

# The Paradox of Relational Well-Being: A Comparative Study of South-East and East Asian Countries

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the relational dimension of social well-being using three indicators: perception, interaction, and participation. The data of seven countries, namely the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, are comparatively analyzed focusing on the three indicators. The relational dimension of social well-being is related positively to the quality of life. The tendency shown by the comparative data indicates that the higher the economic wealth, the lower the relational well-being. This tendency is apparent from the difference in regional patterns among East Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) and South-East Asian countries (Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia). It is this relation between economic wealth and relational well-being that is defined in this study as the paradox of relational well-being. The data set shows that South-East Asian countries have higher levels of relational well-being than East Asian countries whose economic wealth is relatively higher. At the community level, there is a higher quantity and quality of social relations in South-East Asian countries. The same pattern is also true for each of the three indicators: perception, interaction, and participation.

## Keywords

relational well-being, quality of life, South-East Asian countries, East Asian countries

This study aims to examine relational well-being in seven countries: Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Based on geographical area, these countries can be divided into two regions: South-East Asia and East Asia. The South-East Asia region is represented by Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The East Asia region is represented by Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. For the purpose of comparative analysis, this study employs a regional-based approach to similarities and differences between nations associated with the given geographical region. Using this analytical approach, the

review of relationships between relational well-being and quality of life in these countries will consider various regional issues, including their cultural, political, and economic characteristics.

Based on Human Development Index

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(HDI) scores, each region indicates a specific level of HDI. The East Asia region represents countries with a high HDI level while South-East Asia represents countries in the middle category of HDI. By means of a regionally based comparison, this study discusses relational well-being, which is measured by three indicators: perception, interaction, and participation. This study focuses its analysis on the paradox of relational well-being that is manifested as an inconsistency between the country's economic well-being and its relational well-being. The results of this study show that the relational well-being index in South-East Asian countries is higher than East Asian countries with respect to the score of each indicator as well as to their aggregate. The political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts of the two regions play important roles in shaping the relational well-being of their people.

The study of social well-being principally discusses people's quality of life in a country. In general, quality of life represents the conditions of objective and subjective well-being of individuals and communities. The HDI score represents the objective indicators of well-being, whereas the Happiness Index represents the subjective indicators of well-being. In this regard, countries' economic and social policies are believed to contribute to both indexes.

Koo et al. (2016) explain that the concept of social well-being is closely related to experience and behavior at interpersonal and societal levels. They note that by adding the word "social" to the concept of well-being, we focus on the nature of individual relationships in everyday life and their interaction with the institutional and normative aspects of society.

Helliwell (2003) as cited by Koo et al. (2016) showed that the degree of connectedness has a positive effect on individuals' subjective well-being.

In discussing the paradox of relational well-being, this study elaborates the main idea of the Easterlin paradox that underlies a nonlinear relation between the level of a country's economic welfare and the happiness of its people. Easterlin (1974, 1995, 2001, 2013) sees that economic growth does not necessarily relate to increasing happiness in the long term. This paradox can be applied when comparing developed and developing countries, which in this paper, are represented by the two regions, South-East Asia and East Asia.

In this study, the source of the data on HDI scores is the 2016 UNDP Report while the Happiness Index for the seven countries is referred to in the World Happiness Report of 2017. The following table illustrates the HDI and Happiness Index scores.

Table 1 shows that the East Asian countries, namely Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, have higher HDI scores and rankings than their South-East Asian counterparts. These three are included in the 2016 UNDP Report in the category of countries with very high HDI scores. Meanwhile, their South-East Asian counterparts are categorized as medium HDI countries, apart from Thailand whose HDI score is categorized as high.

