

**Subject:** Letters from Asia 2020 South Korea did it

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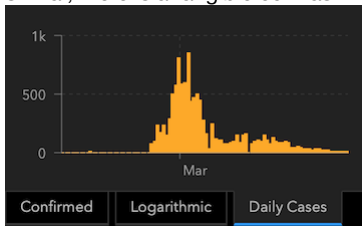
**Date:** 4/30/20, 10:04 AM

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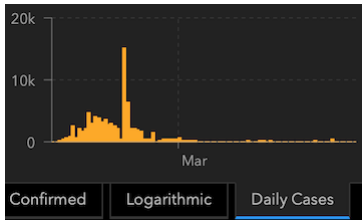
## Dear Family and Friends

This has been brewing quite a while. And there is yet more to come, via email and also on my website at [peacemakerpress.com](http://peacemakerpress.com)

**TODAY April 30th, 2020.** South Korea announced NO "local transmission" of COVID cases. A real cause for celebration. Though seemingly similar, there is a tangible contrast in the cycles of case growth and decline comparing Korea and China. Only Korea seems convincing.



Korea's numbers bloom in Feb/March and then die down. This echos the rest of the world. The key difference? Korea has lower numbers



China confines cases to Wuhan and then has none virtually the entire period the rest of the world is dealing with the dispersal from Wuhan? That seems unlikely.

**April 10, 2020.** South Korea held nationwide, hygienic, in person elections for the seats in the National Assembly.



The President's party triumphed. Clearly South Koreans were satisfied with crisis management in the country. So how did the Koreans do it? Some ideas below, juxtaposing Korea's culture and strategies with other places around the world.

Even though South Korea is its own local self, information can become more meaningful if seen comparatively. Death toll, tracking/testing /privacy, work, commuting, hospitals, vacations, cleanliness, community standards, aging and home-based life are laid out with different colored typefaces to make the comparisons easier to see.

- Black Korea
- Blue Japan
- Green Europe and North America: USA, Sweden, Germany, UK, Spain, Italy etc.
- Purple Central and South Pacific: New Zealand, Australia and SE Asia
- Red China

**DEATH TOLL.** South Koreans' satisfaction with their government must be in part a result of a very low death toll, in the mid 200s, in a total population of approximately 52 million

Their number is in a league with Japan which, with 2 1/2 times the population has about double the number of deaths. [Hong Kong and Taiwan](#) have even more to be proud of, though it looks as though Hong Kong will lose rather than gain political freedoms despite the success. [Everything I read about Japanese public opinion indicates that even with their low case numbers, the Japanese are not satisfied with their national government.](#)

Regardless of whether Korea and Japan missed some cases, their numbers are literally minuscule compared with [Europe and North](#)

America, where the extremes, Spain and the USA, are coping with deaths in the range of 23,000+ and 58,000+ respectively. Sadly in Japan, as in most of the rest of the world, numbers are still rising. Korea has now reached zero local infections.

TRACKING, TESTING and PRIVACY. Several weeks ago Trump and others made a great fanfare about the impending release of Apple/Google track/trace/alert software. April 29 2020, the two companies announced that they are ready with IOS and Android platforms for just such apps. For most Americans the US noise has probably drowned out the fact that the South Korea created its own app-based alert system within days of its first massive outbreak in the city of Daegu. Koreans have known for months whether they, personally, have been within 100 meters of someone testing positive. They also know which neighborhood pharmacy has masks in stock and which days they are allowed to buy a personal supply.

Virus testing for anyone alerted by an “exposure” app is free.

What’s going on here? Have they solved the privacy problem? According to a close friend in South Korea, my kind of privacy — the ability to be forgotten/not followed — is simply moot in digital Korea. Koreans take pride in being among the most digitally linked people in the world. They use their phones as ID all the time. The phone does payments of course, and everyone uses it that way. Smart phones are in every nook and cranny of daily life. Privacy is no longer an option.

In this arena Japan and Korea differ sharply. Japan remains a paper-based culture. Officials collect papers, they stamp papers with their own personal “seal” (Hanko) and they pass the papers from person to person. Going in and out of Japan by air leads to paper. Paying rent in our apartment building was done with paper and cash. If we did pay bills digitally it was a copier sized machine that took in cash, available in every convenience store. These make payments to utilities and sell concert tickets. Bullet train tickets if ordered online have to be picked up in person and one has to specify in advance which station and which day one will show up to collect them. Station staff then hand one paper tickets and receipts which one uses to get through the turnstile onto the platform. The conductor on the train has an app showing which seats are supposed to be occupied, but passengers have paper tickets.

Is any of this a matter of privacy? I have no idea. I suspect it is simply tradition. I do know that Korea and Japan, alike in some ways, handle technology in diametrically different ways.

