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# Korea Focus

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# Rational response to COVID 19 and epidemic orientalism in South Korea and Germany

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# 1. Introduction

Corona is affecting many parts of our lives. We don't really know when this pandemic will end. However, many scholars say that the post-Corona society will be essentially a different society. I wonder whether this will be true. It seems to that European countries instead of getting ready for fundamental changes are returning to old patterns of behaviour.

South Korea was quite successful in preventing at an early stage the spread of the COVID-19. It did so without ordering stringent restrictions for the public and the economy like in China, Europe and the United States. South Korea could successfully slow down the spread of COVID-19 because of a coherent set of measures taken by the government quickly.

Because of the current second wave of Corona the German public and the media are questioning the strategies followed up to now by the German government. Therefore, the awareness of the successfully implemented strategies by the governments in East Asia and in particular in South Korea is growing. Articles focussing on "lessons from Asia" and "lesson from Korea" have become frequent.

There is a strange parallel to the mid-1990s, when the so-called Four Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) had demonstrated their ability to develop their economies dynamically. It became customary to explain these successes by the so-called Asian Values – discipline, obedience, collectivism and others. The Asian values were presented as undermining Western values, like individualism, freedom and democracy.

Nowadays, when Western media look at the Corona strategies in East Asia they recur to this set of Asian Values. Their achievements, even in the case of Korea, are attributed their supposedly authoritarian and collectivist traditions and cultures. Actually, such perceptions became prevalent already 300 years ago, at the time when Europeans started to become aware of East Asia. This sort of orientalism is gaining new strength nowadays in the political discourses in the West. As can be easily recognised the epidemic threat too is seen through orientalist eyes. Therefore, one gains the impression that „epidemic orientalism“ has become an important ingredient in German and Western discourses.

In contrast to these discourses, an unprejudiced view on COVID 19 of the Korean government, for example, reveals that its actions were quite down to earth, simply following the recommendations elaborated in the WHO manuals. The Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) thoroughly revised, after it had been surprised by Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) epidemic, its set of measures to be taken in another epidemic emergency. New laws were elaborated, while the role of public health institutions was strengthened and health workers were trained for being able to cope with various kinds of emergencies. All this was done based on the recommendations of the WHO and in cooperation with the WHO.

Even though the KCDC made it clear almost daily that it basically was following WHO guidelines, surprisingly, German media, politicians, and intellectuals prefer to explain the Korean success story in terms of its Confucian culture. Then this orientalist argument is turned around, and is used to justify that Western countries, because of their respect for personal freedom and privacy, cannot implement Corona strategies as effectively as Korea or other East Asian countries. Only, it is argued, because Korean culture and politics allow freedom and

privacy to be violated, they can be successful in overcoming the Corona epidemic. Therefore, the admiration for their successes ultimately involves a lack of respect their traditions and their political culture – while, at least implicitly, but often quite bluntly, the Western deep-rooted sense of superiority comes into the open.

As we can see, Europeans still otherize non-European societies within the frames of the perception of themselves. As Habermas said, now that we are so well aware that we don't know anything about the Corona virus, the fear of what we don't know is being transposed into an outsider in Asia. The violence latent in the otherization even at times takes the form of physical violence against people perceived as East Asians. I myself, being East Asian, cannot feel amused about a satirical comment in the magazine *Der Spiegel* that, talking in early February 2020 about the Corona virus outbreak in China, says “a bit of racism is allowed”.

The way Europe is currently responding to the Corona crisis is essentially no different from reactions we know since pre-modern times. During the Black Death, at times the wrath of the people was directed against the Jewish minorities, which were seen as the origin of that epidemic. Now too, we can observe, that humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism are overshadowed by a competition between countries to secure the Corona virus vaccine. The present epidemic seems to have given a push to nationalistic claims and competitive nationalism. Will that be the new normal?

## 2. Korean government's response to COVID 19

Now let us talk about the way the Korean government has dealt with the Corona crisis. As already mentioned Korea's Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) often emphasizes that it basically implemented the WHO recommendations for the prevention of infectious diseases for dealing with such infections. When the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) took hold in Korea in 2015, the deficiencies of the Korean preventive and protective systems had become all too obvious. As a result, a joint mission of the Korean government and the WHO was established. Among its recommendations were, first, measures for the early identification of infections and the rapid monitoring of all contacts of the infected person;s second, regular provision of information to the public including; third, strengthening the capacity and capabilities of medical and laboratory facilities, including the training of personnel and experts for infection control and prevention.

Based on the lessons learned from MERS, the KCDC went through thorough reforms of its organizational structure and procedures. Public health institutions acquired new responsibilities and personnel, while the relations with the existing health systems were redefined. Risk assessment and risk communication, domestically and internationally, were put onto a new footing too, while the system became decentralised and local authorities gained more responsibilities.

Most important of all, early detection was secured through rapid testing as well as immediate contact tracing. After 2015 a laboratory network covering the national down to the local level was created. It included transport arrangements for laboratory specimen for complementary testing. By law, the possibility to authorise the emergency use of

unapproved in-vitro diagnostic devices was secured. That possibility proved to be quite important when COVID 19 emerged. Within one week experts from academia and pharmaceutical labs could develop tests for this virus.

Tracing was the other building stone in the fight against the spread of the virus. Tracing comprises four steps: investigation, risk assessment, contact clarification and context management.