With regard to the Happiness Index, the data presented in Table 1 indicate a relatively similar pattern in which East Asian countries have higher Happiness Index scores than South-East Asian countries. However, if we take a close look at their rankings, we see that the gap between the countries in both regions

**Table 1.** HDI and the Happiness Index in Seven Countries

Country	HDI (2015)	Happiness Index (2016)
Indonesia	0.689 (medium HDI-rank 113)	5.262 (rank 81)
Thailand	0.740 (high HDI-rank 87)	6.424 (rank 32)
Philippines	0.682 (medium HDI-rank 116)	5.430 (rank 72)
Vietnam	0.683 (medium HDI-rank 115)	5.074 (rank 94)
Taiwan	0.882 (very high HDI)	6.422 (rank 33)
South Korea	0.901 (very high HDI-rank 18)	5.838 (rank 55)
Japan	0.903 (very high HDI-rank 17)	5.920 (rank 51)

Sources: Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2017; UNDP 2016.

is not as wide as the gap between their HDI rankings. In fact, Thailand ranks higher than Taiwan by one point. This raises the question of why the wide gap in HDI ranking between the two regions is not followed by a gap in their Happiness Index rankings.

If we take a closer look at each country, Table 1 shows that Japan has the highest HDI score, while Thailand has the highest Happiness Index. The country that has the lowest HDI among the seven countries is the Philippines, while the lowest Happiness Index score belongs to Vietnam. It is interesting that Thailand, with regard to HDI, ranks below Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, but ranks higher on the Happiness Index. Thus, the data does not consistently show a positive relation between the HDI and the Happiness Index but contradicts the premise that a country with a high HDI score will necessarily have a high Happiness Index.

The cultural and historical contexts of a country contribute to the status and condition of its quality of life as indicated by the value of the HDI and the Happiness Index. Among the seven countries discussed in this study, Vietnam is the “youngest” as its reunification was not declared until 1976. However, its ongoing development through rapid economic progress has resulted in a relatively high HDI score, where it ranks more highly than the Philippines. Nevertheless, Vietnam’s Happiness Index fell below other South-East Asian countries. Its “recent” independence and post-war traumatic experience are assumed to be contributors to this result.

At the same time, we can assume that the political situation in the Philippines’ post-Marcos’ era, which is plagued by conflicts and political unrest, has contributed to its low HDI score. Compared to the Philippines, Thailand has also experienced political instability in the recent past. However, in contrast to the Philippines, the presence of an absolute monarchy in Thailand, along with Buddhism, which constitutes the basis of Siamese culture, has contributed to restoring balance in the community. Lately, the present king of Thailand, H. M. Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), has promoted the concept of

“economic sufficiency” to guide people and companies to deal with the adverse effects of globalization. This can be seen as a factor supporting Thailand’s high scores on the HDI.

As for South Korea, Bridges (2014) suggests that the country is guided by a concept of soft power known as the Korean Wave (*hallyu*) that is promoted throughout the culture. Since 2000, the Korean Wave has been spread widely through popular culture and is penetrating the global market, thereby contributing significantly to South Korea’s economy. As an industry, *hallyu* affects South Korea’s economic and political development and, over time, contributes to its high HDI score. In general, the concept of “hard work” as a virtue held by East Asian society is one of the driving factors that need to be considered in understanding the high HDI scores achieved by the region. Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan embrace this concept in a way that shapes the culture and values of their society.

An altruistic value embedded in the ideology of working hard becomes apparent when we scrutinize the phenomenon of suicide in some East Asian societies. Japan is a good example. Suicide is not merely a personal issue, but rather an expression of personal responsibility such that a member of society is required to work hard so that society can continue to run well. According to statistical data (WHO 2011), 24.4 per 100,000 individuals commit suicide in Japan annually. Suicide is mostly committed by men aged between 55–64 years. The causes include loss of work, bankruptcy, bullying (*ijime*), and so forth. Nevertheless, the economy became the most significant factor affecting suicide rates in Japan after the long recession of 2000 (Kawanishi 2008). This so-called altruistic suicide—to borrow Durkheim’s terminology—thus reveals how deeply the culture of hard work is internalized among individuals in Japan. Accordingly, the capability of individuals to meet the demands of this culture becomes an influential factor in their subjective well-being.

