

Subject: Letters from Asia 2020 -- that virus -- where do we go from here

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Date: 3/23/20, 9:23 AM

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Japan's Coronavirus is not yet a killer — Choices now and ahead that affect the rest of us.

China's success in taming the virus has received constant coverage and most places are following the lock down model pioneered in Wuhan.

***Japan, one of the earliest sites of infection, has fewer than 50 recorded Coronavirus deaths and under 1500 cases. Why so little media coverage? There are many ways to hide the data about virus infections but deaths? That really is not so easy. The contrast presents us with clear choices about the future. Japan's total population is 126 million, about double the size of Italy's.**

* China used apps and data readers in Wuhan to control the lockdown. Hong Kong requires all returning travelers to wear electronic bracelets for tracking. Other nations heavily infected by the virus have followed the Chinese model — lockdown and forcefully isolate. Kill the economy and put the restart in government hands.

* The Japanese government ordered everyone in Japan with a fever to stay at home in their own houses for four days before calling on medical help. Much of the country is still at work. One of our oldest friends, semi-retired no less, is back in his company office having self-isolated, I believe voluntarily, for a few weeks in his country cottage.

***Japan has fewer than 50 recorded Coronavirus deaths and under 1500 cases despite being one of the earliest sites of infection and without either major testing or compulsory lockdown — how come??.**

Japan's built-in distinctiveness in six short sentences:

- **Endemic physical (NOT SOCIAL) distancing:** Very little human touch — bowing, bus drivers in white gloves, few public displays of affection, social life in pubs and restaurants rather than private houses,
- **Cleanliness:** Every household keeps masks in case of colds and flu, they clean floors as well as faces (special shoes for bathroom, school, etc.), bathing is a ritual, cleaning subway escalator handrails happens on a normal day.
- **Caring for the elderly long distance:** the oldest and fastest aging population in the world is tended by robots as well as strong family ties.
- **Academic calendar reversal:** schools are always closed late Feb – April. Ending one academic year and postponing the next was relatively easy.
- **Recent disasters:** Every ward and prefecture tuned up after the earthquake and Fukushima disaster in 2011. Social awareness of disaster response is heightened.

AND

- **Consensus, hierarchy and social care:**— training from early childhood in the obligation to do the right thing for others, and strong sense of “inside” and “outside” which governs to whom the obligations are directed.

Government virus responses that demonstrate Social Care:

Do the right thing for others:

Jan 30. Abe government asserts control and prefectures and citizens accept their guidance and control.

Feb 1. Hospitals and Health centers set up special zones to prevent cross contamination of patients.

Feb 17. National proclamation that everyone must stay home if suffering “cold symptoms and a fever of at least 37.5 Celsius [until it has lasted] over four days while taking antipyretic medication to avoid overcrowding medical centers.” No self-selection for testing.

Feb 25. A ban on large gatherings.

Feb 27 School closure combined with employer support for employees scrambling for unexpected child care.

Mar 9. Warning that a region’s peak infections may not occur until 90 days after the first case.

Inside – Outside: Quarantine is an easy, natural impulse. Cruise ship controls were unchallenged. Hubei passports banned early. Explicit decisions to limit incoming international travel from China and South Korea in particular. This angered South Koreans though the complete ban did not come until March 5. Iran and Italy added to the list soon after.

In a personal letter one friend in Tokyo commented directly on two issues — the requirement that ordinary people stay home and the failures of the Diamond Princess. More on that later.

South Korea is different as well.

They too all have masks.

They too live with a powerful sense of hierarchy, but after spending 90 years in the twentieth century under wartime and dictatorial governments (Japanese colonization followed by Korean military dictatorships), the distrust of the governmental part of the hierarchy is ingrained.

So South Korea mobilized to win the techno/commercial competition — the test kit to be precise. And they did win.

And then they self-selected for testing on a HUGE scale.

They also had an “enemy” to blame, albeit a Korean one. The outbreak clearly erupted in a particular church.

The number of Korean cases is still growing but the exponential curve has been flattened and unlike Italy they are not spiraling down.

I have Korean connections but I don’t know a whole lot more than you do. My sense is that there is little fear of economic crisis.

Japan’s story is not all rosy

The Diamond Princess cruise ship chaos in Yokohama suggested, at least to me, that Japan was suffering the “Fukushima” organizational problem: don’t face up to the difficulties fast enough, prevent anyone taking decisive action, be ham-handed when response gets underway. Invisible to the wider world but not, I suspect in Japan, the actual ship, the Diamond Princess herself, was Japanese designed and built. Mitsubishi engineers have just released a report on how the HVAC system worked, or in this case did not work to prevent transmission. This feels like a classic Japanese response to a major failure. Look at once towards the future by clarifying in technical detail how the mistakes of the past occurred.

