

Subject: Letters from Asia 2020 and elsewhere

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Dear Friends

Time passes very slowly during this lockdown and yet simultaneously the rapid pace of change is astonishing. When I sat down to write this, the UK government was in Boris Johnson's hands. Now I learn he is in the hospital. Perhaps still in charge but clearly not doing very well.

I've been gardening and watching the beans I planted not sprouting. The rains pelted down yesterday and today, and lo and behold —> Beans in joyful touch with the daylight. Not all of them but enough to convince me that the planting hasn't failed.

What follows has three parts: First Japan, the next phase. Second some comments about women's words and work. Third contemplating Yellow as a warning colour/color.

As usual I have been watching events in the wider world from a distance. In addition to the normal media and scholarly sources I decided to create a new mailing list — 30 or so friends and colleagues in Japan and people in the USA with close connections to Japan.

I asked them three questions: (1) How does Japan with its huge population (126 million), with so many elderly people, have such a low death-rate? Do you have any ideas about what makes Japan so very, very unusual?

(2) My biggest question — since in the United States so many millions have become unemployed — is how is Japan handling the question of work? Where are people doing their jobs? Have schools and universities begun again? Do people work from home? What is happening to people who are losing work like those who work for airlines?

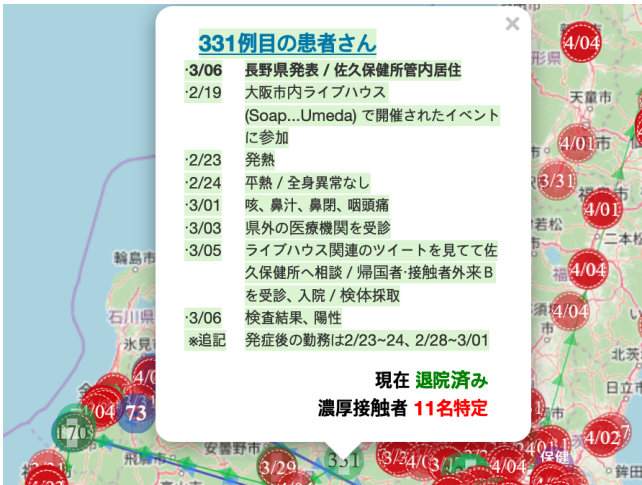
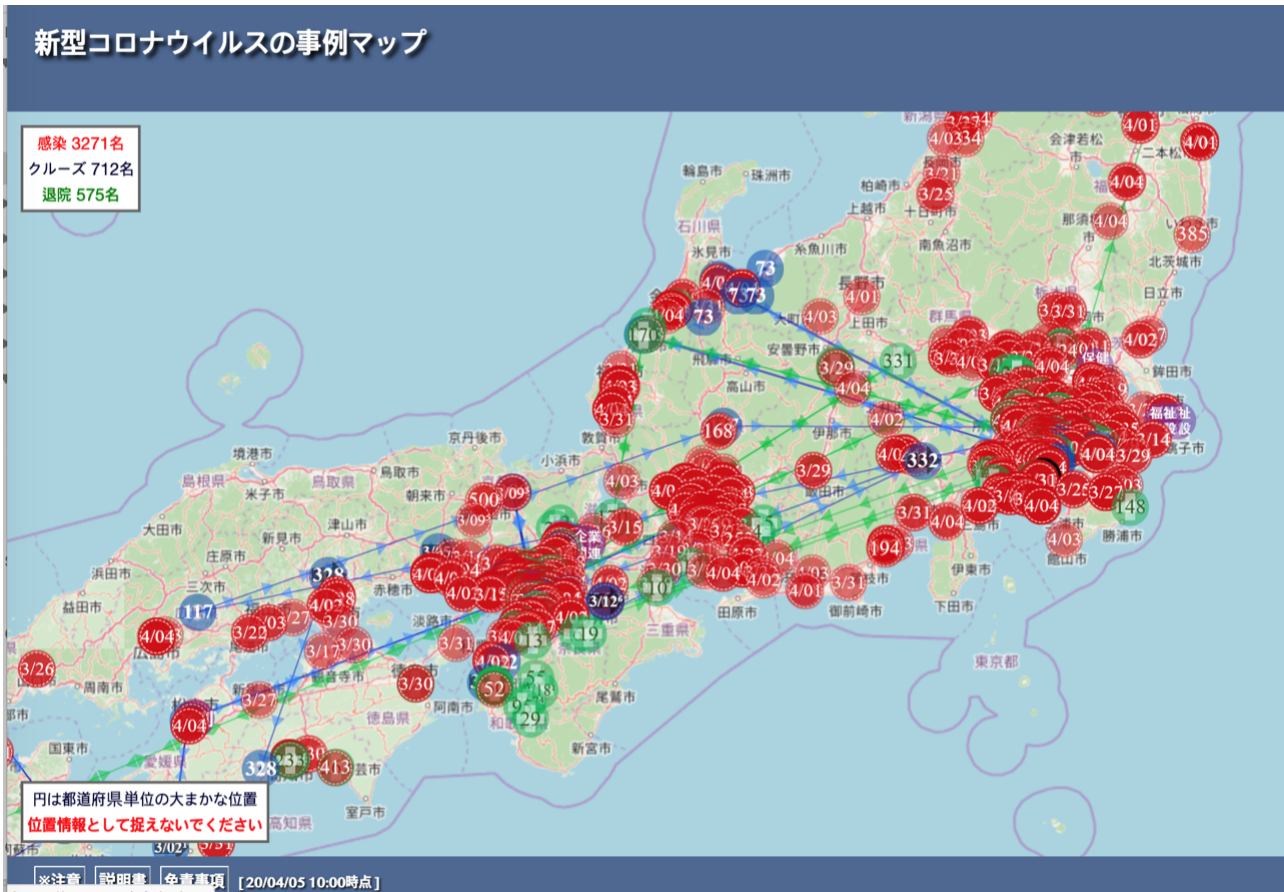
(3) Also, what about food and other supplies? Are people in Japan worrying about that?