At this point, we see a tendency in

the countries examined: the higher the economic wealth, the lower the relational well-being. This tendency is apparent from the differences in regional patterns between East Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) and South-East Asian countries (Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia). There are several factors that work in accordance with the context of each country in shaping this condition. This relationship between economic wealth and relational well-being, defined in this paper as the paradox of relational well-being, is the focus of this study.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual definition provided by Koo et al. (2016:45) defines social well-being as “a combination of perception of individual life conditions, their quality of relationship with others, and the conditions of society they live in.” According to this definition, there are three dimensions in the measurement of social well-being, namely personal, relational, and societal. Relational well-being means that people have quality relationships with others and have developed favorable attitudes toward others (Koo et al. 2016:45). This study analyzes this relational dimension of social well-being (SWB) using three indicators: perception, interaction, and participation. The data of seven countries, namely the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, are comparatively analyzed according to the three indicators. The relational dimension of social well-being is related positively to the quality of life. The social quality of life requires four conditional factors: socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment (Koo et al. 2016:45).

The theoretical assumption made is that the higher the positive perception, the higher the positive quality of relationships with others will be, and the higher the positive participation individuals make in their communities, the higher the relational well-being they will experience; this in turn will

increase the quality of social life. Conversely, the less positive perceptions are made, the less the positive quality of relationships will be with others, and the less positive participation there is in the community, the lower the relational well-being will be; this in turn will decrease the quality of social life.

The perception indicator is measured by the level of trust respondents have in their interactions with family, neighbors, friends, and colleagues in their communities. Interaction is measured by the level of intensity and frequency of interaction, and the number of people with whom respondents interact in their communities. Participation is measured by the level of intensity and frequency of respondents’ participation in common activities in their communities. These indicators are analyzed statistically to formulate the composite index of relational well-being.

## METHODOLOGY

This study applies a mixed method research strategy by using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. For the quantitative data analysis, this research relies primarily on the social well-being data set of seven countries provided by the Senshu Center for Social Well-being Studies. Various questions relating to the relational dimension of well-being have been aggregated and given index scores to provide a suitable comparison between South-East Asian countries and East Asian countries. The data are further described in Appendix 1 (Indonesia).

Second, the study also employs qualitative data analysis to support the quantitative comparisons. This method of analysis is limited to the Indonesian case study where in-depth interviews were conducted to describe the local elements that are related to the relational dimension of well-being. Qualitative data were collected in the Indonesian Provinces of Banten, Yogyakarta, and Bali. The methodological criteria for selecting these three particular provinces were the presence or absence of a particular dominant religion, the presence or

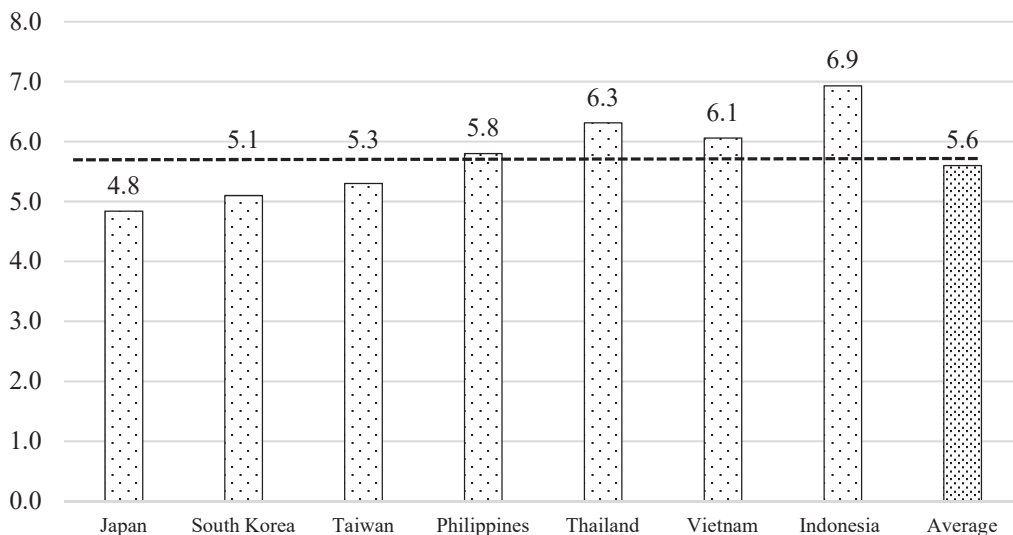
absence of a particular dominant race and/or ethnicity, and the degree of social exclusion related to relational well-being.

