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The Happiness Paradox in Development: Economic and Social Factors and the Corruption Index in East Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

Happiness is an important indicator of well-being when assessing development success. However, economic achievements do not always translate into greater social happiness. This phenomenon is known as the happiness paradox, evident in East Asian countries, which serve as an interesting example because, despite relatively strong economic performance and human development, their societal happiness levels remain in the medium category globally. This study uses panel data from six East Asian countries, namely Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Mongolia, from 2014 to 2023. The dependent variable is the happiness index, while the independent variables include economic growth, per capita income, the unemployment rate, education, and the Corruption Perception Index. The analytical method used is panel data regression with a Fixed Effect Model approach. The results show that per capita income and education significantly influence the Happiness Index. Meanwhile, economic growth, unemployment rate, and corruption rate do not significantly influence it. These results indicate that increases in societal happiness in East Asia are determined not only by macroeconomic performance or labor market conditions, but are more influenced by welfare aspects related to quality of life and human development.

Keywords: *Economic Growth, Income per capita, Unemployment Rate, Education, Corruption Perception Index, and Happiness Index*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Economic development is part of overall development. The main goals of development include improving the availability and distribution of basic needs, raising living standards, and expanding interconnected economic and social choices (Todaro & Smith, 2020). Well-being can be achieved when individuals can meet their life needs with adequate means. The limitations of economic indicators in representing societal well-being have drawn global attention to the social dimensions of development. Advanced economic indicators, such as economic growth and poverty alleviation, are considered insufficient to reflect the true level of prosperity (Rahayu et al., 2016). The goal of individual happiness goes beyond personal satisfaction, as it includes recognizing that an individual can contribute to the happiness of their environment (Hamidah & Voutama, 2023).

East Asia has begun to pay attention to its people's happiness levels as an important indicator of welfare and human development. According to the World Happiness Report (2025), East Asian countries show relatively contrasting results, with Taiwan ranking 27th in the world, followed by Japan at 55th, South Korea at 58th, China at 68th, Mongolia at 77th, and Hong Kong at 88th. This occurs despite the region's relatively high income levels, reflected in Hong Kong's GDP per capita of US$44,725, Japan's US$37,145, South Korea's US$34,121, and Taiwan's US$37,827, according to the World Bank in 2025. Meanwhile, China, with a GDP per capita of US$13,122, and Mongolia, with US$4,615, remain above several Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia at US$4,368 and Vietnam at US$4,018. (World Bank, 2025).

Nevertheless, lower-income countries show higher levels of happiness: Vietnam ranks 54th in the world, and the Philippines ranks 53rd, surpassing China at 68th and Mongolia at 77th. Global comparisons further reinforce this phenomenon: Finland, with a per capita GDP of around US$44,855, ranks first in the world, while Hong Kong, with a nearly equivalent income level, is ranked 88th. These findings indicate that the relationship between income and happiness is not linear and reinforce the happiness paradox in East Asia, where high economic achievement does not automatically translate into higher well-being. Economic growth achievements reflect the government's efforts to improve welfare (Amri, 2017).

Human Development Theory, through the capability approach, emphasizes that the main goal of development is not merely increased income or economic output, but expanding human capabilities to lead a life they have reason to value. According to 2025 International Monetary Fund data, Japan and South Korea have maintained very low unemployment rates, around 2.5 percent and 2.7 percent. In contrast, China and Mongolia face higher unemployment rates compared to other East Asian countries, at approximately 5.217 percent and 5.3 percent, while Taiwan is at 0.480 percent and Hong Kong at 2.975 percent. Long working hours, wage stagnation, and rising non-permanent employment create new pressures on workers' well-being. Japan and South Korea have some of the highest average annual working hours among developed nations, which contributes to poor work-life balance and increases the risk of physical and mental exhaustion. This shows that quantitative indicators such as low unemployment need to be complemented by an assessment of job quality in relation to people's happiness. (OECD, 2024).

In addition to unemployment, education is a major pillar of Human Development Theory because it directly expands individual capabilities. Research by Titisari et al. (2025) states that highly educated people have significantly higher happiness than those with low education. According to Human Development Reports (2025), educational attainment reflects gaps in the quality of education in East Asian countries, where developed countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong have reached high standards, with an average schooling length of 12 years, while Taiwan reaches 11 years, whereas China and Mongolia are still below the average at 8 years and 9 years, respectively.