I have answers thus far from 6 people — two women, four men; two ex pat, four Japanese; five my age one aged 45 or so; one Tokyo, four Kobe/Osaka, one Fukuoka; two retired, four still working; four in Japan the entire time and two returned from overseas.

Among the striking answers — Every respondent wrote at length, explicitly and energetically about not trusting the national government. They are all worried that the Abe government has squandered its months of relative tranquility and that disaster is about to hit, at least in Tokyo. They trust the health care system. There are plenty of goods of most kinds and so far most people are still working. The low death rate so far is attributed to the hygiene I wrote about last time, or dishonest statistics. No-one seems worried about work given their kind of government AND family safety nets.

AND one profound surprise: Japan has very strict Constitutional prohibitions against government control of citizen behavior. Rob already knew that green buildings were governed by official "suggestions" rather than by regulation. Clearly this applies much more profoundly than we might have thought. Japanese people internalize the social conventions rather than being bound by government fiat.

Japan is still doing extensive track and trace for each person tested. The coromap gets fuller and fuller. Cases everywhere more and more densely packed. <https://coromap.info/>



This second image indicates that it is still true that every tested case gets a number and a life history. Every tested case that is positive also has to be seen at a hospital which is one reason they don't test much. They don't want to send people to hospital blocking access to those who have to be there to recover. The death rate in Japan remains amazingly low. Perhaps in part because like the Russians they are listing deaths as pneumonia rather than COVID. That at least is what one of my contacts suspects

SO — if we want to live well with this virus over decades we might do well to inculcate the generation now being born into new habits for cleaning themselves and we adults might want to do a better job of avoiding bringing debris and viruses from outside into our houses.

BUT — we really don't want a government as inert as Japan's now seems to be. My Japanese contacts fear that the Diamond Princess cruise ship is merely a foretaste of what will be a far more serious catastrophe in Tokyo.

I do plan to be more Japanese about cleanliness myself but I am quite clear that this is hard to achieve on a body and a life system like mine that is so finely tuned to another way of being. Every time I am in Tokyo it all feels quite easy. Here in Berkeley, not so much.

Women's words and work

While the men dominating the national government in Japan flounder, the woman who is governor of Tokyo is speaking out. She too cannot compel compliance, but she is speaking loud and clear because the Tokyo data really are not encouraging. 900 or more and growing quite fast in a city of 37 million people. Tokyo metropolis is 4 1/2 times the size of New York. So seen from that perspective 1000+ cases remains minuscule and ought to be easily contained with proper track and trace.

It is not particularly surprising that I am finding reassurance in the women in power who are taking on this challenge. Here are five in the chronological order in which they crossed my horizon.

On March 10, long before other leaders were willing to grapple publicly with the scale of the challenges. Chancellor Angela Merkel gave a speech in Germany which should have put the other European leaders to shame if not leaders elsewhere as well. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CGi41nB3tA>. She was frank about the numbers. Frank about the work and frank about how interdependent everyone would be.