It is hoped that further qualitative data from the other six countries, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam will be available in the near future to provide a more comprehensive comparative

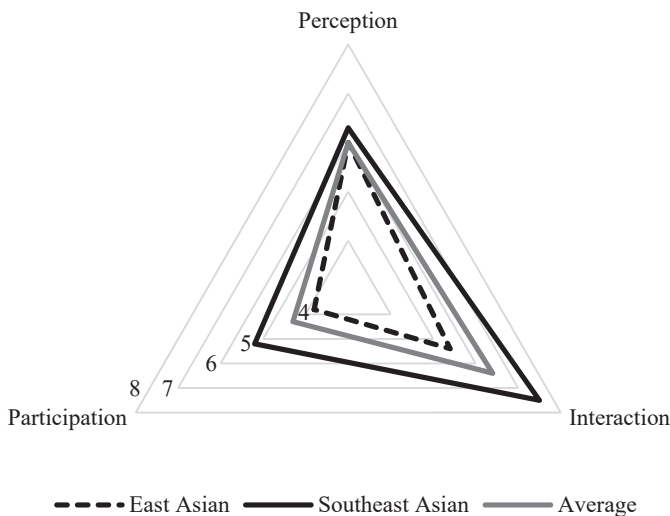
analysis of relational well-being in all seven countries.

### DATA DESCRIPTION

*An Analysis of Relational Well-Being in Asian*



**Figure 1.** An Analysis of Relational Well-Being in Seven Countries



**Figure 2.** A Comparison of Perception, Interaction, and Participation in Seven Countries

**Table 2.** Relational Well-Being and its Subcomponents in Seven Countries

Country	Relational Well-Being	Perception	Interaction	Participation
Japan	4.8	5.9	5.1	3.5
South Korea	5.1	5.8	5.3	4.3
Taiwan	5.3	6.2	5.7	3.8
<i>East Asian Average</i>	5.1	6.0	5.4	3.8
Philippines	5.8	6.3	6.5	4.6
Thailand	6.3	6.1	7.9	5.0
Vietnam	6.1	5.7	7.6	5.0
Indonesia	6.9	6.9	7.9	6.2
<i>Southeast Asian Average</i>	6.3	6.3	7.5	5.2
<i>Overall Average</i>	5.6	6.0	6.4	4.3

Table 2 depicts the index for relational well-being and its constituent dimensions: perception, interaction, and participation. The overall score of relational well-being for the seven countries is 5.6. In the South-East Asia region, the average score of relational well-being is 6.3. In the East Asia region, the average score of relational well-being is 5.1. The scores show that South-East Asian countries, such as the Philippines (5.8), Thailand (6.3), Vietnam (6.1), and Indonesia (6.9), have a higher index of relational well-being than East Asian countries, such as Japan (4.8), South Korea (5.1), and Taiwan (5.3).

In general, the relational well-being index shows that South-East Asian countries have a higher level of relational well-being than East Asian countries, particularly on the dimension of face-to-face interaction. There is a higher quantity and quality of social relations at the community level in South-East Asian countries. Furthermore, the same pattern is followed by the three derivative dimensions of relational well-being; South-East Asian countries have higher levels of perception, interaction, and participation than their East Asian counterparts.