WORK. Have Koreans by the million lost their jobs? Not as far as I can tell. They haven’t even stopped going to the office, though limited amounts of working from home has occurred and stores selling non-essentials like furniture are pretty empty. In government offices, I am told, they are required to go to their own desks but they do not have face to face meetings, even in the office. They zoom from desk to desk wearing masks. I am guessing that South Korea’s economy has been changed far less than even the most virus free countries in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, with the possible exception of Sweden. Swedes like Koreans seem to have continued their every day lives. The big difference of course is that Sweden has double the number of cases and ten times the number of deaths in a population only 20% of the size. Korea’s ability to stay on the job and drive the case numbers down is matched by almost no one else.

COMMUTING. For workers, the daily commute continues. That commute in Seoul can be very long; commonly more than an hour. Many travel by subway without doing much in the way of social distancing except wearing the omnipresent mask. I am betting that train straps/poles, escalators etc. in the Seoul subway, like the Japanese ones, have anti-microbial surfaces. I have seen cleaners travel up and down inside the trains even while they are on a standard run. Certainly there are no signs of mass transit as a vector in illness. The daily commute in our area of California has disappeared. Here in Berkeley the BART parking lot at our local station is deserted and car journeys across the Bay Bridge go at full speed all day every day. New York’s subways system is filthy everywhere by comparison with BART even and certainly by comparison with Seoul.

HOSPITALS. Another truly surprising Korean data point: My closest friend in Seoul broke his elbow several months ago. In need of physical therapy and rehabilitation after major surgery, he has been traveling from the apartment to the hospital, an hour’s commute, day after day. He shows no fear at all about going into a hospital. Contrast this with the USA where we now suspect that there are thousands of extra deaths attributable not to the virus but to heart attacks and other medical events left untreated. In the USA and also in the UK fear of exposure to the virus by going to a hospital has been severe. Our USonian anxiety may actually be baseless. A friend in the Bay Area is a nurse. Her fear is of losing her job because her world class hospital is so empty. Almost no COVID cases and virtually no others at all. Average occupancy: 35%.

VACATIONS. This coming weekend many people in Korea will start a five day holiday. It opens with Buddha’s birthday and ends with Children’s Day. Astonishingly, this vacation seems to be going ahead without visible restrictions. My friend, having largely healed that elbow, needs to head back to his office which is on the island of Jeju a favorite holiday destination. He expects his flight to be full. The governor of Jeju fears that about 160,000 tourists from the mainland will crowd hotels and beaches, ignoring his request to stay away. It will be interesting to see whether, with this degree of close contact, Korea’s case load erupts again. Meanwhile in Europe, Germans are being told to plan domestic vacations when the time comes and Mediterranean countries are dreading the probability that international tourism, perhaps 15% of their economies, will simply not return at all this year.

CLEANLINESS. There isn’t a country in Europe or in the Americas which does cleanliness like Japan and Korea. China doesn’t either. Though I would never say this to any Korean, I wonder whether the fascination with cleanliness in both Taiwan and Korea is a legacy from Japanese colonization. So many behaviors echo among all three nations. Really careful, government regulated sorting for recycling. Public sidewalks cleaned daily by the building that fronts on the sidewalk. Public spaces also cleaned regularly — park benches, subway stairs, even the floor of the swimming pool in Japan where they empty swimmers out of the pool every hour for ten minutes. God knows, in that case, what they actually find with so many checks, but everyone complies every time. I see pool water chemicals tested in the USA but cleaning? not so much.

In Korea, Taiwan and Japan people even bathe together, soaking for hours at a time in hot spring baths. An evening or an afternoon at a Jimjilbang (Japanese word: Onsen), with a nice meal onsite make a truly relaxing break. People go with friends or they go alone. Either way they can be confident that everyone with whom they are sharing the big soaking tub has done a thorough scrub all over before getting in to soak.

**COMMUNITY STANDARDS:** By now masks have become a phenomenon world wide. They always were in Korea and Koreans all wear more or less the same kind of mask. That's how the government can tell you what the stock is at your neighborhood pharmacy. Americans seem happy to wear an unconventional mask, either for fun or because that's available. Having mislaid my normal face cover, I got admiring comments when wearing a head wrap turned into a mask. The unusual mask has become a government project in support of essential workers and low income people in Washington State: <https://www.itgov.wa.gov/mask-challenge> If one violates community standards in Korea one is quite likely to get a public upbraiding. I have seen this most frequently in the subway if a youngster sits in one of the seats reserved for the elderly or those in need of seats. Though a public upbraiding in the UK is uncommon, nonetheless one expects to have one's behavior noticed and judged. USonians protesting the social distancing rules took pride in visibly breaking them. Koreans do protests as well, but they are unlikely ever to do so under these circumstances.