Next someone you have never heard of: Dr. Cody the Public Health Officer for Santa Clara County in California. Where's Santa Clara? It was California's first hot spot — it covers the entire south end of San Francisco Bay, the hotbed of Silicon Valley tech as well. This news story offers both a counter-weight and a rebuke to Trumps' incompetence. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/29/she-shut-down-the-bay-area-to-slow-the-deadly-coronavirus-none-of-us-really-believed-we-would-do-it/>. The story here tells you something about how she went about creating the world we found here when we arrived back in Berkeley on March 14. By the following Monday, March 16 we were under local government regulations, to "shelter in place." That's language that comes out of earthquake country and by the middle of the week we were under a state-wide and new kind of order — "stay at home." That order was tightened again a week ago including a strong suggestion that anyone outside the house should be wearing a mask. This story, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/04/04/coronavirus-new-stanford-research-reveals-if-youve-been-exposed/>, about anti-body testing, affirms what I suggested about US opportunities a couple of weeks ago. If we come out of this event with any good news it will be that USonians, like South Koreans are enthusiastic supporters of tech solutions.

March 16 South Korea's Foreign Minister was interviewed by Andrew Marr of the BBC about their approach to the virus. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgxhVOoScp0>. She talks

about technology and also about the transparency needed to make government trustworthy. Koreans are only now really learning about social distancing of the kind we have been using in California, but with such a comprehensive testing program, most of those who were putting others at risk were already isolated. Also they quickly established a good mask protocol based on local pharmacies

Governor Koike of Tokyo has appeared again and again on Japanese TV and you can also find her on youtube. What's more she gives her message in English as well as Japanese. Check it out. As of April 2 she was saying she would do a daily update at 6:45 every evening. As of today, Tokyo is approaching or perhaps over 1000 cases. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z99YBdtUy5E>

The woman most recently in my field of view is Queen Elizabeth. She spoke today. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3z79a42cR4> Talk like that echoes across most of my life time of course. FDR at the fireside for 60+ years. In fact she mentions doing one for evacuated children when she herself was nothing but a child, in 1940. Does she write her own speeches? I assume not. Does she have a consistent voice? Oh yes. I would not have missed today's talk for anything. This was jazzier than normal — some scene cuts to NHS workers etc. but the usual quiet and definite tone. Last year I was considering people whom I am grateful to have been alive with, for example, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Queen Elizabeth II as well.

A meditation on Yellow

Incident tape is yellow. Low level UK weather warnings are called “amber” but they feel yellow. Heavy rain that isn't catastrophic is colored yellow on weather radar images on the online weather forecaster I use.

I don't know where yellow falls on the “universal symbols” chart. Everyone knows about red but yellow?

These two were the books that brought this whole question to mind. Let's spend few minutes comparing them.



We bought the Worst Case book. The Japanese book was part of the packet we were given with Rob's 2015 Tokyo Resident's card. Let's Get Prepared.

Most of it is in Japanese but there are so many useful illustrations that we brought it back to the USA, knowing that in an emergency it would help. The focus is on earthquake and typhoon damage. Cuts and bruises, broken bones, clever ways to turn ordinary objects like plastic bottles into useful things like serving dishes. A whole page on different kinds of knots. Another page on exercise and stretching. Lots of pages about how to set up collective care centers. And a few pages at the very end to help English speakers find the right sentences to get help from Japanese speakers. We will be keeping the Tokyo book in our emergency bag. Oh yes, we have emergency bags. So do lots of people up and down this earthquake zone on the US west coast. I presume they do across the typhoon belt and the hurricane zone as well.

The Worst Case book is much less serious at one level. It is also less useful. Unless you happen to be trying to get someone out of a burning house and then it is just what you need. The difference between these two orange books somehow exemplifies crucial differences between the US and Japan. It's there in the difference between Trump and Abe. And the fact is, a book won't help in either case, not unless one reads it ahead of time and has it nearby on the day.

At very least it would make sense to use someone's down time now to make a Bay Area Let's get prepared book. Maybe there is one. In which case it would be useful to make sure we all have a copy. And also to update it to cover epidemic disease. Better than trying to make a tourniquet following instructions in Japanese.

I will leave you with an image of new life. Scraggy. In the middle of a rather muddy bed, but growing. A new season of life showing willing and able. May we be like the beans, when the time comes to create our new lives out of this, today's present.



Helena