### *Perception*

Figure 3 shows the general level of perception i.e., degree of trust towards other individuals and social groups in each country. The average score of perception in the seven countries (ASIAN) is 6.0. South-East Asian countries, such as the Philippines (6.3),

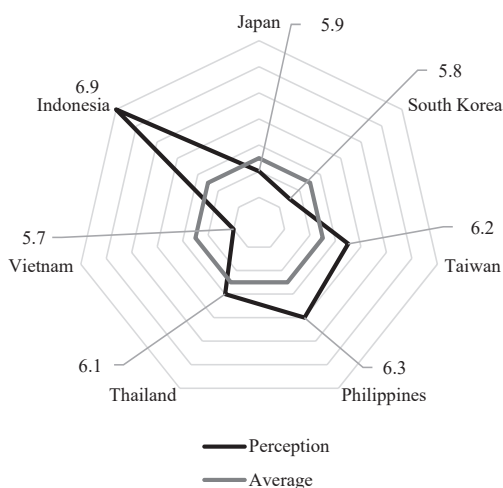
Thailand (6.1), Vietnam (5.7), and Indonesia (6.9), have a higher index of perception than Japan (5.9), South Korea (5.8), and Taiwan (6.2). On this dimension, it is interesting to note that Vietnam appears to have the lowest level of perception among the South-East Asian countries.

### *Interaction*

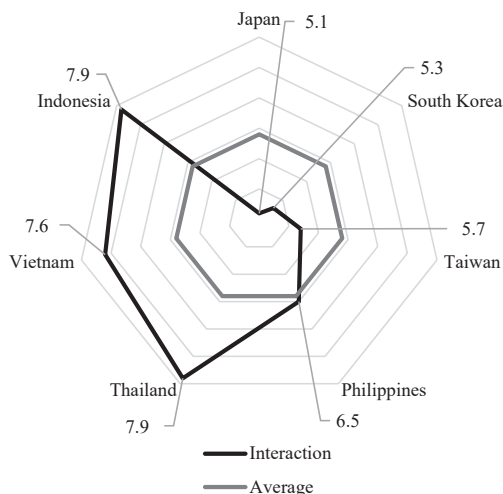
Figure 4 depicts the degree of interaction i.e., the frequency and intensity of face-to-face interaction between individuals and their family/neighbors. The data show that, in general, the average score of interaction in seven countries (ASIAN) is 6.4. South-East Asian countries such as the Philippines (6.5), Thailand (7.9), Vietnam (7.6), and Indonesia (7.9) have a higher level of interaction than East Asian countries such as Japan (5.1), South Korea (5.3), and Taiwan (5.7). On this dimension, it is notable that the South-East Asian countries have a significantly higher degree of interaction than the East Asian countries.

### *Participation*

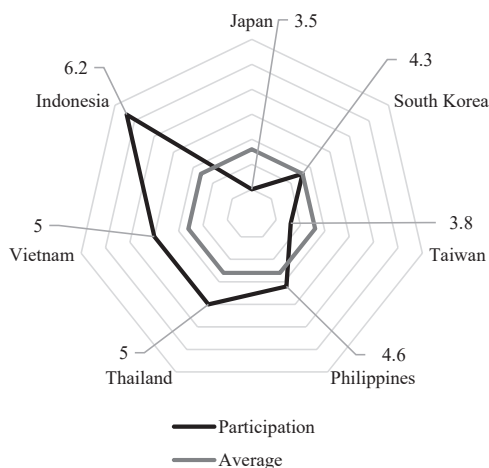
Figure 5 shows the level of participation i.e., the individual's participation in communal activities in their community. The average score of participation in the seven countries (ASIAN) is 4.3. South-East Asian countries, such as the Philippines (4.6), Thailand (5.0), Vietnam (5.0), and Indonesia (6.2), have a higher level of participation than the East Asian countries such as Japan (3.5), South



**Figure 3.** A Comparison of Perception in Seven Countries



**Figure 4.** A Comparison of Interaction in Seven Countries



**Figure 5.** A Comparison of Participation in Seven Countries

Korea (4.3), and Taiwan (3.8). On this dimension, it can be observed that Indonesia and South-Korea appear to have a relatively higher degree of participation in their respective regional areas.

