

Yale Professor Proposes Mass Suicide for the Elderly

With a fertility rate of about 1.3 children per woman and a third of the population over 65, it seems inevitable that some Japanese should begin thinking about institutionalized euthanasia. One out of five people live alone and Japan has the highest proportion of people suffering from dementia.

A film on the topic, *Plan 75*, was Japan's entry for the best foreign feature film. The director, [Chie Hayakawa](#), imagines a not-too-distant future in which senior citizens are coaxed into euthanasia plans by cheery young salespeople as if they were considering an overseas cruise.

This might seem too pessimistic, but a recent feature in the *New York Times* profiled a Yale University economist who has floated an even darker idea – forcing old people to accept euthanasia. Thirty-eight-year-old [Yusuke Narita](#) has a huge social media following amongst disaffected Japanese youth who feel that the elderly are a logjam keeping them from advancing socially and professionally.

He seems to be a kind of Jordan Peterson without a moral compass.

“I feel like the only solution is pretty clear,” Narita said in one [online](#) news program in late 2021. “In the end, isn't it mass suicide and mass ‘*seppuku*’ of the elderly?”

Seppuku is a loaded word for Japanese. It is ritual self-disembowelment by disgraced samurai. Defeated officers in the Japanese army in World War II sometimes committed *seppuku* as a way of atoning for their failure and of restoring the honour of their family. It was an explosive comment for a Yale lecturer. Was he implying that being old and dependent is dishonourable, a disgrace to the nation?

There is a [YouTube video](#) of Narita responding to a high school student who questions him about *seppuku* for the ageing population. He vividly describes a scene from the Swedish horror film [Midsommar](#) in which two elderly members of a cult jump off a cliff to their deaths.

“Whether that’s a good thing or not, that’s a more difficult question to answer,” he said. “So if you think that’s good, then maybe you can work hard toward creating a society like that.”

In another interview, he said that: “The possibility of making [euthanasia] mandatory in the future will come up in discussion.”

Under the klieg lights of media publicity, Narita backtracked a bit. “I should have been more careful about their potential negative connotations,” he told the *New York Times* about his use of the terms “mass suicide” and “seppuku”. They were an “abstract metaphor”, he explained. “After some self-reflection, I stopped using the words last year.”

In an email to the Times, Dr Narita said that “euthanasia (either voluntary or involuntary) is a complex, nuanced issue. I am not advocating its introduction. I predict it to be more broadly discussed.”

Whatever an “abstract metaphor” may be, it seems that Dr Narita is surfing the *Zeitgeist* of an ageing, sclerotic society which is fraying at the edges.

In today’s Japan, signs of decay are everywhere. Recent feature articles in the [London Times](#) and the [BBC](#) have described the disconcerting phenomenon of *akiya*, abandoned houses. This is to be expected in rural areas, when young people leave to find education and jobs in the big cities. But because of the quirks of Japanese property law and taxation, there are *akiya* even in prosperous neighbourhoods in Tokyo. According to the BBC, “A record high of 13.6% properties

across Japan were registered as *akiya* in 2018, and the problem is predicted to get worse.”

Another disturbing sign of dysfunction in an ageing and atomised society is *kodokushi* (lonely deaths). About [30,000 people a year](#) in Japan die on their own. Their corpses discovered after a long time, in filthy surroundings. There is a small industry specialising in cleaning up the decay and clutter.

None of these miseries are unique to Japan. But Japan is ageing more rapidly than other nations. Its solutions to the dark side of the demographic winter are likely to be repeated in other countries – wherever old people fear becoming another forgotten case of *kodokushi*. And it seems that Yusuke Narita and his young followers will try to ensure that compulsory euthanasia, mass *seppuku*, is going to be on the national agenda.

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