However, behind these figures, a highly competitive education system actually creates psychological pressure, as seen in South Korea and Japan, where students face heavy academic burdens. Kim et al. (2023) found that academic helplessness significantly lowers the life satisfaction of Korean adolescents, with depression acting as a mediator in this relationship. The results indicate that excessive academic pressure can harm young people's psychological well-being, ultimately affecting society's overall happiness. Beyond economic and social factors, the corruption index also plays an important role in shaping societal well-being.

Based on Transparency International (2025) data, East Asian countries showed considerable differences in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2023. Hong Kong recorded the highest score of 75, followed by Japan (73), Taiwan (68), South Korea (63), China (42), and Mongolia (33). These score differences indicate varying levels of institutional integrity

and government effectiveness between countries. Countries with a high Corruption Perceptions Index score, indicating low corruption, generally have happier societies because public policies are carried out more transparently, social services are more efficient, and the sense of social justice is stronger. Corruption also causes widespread economic and social impacts, especially in the context of sustainable development.

East Asian countries show fairly wide variation in happiness levels. This difference indicates that although these countries have significant economic and social progress, the happiness of their people does not always align with development achievements, making East Asian countries a relevant and interesting context to study how dynamics and development factors such as economic growth, per capita income, unemployment rate, education, and levels of corruption affect people's happiness. This research not only provides an empirical understanding of welfare dynamics in high- and middle-income countries, but also contributes to expanding the human development perspective oriented toward well-being. This study aims to examine the effects of economic growth, per capita income, unemployment, education, and the Corruption Perceptions Index on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Happiness Index

The Happiness Index, a statistical measure of happiness, is constructed as a composite index that encompasses all dimensions and indicators that together substantively reflect an individual's level of happiness. This composite index has higher reliability at the individual level. The dimensions and indicators that make up the index are selected with the consideration that both conceptually and substantively they indeed represent the condition of each individual's happiness. According to the Central Statistics Agency, the Happiness Index is compiled from three dimensions of life, namely: (1) the Life Satisfaction dimension, (2) the Affect dimension, and (3) the Eudaimonia dimension. These life dimensions are further divided into the subdimensions of personal life satisfaction and social life satisfaction. The happiness index is then compiled based on satisfaction with 10 essential aspects of life. These aspects substantially reflect the level of happiness, which include satisfaction with: (1) Health, (2) Education, (3) Employment, (4) Household Income, (5) Family Harmony, (6) Availability of Leisure Time, (7) Social Relationships, (8) Housing and Assets, (9) Environmental Conditions, and (10) Security Conditions. All life satisfaction indicators used to measure the HII are considered capable of representing the essential aspects of life experienced by the population in daily life.

2.2 Economic Growth

Economic growth refers to economic activities in a region, including a country or area, that create additional income for the community over a certain period. Economic growth is also interpreted as the development of economic activities that increases the goods and services produced by the community. This definition explains why, as needs increase, the income generated also increases. This income comes from increased production of goods and services. Budiono defines economic growth as the long-term process of increasing output per capita. According to Sukirno (2011), economic growth is the dynamics in economic activities that increase the goods and services produced by the community.

2.2.1 Per Capita Income

Per capita income is a measure of the average income received by individuals in a country or region in one year. This concept is often used as a standard indicator to assess a population's economic welfare and standard of living (Mankiw, 2021). Per capita income is calculated by dividing the total national income by the population. This method provides a general overview of wealth distribution and can help in comparisons between countries or over time (World Bank, 2025).

2.2.2 Unemployment

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, unemployment refers to the population that is actively looking for work, the population that is preparing a new business or job, the population that is not looking for work because they feel it is impossible to get a job, and the group of population that is not actively looking for work for the reason that they already have a job but have not yet started working..

2.2.3 Education

Education is one of the main pillars of human development that plays an important role in improving quality of life. According to Todaro and Smith (2020), education not only produces skilled labor but also strengthens human capital that drives long-term economic growth. Without education, the quality of human resources is considered inadequate in advancing human development..

