that depopulation could bring a shift in form of socio-economical changes. These changes are similar to those envisioned by the degrowth movement – a focus on efficiency and competition is replaced by striving for sufficiency and well-being. Fewer children mean we have to concentrate on and invest in quality education, taking time to think and learn together. Rather than treating humans as expendable assets, the value of every single individual emerges anew. As a result, depopulation could foster cooperation over competition – a paradigm that is emerging from the work of researchers who are looking at the question of what a ‘good life’ means.

### The new good life

What does it mean for humans to live a good life? New research is showing us how much our well-being depends on our environment. First, we depend on ecosystem services for our health. Plants filter the air we breathe and help to cool our cities. They are our best hope to absorb CO<sub>2</sub> out of the air and are thus vital allies in the fight against global warming. Contact with plants relieves stress and improves affective, cognitive and physiological restoration. Access to nature is fundamentally important to children’s development, to the degree that simply growing up with a green view will enhance for example their ability for self-discipline.

Second, we depend on biodiversity for medicine and rich, resilient ecosystems. The diversity of life offers us lifetimes worth of discovery. We are just learning what cures we might lose if we take all of the planet for ourselves. The biologist E. O. Wilson has proposed to set aside half of Earth for wild animals and plants. Researchers have shown again and again that without biodiversity, everyone is worse off.

Finally, we depend on ecological, sustainable agriculture to feed us with good food that is more than just nutrients. Agroecology offers a way to apply ecological principles to agroecosystems. It is a science, a movement as well as a practice. Research shows it can provide us with more food than conventional agriculture without creating the agricultural deserts of industrial monocultures. It requires that we study not just our own needs, but to re-think our relationship to animals and plants – as consumers and producers transitioning to sustainable agrifood systems.

The new image of a good life that is emerging is an image of us humans as deeply rooted in a social, cultural and environmental nexus, entangled with the life around us. Our happiness is not born from winning a competition for resources. Evidence demonstrates that happiness comes from engaging with our surroundings, from fostering relationships, and from doing something meaningful and positive.

### Conclusion

For this reason, I want to end by proposing such a meaningful and positive task. As inhabitants of East Asian countries which face depopulation now or in the near future, we have the opportunity to escape the downward spiral of economic growth and environmental destruction.

Our task is now to start giving back, to care for our environment. Our task is to learn how to be responsible stewards, to repair the environmental damage we have done. Let's move from conflict to symbiosis by using depopulation to achieve positive degrowth. Let's make sure nobody has to exploit the environment or themselves because they worry about food and shelter. Because in the end, what could be more meaningful than building a better life and a better future – not only for ourselves, but for all living beings around us?

Thank you for your attention.

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