The 2020 Olympics have been a major driver in Japanese government policy for years and they drove this response too. Abe wanted to make sure that Japan as virus center did not kill the Olympics.

This is where civic distrust of government is easy to find. What will happen to Japan’s economy after the Olympics boost dies down? No-one knows but many were worrying before COVID 19. If the games really are postponed then the “stimulus” continues for a bit and actually the games themselves might even improve because weather means August was a dreadful month to run outdoor events. A net gain for Japan? Who knows.

What are our choices in the USA?

I suspect we resemble South Korea more than Japan. We can mobilize. We tend not to trust government. With Trump at the Federal helm that is even more intense though he is trying to cast himself nowadays as Churchill by constantly describing himself as a “wartime president.” America’s most recent “wartime presidents” were Johnson, Nixon, Bush (GHW) and Bush 2. Hardly models I would like to see emulated.

Also we like technical fixes and the techno challenges ahead are real.

In addition, we do disaster social care well and the long term commitment to social care in the nursing profession is enormous. The Democrats in the Senate are trying to prevent this economic crisis from becoming yet another opportunity for corporate theft. University teachers in the USA are continuing on to the end of the semester, switching as fast as may be to online work. A special shout-out to our colleagues at The Evergreen State College who are already planning a curriculum that is way richer than simple videos of themselves lecturing in empty rooms.

I could be frightened that we will become Hong Kong or China but I am not for many reasons. One in particular. There are already far too many USonians, particularly African Americans, who are certain that electronic bracelets will never be issued primarily to make our individual lives better.

What can we learn from Japan?

Stay home when relatively mildly sick. Leave the space in the medical system for those who need it and don’t worry about that damned test. Let our bodies tell us if we cannot manage on our own any more.

And one more Japanese trick. ENTRANCE ceremonies

In schools, in colleges and even in the working world, the Japanese put a huge amount of weight on ceremonies to rejoice in the moment one joins a college, a class, a company. We should be planning now for the ways we will celebrate being able to be close together again, though perhaps we should hug less and bow more.

These letters usually come illustrated with images so here's a small treat from our Lake End winter:



A couple of websites and some helpful advice from the Guardian

Johns Hopkins University has a superb comparative virus tracker. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

Wikipedia has a page devoted to tracking Japanese national government regulation: https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=2020_coronavirus_pandemic_in_Japan&oldid=946651461

Britain oriented advice from the Guardian Newspaper

Dos

- Self-isolate and stay at home for seven days if you [develop symptoms](#): a new continuous cough and/or high temperature. A high temperature means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back; a new, continuous cough means coughing a lot for more than an hour or three or more coughing episodes in 24 hours.
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Stay at home [for 14 days](#) if you live in a household where someone has the symptoms of coronavirus. This longer period is because it can take 14 days for symptoms to appear and you will not know initially whether or not you are infected. If you then develop symptoms, stay at home for a further seven days even if that means you stay at home in total for longer than 14 days of isolation.

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and particularly before you touch food or if you have been out in public areas, have been coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose.
- Always cough and sneeze into a tissue, then throw it away and wash your hands. Use your arm if you don't have a tissue to hand.
- If you develop symptoms and [live with someone](#) who is vulnerable – over 70, who has a long-term health condition, is pregnant or has a weakened immune system – arrange for them to stay with friends and family for 14 days. If that is not possible, keep two or three metres away from them, do not share a bathroom and do not use shared spaces (ie kitchens) at the same time.
- Clean commonly used surfaces at home such as door handles, kettles and phones.
- Drink plenty of liquids to stay well hydrated.
- Take paracetamol to ease any symptoms. There is no strong evidence that ibuprofen can worsen symptoms, so if you are already taking ibuprofen or another anti-inflammatory, then do not stop taking it without consulting a doctor.
- Work from home where possible. Keep in touch with friends and family using remote technology: ie phone, internet and social media.
- Take light exercise to keep fit.
- Respect the need for [social distancing](#): if you go out, stay at least two metres away from others to prevent transmission of the virus. Avoid non-essential use of public transport where possible. Stay away from gatherings in public spaces. Cinemas, theatres, pubs, bars, restaurants and clubs are now all [required to close](#).
- Ask family, friends and neighbours to support you if you are reducing social contact and need help obtaining food and medicine. Use online services.

Don'ts

- Do not have contact with anyone who has symptoms.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with your hand.
- Do not visit your GP's surgery, a pharmacy or hospital if you still have coronavirus symptoms after seven days. Instead get advice from [NHS](#) 111 online or call [111](#). If it is an emergency call [999](#) and say you may have coronavirus.

- Do not share towels or a bed with those deemed vulnerable if you have the symptoms and live in the same home.
- Do not visit your mother on Mother's Day if she is older or vulnerable. Call her instead.
- Do not go on holiday overseas. The Foreign Office [advises against](#) all non-essential travel abroad. Other countries may restrict travel without notice.