2.2.4 Corruption Perceptions Index

Every year, Transparency International, a global non-governmental organization, publishes the results of a corruption survey known as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI score provides an overview of corruption at the country or regional level (Transparency International, 2025). By assigning scores from 0 to 100 to each country, the CPI reflects how free a country is from corrupt practices, with higher scores indicating a cleaner environment (0 indicates a very high level of corruption, while 100 indicates a very clean environment).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach with panel data from six East Asian countries, namely Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Mongolia, during the period 2014–2023. The dependent variable is the happiness index, measured using World Happiness Report data. The independent variables include economic growth, per capita income, unemployment rate, education, and corruption level. The data used are secondary, sourced from the World Bank, UNDP, Transparency International, and various other international publications. This study uses a panel data regression approach. The general panel data regression model is written as follows.

$$HI_{it} = \beta + \beta_1 EG_{it} + \beta_2 PCI_{it} + \beta_3 Un_{it} + \beta_4 Ed_{it} + \beta_5 CPI_{it} + u_{it}$$

Description:

HI	= Happiness Index
β	= Constant
β 1, β 2, β 3	= Regression Coefficient
EG	= Economic Growth
PCI	= Per Capita Income
Un	= Unemployment
Ed	= Education
CPI	= Corruption Perceptions Index
u	= error component

This study conducts model specification tests to determine the most appropriate panel data approach in estimating the influence of economic, social, and institutional factors on the happiness index. The tests are carried out through the Chow Test to compare the common effect model with the fixed effect model, the Breusch–Pagan Lagrange Multiplier (LM) Test to evaluate the random effect model against the common effect model, and the Hausman Test to determine the choice between the fixed effect and random effect models. These tests aim to identify the most appropriate estimation model for analyzing the relationship between economic growth, per capita income, unemployment rate, education, corruption level, and the happiness index in East Asian countries.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To determine the most appropriate model in managing panel data, there are three stages of testing, namely the Chow Test, and the Hausman Test. The following are the results of the tests that have been conducted:

4.1 Chow Test

The Chow test determines the appropriate model for estimating panel data, whether the Common Effect Model (CEM) or the Fixed Effect Model (FEM).

Table 1. Chow Test Results

Effects Tests	*Statistic*	*d.f.*	*Prob.*
Cross-sections F	*19.596385*	*(5,49)*	*0.0000*

Cross-sections Chi-square	*65.725381*	*5*	*0.0000*

Source: Processed Data, 2026

From the test results conducted, it is known that the significance value of the cross-section Chi-square probability is less than $\alpha = 0.05$ ($0.0000 < 0.05$), so H_0 is rejected, and H_1 is accepted. Thus, the Chow test indicates that the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) is the best model.

4.2 Hausman Test

This test compares the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) with the Random Effect Model (REM) to determine the best model for estimating panel data.

Table 2. Hausman Test Result

Tests Summary	Chi-Sq. Statistic	Chi-Sq. d.f.	Prob.
Cross-sections random	97.531925	5	0.0000

Source: Processed Data, 2026

The test results show that the significance value of the random cross-section probability is smaller than $\alpha = 0.05$ ($0.0000 < 0.05$); thus, H_0 is rejected, and H_1 is accepted. Therefore, the Hausman test indicates that the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) is the best choice. The Fixed Effect Model was chosen based on the results of the model specification tests: the Chow test and the Hausman test. This model is considered the most appropriate because it effectively aligns with the research objectives.

Table 3. Regression Output Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	8.025952	0.888296	9.035217	0.0000
EG	-0.005612	0.009775	-0.574078	0.5685
PCI	1.77E-05	5.84E-06	3.025792	0.0039
Un	0.049647	0.035906	1.382694	0.1730
Ed	-0.400575	0.117064	-3.421835	0.0013
CPI	0.024317	0.014677	1.656807	0.1039

Effects Specifications			
Cross-section fixed (dummy variables)			
R-squared	0.862120	Mean dependent var	5.768650
Adjusted R-squared	0.833982	S.D. dependent var	0.438523
S.E. of regression	0.178678	Akaike info criterion	-0.442323
Sum squared residuals	1.564362	Schwarz criterion	-0.058360
Log likelihood	24.26968	Hannan-Quinn criterion	-0.292134
F-statistic	30.63822	Durbin-Watson stat	1.095936
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000		

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Based on the output results in Table 3, the regression equation model can be obtained as follows:

$$HI = 8.025952 - 0.005612\ EG + 1.7669805\ PCI + 0.049647\ Un - 0.400575\ Ed + 0.024317\ CPI + \varepsilon it$$

The following interprets the panel data regression results in this study: the constant is 8.025952. This means that if economic growth, per capita income, unemployment, average years of schooling, and the level of corruption are zero, the Happiness Index is 8.025952, which is positive and increasing.

The Economic Growth (EG) variable has a coefficient of -0.005612, indicating a negative effect of Economic Growth on the happiness index. If Economic Growth decreases by one percent, it will reduce the happiness index by -0.005612, assuming other variables remain constant..

