

# The Strange Case of Mitsutoki Shigeta

by Theodore Dalrymple



You have to be of a certain age to remember how important the Domino Theory was to American foreign policy in the 1950s and 60s.

This was the theory according to which all the countries of Southeast Asia (and beyond) would fall to communism if one of them did so. It was therefore vital to prevent any of them from falling.

It is difficult to assess the worth or otherwise of this theory. Counterfactual history is hardly a science, or even a branch of knowledge. Who can say what would have happened in Southeast Asia if the Americans had acted differently, according to some other geopolitical theory? It is not even possible definitively to decide whether the policy followed was a success or failure. Even at a cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and untold destruction, to say nothing of

the economic cost to America itself, it did not prevent the spread of communism in Indochina. On the other hand, communism spread no further, nor did it last indefinitely. Whether its duration was longer or shorter because of the war will remain forever a matter of speculation.

The Domino Theory seemed to have held in Eastern Europe, though in reverse. Leonid Brezhnev enunciated a doctrine of his own, namely that a country, once communist, could not return to capitalism (a Marxist equivalent of the Islamic doctrine that once Islamic, a country could not revert, which is one of the reasons why Spain, or al-Andalus, looms so large in the mind of fanatics). But it was obvious that once an Eastern European country had seceded from communism, the holdouts – Romania and Albania – could not long survive.

Recently there has been another kind of contagion in Southeast Asia, that of surrogate motherhood. Rich foreigners, for some reason unable to have children, have sought surrogate mothers, first in Thailand, then Cambodia when the practice was prohibited in Thailand, then Laos when it was prohibited in Cambodia. There had been a domino effect in prohibition.

[A case has recently been settled in Bangkok](#) (after 4 years of legal wrangling) in which a young Japanese billionaire, Mitsutoki Shigeta, who paid thirteen mothers in Thailand to have his children before the prohibition came into force, has been declared their sole legal parent. His initial explanation of his rather extraordinary behavior was that he had political ambitions and wanted to create voters for himself, though this, if meant seriously, would have suggested that he wasn't very good at arithmetic; but the judgment took into account the fact that he was certainly in a position to bring the children up in comfort, if not happiness.

The surrogate mothers were poor women from the countryside and Shigeta paid them about \$15,000 each to bear his child. This was surrogacy on an almost industrial scale, on the

production-line model. In awarding sole parenthood to Shigeta, the court took notice of the fact that he was in a position to give the children a good upbringing, at least from the material point of view, and that he was the only parent who had actually wanted the children.

Most people's immediate reaction to this story is one at least of distaste, and even of disgust. On the other hand, they do not find it easy to construct an entirely rational reason for their instinctive feeling that people (and particularly someone like Shigeta) should not be permitted to behave in this way. It is, in fact, rather easier to construct the opposite argument.

Thirteen women, who were not coerced into agreement, were enabled to accumulate a capital sum that would probably otherwise have been beyond them to accumulate. It would give them the opportunity to start a small business, perhaps; and if you argued that they were coerced by their economic circumstances into agreeing to Shigeta's whim, you are in effect arguing against free will.

In a sense, everyone is coerced by his circumstances, for no one lives, acts or takes decisions in *no* circumstances whatsoever that are not of his choosing; the degree of coercion differs, no doubt, but it was never alleged that Shigeta held a gun to the women's heads. He tempted rather than coerced them; and probably (though I have no evidence of this) the women succumbed to the temptation with the agreement of others around them. The situation, then, was the product of free human choice.

Whether the thirteen children brought into this world in this unusual fashion will be happy or emotionally well-cared for must be a matter of pure speculation. As far as I know, no one has ever behaved in precisely this way before, and so there can be no evidence, even merely probabilistic, either way. In any case, we do not insist on parents guaranteeing their

children a happy life before granting them a licence to reproduce. Such a remedy would be far worse than the disease of bad parenting that it is supposed to cure.

Moreover, it is unlikely that Shigeta's example will be followed by many people. He is clearly a strange man, for only someone very strange could even have thought (I was about to say conceived) of such a mode of conduct. He doesn't pose a threat to society, Thai, Japanese, or any other. Indeed, Japan is suffering from so low a birth rate that the accession of thirteen children to it might be counted a blessing.

Such are the arguments in favour of permitting people to behave as Shigeta and his surrogate mothers behaved, yet I think that many people would be left unsatisfied by them. Their instinct would tell them that this is not the way humans should behave, that in some way not easily definable it was turning humans into objects merely to meet whimsical desires and instrumentalising human life: and this would be so even if everything turned out happily for all concerned, and the surrogate mothers and consequent children were all treated well.

There is a conflict between the Promethean view of life, that it should be entirely without limits (except, perhaps, those suggested by a utilitarian ethic), and the view of life that accepts limitations that are neither of our own devising nor rationally arguable but only agreed by instinct and tradition. My own view is in unstable equilibrium between the two. I find it difficult to be entirely consistent.

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