**INDONESIA: A CASE STUDY**

Generally, there are two sociocultural factors that support relational well-being in Indonesia: culture and religion. Based on observation and interviews, in Banten

province we find that religion tends to be the major component that allows individuals to interact with one another. In Serang and Pandeglang district where the fieldwork was conducted, the population is predominantly Muslim. Our informants have indicated that most individuals are able to interact with one another in religious places (mosques or *musalas*) on a weekly basis to perform prayers as well as to conduct Islamic teachings, and during annual religious events or festivals such as Eid al-Fitr and Islamic New Year.

Social exclusion in Banten province, especially in Serang and Pandeglang, is not based on religion but occurs between local people and outsiders who are mostly people from other parts of Java. Outsiders are considered wealthier than the local people although both groups are predominantly Muslims. Thus, relational well-being is based more on social strata than on any particular religious affiliation.

On the other hand, in Yogyakarta Province, we have found that religion may not have a similar impact on the interactional settings as in Banten even though the majority of the population in both provinces are Muslims. Religion plays a less dominant role than local culture. Local culture practiced in the community has a stronger role in supporting social interactions among



groups and individuals. In the Semangu and Kricak subdistricts of Yogyakarta, we found that community activities such as credit associations, community gatherings (*arisan*) and local art festivals have been actively facilitating social interaction on a weekly or monthly basis. There are more frequent social contacts among individuals and groups from different religious background in Yogyakarta than in Banten.

By comparing Yogyakarta and Banten, we see that in a community with a relatively homogenous religious identity (Banten), religion plays a significant role in facilitating social interaction, whereas in a community with a more heterogeneous religious identity (Yogyakarta), the most significant role is played by culture. The case of Bali province, as the third site where fieldwork was conducted, provides a slightly different perspective.

As it is similar to Yogyakarta, the capital city of Bali, Denpasar, is a melting pot where communities from different religious and cultural background meet. Thus, there is apparent diversity with regard to religion and culture. However, unlike in Yogyakarta where Javanese culture is relatively able to encompass differences and facilitate social interaction between religious groups, in Bali segregation caused by differences in religion and culture is observed. According to our informants' accounts, social interactions among the Balinese, who are predominantly Hindu, are frequently facilitated by Hindu rituals and festivals. However, the Muslim community, which consists predominantly of immigrants from East Java, has its own events and festivals that promote interaction. This does not mean that interaction between the different communities does not exist. Festivals celebrating national holidays, especially around Independence Day "17 Agustus," often promote social interaction among different social groups.

In comparative perspective, the three Indonesian provinces of Banten, Yogyakarta, and Bali provide significant and interesting highlights. In Banten, the predominant religion, Islam, plays a crucial

part in relational well-being. In Yogyakarta, traditional Javanese culture plays a more significant role. In Bali, both Hinduism as the predominant religion and the Balinese culture play significant and important roles. In conclusion, the locality and context of each society make a contribution to determining which variable plays a crucial role in constructing relational well-being.

## CONCLUSION

The quantitative index shows that South-East Asian countries have higher levels of relational well-being than East Asian countries. At the community level, there is a higher quantity and quality of social relations in South-East Asian countries. The same pattern is also true for each of the three indicators: perception, interaction, and participation.

The qualitative data for Indonesia, specifically in the provinces of Banten, Yogyakarta, and Bali, have shown that the conditions of relational well-being, even in the same country, are different and varied. The localities as well as the social, cultural, and religious contexts are influential in shaping the conditions of relational well-being in each province. More qualitative data from the other six countries are needed to establish a more comprehensive understanding based on a comparative perspective of why and how the dynamics of relational well-being.

The comparative quantitative data show that the paradox of relational well-being is empirically observable. The paradox shows that the higher the economic wealth is, the lower the relational well-being will be. There is a general pattern of regional tendencies. East Asian countries tend to be economically wealthier than South-East Asian countries, and tend to have lower relational well-being, which in turn influences the social quality of life in general. Thus, in this study, the paradoxical relation between economic wealth and relational well-being is empirically proven through the comparison of regional patterns among East Asian and South-East Asian countries.



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