The per capita income (PCI) variable has a coefficient of 1.7669805, explaining the positive influence of per capita income on the happiness index. If per capita income increases by 1 USD, the happiness index increases by 1.7669805, assuming other variables remain constant.

The unemployment variable (Un) has a coefficient of 0.049647, explaining the positive influence of unemployment on the happiness index. If unemployment increases by one percent, the happiness index increases by 0.049647, assuming other variables remain constant.

The Education variable (Ed) has a coefficient of -0.400575, indicating that average years of schooling negatively affect the happiness index. If education decreases by one year, it will decrease the happiness index by 0.400575, assuming other variables remain constant..

The corruption perception index (CPI) has a coefficient of 0.024317, indicating a positive effect on the happiness index. If the corruption perception index increases by one point, it will raise the happiness index by 0.024317, assuming other variables remain constant.

4.3 F-Statistic Test

This study has 6 variables with 60 observations, so df1 (columns) = 5 and df2 (rows) = 54. This study uses a significance level of alpha = 0.01, resulting in an F-table value of 2.39.

Table 4. F Test Results

F-statistic	Prob(F-statistic)	Conclusion
30.63822	0.00000	Significant

Source: Processed Data, 2026

The data processing results show that the Prob(F-statistic) is smaller than the significance level α (0.000000 < 0.01) and the calculated F is greater than the F-table value (30.63822 > 2.39), which means H0 is rejected, and H1 is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that all independent variables, namely Economic Growth, per capita income, Unemployment, Average Years of Schooling, and corruption perception index, together have a Significant Effect on the Happiness Index of East Asian countries.

4.4 t-Statistic Test

A t-table value of 2.66998 was obtained from the fifth column of the t-table at df = 59.

Table 5. t Test Results

Variable	t-Statistic	Prob.	Conclusion
EG	9.035217	0.0000	Significant
PCI	-0.574078	0.5685	Not Significant
Un	3.025792	0.0039	Significant
Ed	1.382694	0.1730	Not Significant
CPI	-3.421835	0.0013	Significant
EG	1.656807	0.1039	Not Significant

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Based on the data processing results, the P-value and t-statistics of each variable were obtained, with the test results showing that the Economic Growth (EG) variable has a prob(t-statistic) value greater than the 5% significance level alpha (0.5685 > 0.05) and the t-count value > t-table (0.574078 < 4.30265273), meaning that the Economic Growth variable does not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The per capita income (PCI) variable has a prob(t-statistic) value smaller than the 5% significance level alpha (0.0039 < 0.05) and the t-count value > t-table (3.025792 < 4.30265), meaning that the per capita income variable has a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The unemployment variable (Un) has a probability value (prob(t-statistic) greater than the significance level alpha (5%) (0.1230 > 0.05) and a calculated t-value < t-table (1.382694 < 4.30265), meaning the unemployment variable does not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The Education variable (Ed) has a probability value (prob(t-statistic) smaller than the significance level alpha (5%) (0.0013 < 0.05) and a calculated t-value < t-table (3.421835 < 4.30265), meaning the average years of schooling variable has a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The corruption perception index variable (CPI) has a probability value prob(t-statistic) greater than the 5% significance level alpha = 0.1039 > 0.05), and the calculated t-value > t-table (1.656807 > 4.30265), which means that the corruption perception index variable does not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

It can be concluded that, in this study, Economic Growth, Unemployment, and the Corruption Perception Index are independent variables that do not significantly affect the Happiness Index in East Asian countries. This is shown by comparing the F-statistic probability value with a 5% significance level (alpha) and comparing the calculated t-value with the t-table.

4.5 Coefficient of Determination

The following results were obtained using EViews 12.

Table 6. Determination Coefficient Result

R-squared	Adjusted R-squared	Conclusion
0.862120	0.833982	Strong

Source: Processed Data, 2026

The coefficient of determination is 0.833982, or 83%. This means that economic growth, per capita income, unemployment, average years of schooling, and the level of corruption can explain 83% of the Happiness Index in East Asian countries, while the remaining 17% is explained or influenced by variables outside the study.

4.6 The Influence of Economic Growth on the Happiness Index

Based on the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) results, economic growth does not affect the happiness index in East Asia. This study shows that an increase in the rate of economic growth is not necessarily accompanied by an increase in public happiness. The results contradict research by Lubis et al. (2023), which found that economic growth significantly affects the ASEAN happiness index. However, this study's results align with Nugraha (2024), who explains that economic growth does not significantly affect the happiness index in 34 provinces in Indonesia. Sari (2020), in her research on the determinants of happiness in Indonesia, found that high economic growth does not always increase happiness because such growth is often not accompanied by equitable income distribution and community quality of life.