**AGING POPULATIONS:** Another factor that applies both to Japan and to Korea. They have among the lowest birthrates in the world and therefore their populations are skewed old, particularly in Japan. COVID preferentially harming us older people does not seem to apply there.

**TO END WITH A KEY FACTOR** I am guessing is both quite hidden from most outsiders and probably critical to low case loads in South Korea and Japan.

**LOW LEVELS OF CONTACT AT HOME:** Japanese and Korean private homes have almost no-one in them most of the day. The daily routines of each kind of family member surprised me. I know nothing about the situation in Taiwan in this respect. What contact there is in spotless settings. Housewives really do clean: Never a dirty dish in the sink overnight; landing outside the apartment front door immaculate. Shoes off the moment one comes indoors. School uniforms and business shirts are immaculate. Bathrooms are sanitized and of course in Japan most modern houses have bidet toilets. So do we in our new house in Berkeley. Korea's one oddity — no toilet paper flushed away in the loo. The pipes cannot handle it. Nor can they in China. Japan does.

**Family meal time:** Of course with schools closed right now this will have changed but normally the only "family meal" to which everyone comes is breakfast, after which the house empties. At the end of the day, fathers and teenagers are rarely home for dinner, though smaller children still need to be fed.

**Working Adults:** I have already said that they can face very long commutes, two hours a day would not be surprising. In addition many are expected to stay on through an early dinner and go back to work before heading home late at night.

**School Travel:** Kids walk or bike to school, and from a surprisingly young age they go to and from school with other children, without their parents. Adults are thus much less likely to intermingle across family groups than they are in a country like Britain where the "school drop off" is a key ritual, or in the USA where the equivalent intermingling happens while waiting for the school bus.

**School schedules:** Many kids don't go home at the end of school. Weekdays and Saturdays a huge percentage, late elementary through high school, face extra tuition in cram schools or hours occupied doing sports or both. Public transport is full of teams heading home from games and teenagers in school uniforms finally getting done with cram school well after anyone's dinner time.

**Non-working mothers and other adults** are either alone at home or out of the house themselves for much of the day, on field trips with friends, in groups studying crafts, and doing the daily food shop. They rarely socialize in each other's houses.

Contrast this with Italy and Spain, the two countries in which the word Siesta still applies. Not that many people take naps any more but those who work close by do head home for lunch. Adults live with their own children as well as with their parents. Elderly people in close contact for many hours with people who have been out circulating where the virus is circulating as well is a recipe for disease.

Close contact arises also in the USA. In Prisons and Nursing Homes. Both seem to be producing steep case counts. Some jurisdictions have begun releasing the incarcerated, but others are mandating that nursing homes take in new patients regardless. Meanwhile dead bodies pile up.

**SOUTH KOREA IS NOT PERFECT:** April 29 Korea had yet another work-place catastrophe with dozens of deaths in a toxic, workplace, construction fire. It would be wrong to imagine that the public health success in Korea has wrought an overnight improvement their industrial safety record which is pretty terrible.

*Let me end this with some personal reflections.*

*Every day the situation seems to change a bit. What we know becomes more complex rather than being simply "up" or "down," though Trump prescribing injections of bleach cratered many Americans briefly.*

*My scholarly self is losing none of its interest in "national" cultures which turn out to be surprisingly real — manifest in the details of daily life — not merely imagined. (See Benedict Anderson for those who want to know more). I have more reservations about the generalizations and*

*identities that are embedded in larger cultural categories — Asian, European, Immigrant, White, Western. They now seem more imaginary than the detailed, COVID related differences we can see between Scotland and England, Greece and Italy, Australia and New Zealand, China and Japan.*

*I cannot imagine that I will accept the way we are living now bringing a permanent end to our nomadic lives. There are too many people and too many places to which we have strong, strong ties.*

*I have become able to do a kind of yoga in Berkeley, that rests directly on what I learned from my Olympia teacher. The process astonishes me. Without a virus to keep me home-bound this would never have happened.*

*Our kitchen floor shows the dirt. In the past I could have regretted this. After these months of isolation I have a newfound respect for daily and detailed cleaning. I have an even deeper respect for how difficult it is to change my ingrained habits. With years of practice I still find it hard even to be reliable about taking off my shoes.*

*I do not live in Korea. I live in the United States, a country which has been rocked by the arrival of the virus, a country which will have to adapt to new ways of being. I have loved the USA in the past for its willingness to explore the new. Beyond our current techno-babble about “disruption,” and with a view towards the deep changes that climate issues will demand, I realize that I still enjoy the prospect of the creative work that lies ahead.*

Best wishes to all

Helena