4.7 The Influence of Per Capita Income on the Happiness Index

The per capita income variable influences the happiness index in East Asia. These results indicate that higher incomes contribute significantly to improved happiness in this region. Economically, higher income improves individuals' ability to meet basic needs, access better education and health services, and generally improves quality of life. These results align with Hanifa et al. (2024), who found that per capita income significantly affects the happiness index. Nandini & Afiatno (2020) reported similar findings, finding a positive influence of income on the happiness index. Yasir et al. (2022) found similar results, reporting a positive and significant influence of income on the happiness index.

4.8 The Effect of Unemployment on the Happiness Index

Based on the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) estimation results, unemployment does not affect the happiness index in the East Asian region. These results indicate that changes in the unemployment rate have not yet significantly affected people's happiness in East Asia. These countries have relatively strong labor protection systems and cultures that prevent

individuals from completely losing social meaning when unemployed. This research aligns with Hendrawan & Yanto (2023), who state that the unemployment rate does not significantly affect the happiness index. The unemployment rate does not always determine the happiness index. Similarly, Bestari & Amaliah (2024) also state that the unemployment rate does not affect the happiness index. Hanifa et al. (2024) find the same: unemployment does not significantly affect the happiness index in ASEAN countries. Gedikli et al. (2023) argue that strong social support and adequate welfare policies can reduce the psychological impact of unemployment on happiness. However, the relationship between unemployment and happiness remains complex and contextual. Kumar et al. (2024) found that globally, unemployment still has a negative relationship with happiness.

4.9 The Influence of Education on the Happiness Index

The education variable, measured by average years of schooling, affects the happiness index in East Asia. This result indicates that although education is an important factor in improving human capital, more years of schooling do not always lead to higher societal happiness. This phenomenon is especially prominent in East Asia, which has a competitive education culture and high academic pressure. The results align with Purwanti (2022), who finds that education significantly affects happiness in Indonesia. Haryati (2023) reported similar findings, stating that as the education level of the Indonesian population increases, it affects subjective well-being, including happiness, self-acceptance, and family harmony, as well as monetary benefits such as reduced income inequality. Jiang (2022) also stated that education affects happiness. Higher education has been observed to increase happiness by improving an individual's political status, perceived personal status, health, and family social status in China. Helliwell et al. (2024) emphasized that education will positively affect happiness when accompanied by a supportive social environment, a balanced work system, and public policies that consider the population's mental well-being.

4.10 The Influence of the Corruption Perceptions Index on the Happiness Index

The corruption perception index variable shows a statistically insignificant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries. These results contradict Wanti & Fafurida (2023), who found that the corruption perception index is related to happiness in Asian countries, but that its significance depends heavily on each country's economic conditions and human development. However, this study's results align with Surya (2023), which states that corruption does not affect happiness. In general, increased corruption should reduce a country's happiness by decreasing public trust in government and perceptions of poor governance, which affects citizens' happiness. Kumar et al. (2024) found similar evidence: corruption tends to lower happiness, but its effect weakens and is not always directly significant. This suggests that corruption's impact on happiness often operates through indirect pathways, such as the quality of public services and social trust.

5 CONCLUSION

The Fixed Effect Model (FEM) results show that per capita income and education significantly affect the Happiness Index, while economic growth, unemployment, and the Corruption Perception Index have no significant effect. This suggests that individual and socioeconomic factors are stronger determinants of happiness than general macroeconomic indicators, and that corruption's impact is largely indirect. Governments in East Asian countries should integrate economic and social policies to improve public welfare. Increases in income and job creation need to be balanced with policies that consider the quality of people's lives. In education, the government needs to formulate policies that not only improve academic achievement but also consider welfare and a balanced social life. Although the level of corruption has not been proven to have a significant direct impact on happiness, strengthening governance remains a priority to support sustainable development and increase public trust.

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7 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in the paper.

8 AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author Veranika Nabila 1 contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft.
Author Zulfanetti 2 contributed to data collection, analysis, and validation of the results.
Author Etik Umiyati 3 provided supervision, critical review, and editing of the final manuscript.
All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

9 ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with Jambi University's ethical standards and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided written informed consent before participating. We strictly maintained participants' privacy and confidentiality, and used the collected data solely for academic purposes.

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