At the investigation step, preliminary information is collected through interviewing the patients, his or her family members and his or her primary physician. According to several studies above 90 % of the contact tracing information is obtained through these interviews.

The next steps are risk assessment, contact clarification and context management. Additional information such as medical records, mobile phone location using GPS, credit card transaction logs and CCTV information may be collected if deemed necessary.

Too, the KCDC created a new system of managing health care resources and severe cases of infections. Confirmed cases are classified into four categories: mild, moderate, severe and very severe. Each category receives different types of treatment and accordingly is assigned specific facilities. These measures contributed a lot to ensuring the sustainability of the Korean health care system.

This slide shows a support centre for mild cases, that is persons which had tested positively, but showed no symptoms, as well as for persons that had been in contact with infected people. They were quarantined for 14 days.

Training centres of the government or private companies and hotels were used for these purposes. When people started to show symptoms during the quarantine, they would be transferred to hospitals for further treatment. Such centres were also used for foreigners during the 14-day quarantine after their arrival in Korea. The quarantine rules are very strict.

One is not allowed to leave one's room for 14 days. During this period a quarantine app has to be activated by law.

Contrary to what German media report, this app is installed obligatorily on cellular phones. It is only used during the quarantine period. You may want to keep this app after the quarantine period as a souvenir, but you will realise soon that you are cut off from the system. That happened to me during my stay in Korea in August this year.

One important element in the prevention of the spread the epidemic is the emergency alarm SMS system. During an epidemic one can receive anonymised information on the movement of infected persons in certain areas. If one had been in such an area, one can check oneself, whether one might have crossed this person's paths. Then one might call the public health office and ask for a test or go to a testing centre directly. This emergency alarm SMS system requires the consent of the user and involves the installation of the corresponding app. One is free to uninstall this app too. This SMS system has been in use for many years. It works for all sorts of emergencies, for example typhoon or snow storms, too.

All these measures have a legal basis. The relevant laws are the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act, the Framework Act on the Management of Disasters and Safety, the Quarantine Act, the Regional Public Health Act, and the Prevention of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome Act.

The Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act (IDCPA, Act No. 14286, amended on December 2, 2016 (available in English) and on March 4, 2020 (Korean only) is the most relevant law regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

This law in its current form in part is the outcome of the bitter lessons learned from the 2015 MERS outbreak. After a delayed response to the first infections, the South Korean authorities hectically took measures to trace the path of the infections, largely ignoring standards of democratic transparency. Besides, the authorities could not provide a sufficient number of testing kits and masks.

The first IDCPA was enacted in 1954. It contained far fewer provisions compared to the current one. This law so far has been revised more than forty times, largely in response to the outbreak of various infectious diseases; just like with MERS.

### 3. Korean citizen's response: Fear and anger vs. prevention and trust

Although there is no doubt that Korea was quite successful in controlling the pandemic, the COVID 19 crisis had a strong impact on the social behaviour of the people. Everyone in Korea gets more than 10 emergency alarm SMS per day. Naturally, some people complain about this information overload. Nevertheless, there is no public protest or a widespread rejection of the official emergency alarm app. That is because, above all, there is a much concern about getting infected oneself. Surveys show that Koreans are more concerned about the Corona infection than people in other countries. In one survey that covered 14 countries, including Germany, South Koreans were the most concerned about Corona infections, while Germans were the least concerned.

The media in Korea are one of the determining factors affecting the perception of risk. The survey team at Seoul National University from February to May 2020 carried out five identical surveys citizens in Seoul on the role of the media in the perception of the Corona crisis. It was shown that people feel most anxiety when they are exposed to COVID-19-related news. Between the survey rounds 1 and 5, the levels of anger increased significantly. Why? There was a hike in February and another in May. These hikes were clearly induced by a massive number of articles on outrageous behaviour of the religious group Sincheonji in February, and of the visitors of Gay bars in Seoul in May.

Let us look at the results of a survey on why Koreans are concerned about Corona infections. The survey included a question: "When considering infection, which one of the consequences affect you the most?" The answer shows that people were more concerned about infecting others because they were afraid of infecting people around them and being stigmatised themselves for irresponsible behaviour. It seems there is a prevalence of some sort of reflective thinking among Korean citizens. They realise that their social responsibility involves limits for their individual freedom. That comes close to Kant's golden rule of ethical behaviour. In any case this behaviour is not ordered and enforced from above by the government.

The citizens are well aware of the current situation, they know that government officials will listen, and they acknowledge that their actions will have an impact on the outcome. The survey shows high levels of public trust in Korea. Support for the Ministry of Health and Welfare has risen, while that of the KCDC has always been a very high level. Probably, regular press briefings of KCDC increased the levels of trust. Interestingly, the credibility of the media has continued to fall. The reason is that the media, in particular the print media, are dominated by far-right conservative groups.

At the individual level, such as wearing a mask, washing hands or practicing good cough etiquette, has continued to increase since the beginning of the pandemic. One cannot go into any building or use public transportation without wearing a mask. The awareness of the need for social distancing was somewhat lower in spring, but it is increasing too.

What we need to look at very carefully is the following: Most people wear a mask on their own accord, and not because of external pressure from friends, colleagues or the public in general.

Experts in South Korea, apart from technology or the qualities of the medical system, identified three factors explaining the success in dealing with COVID 19: public trust, active cooperation, and remembering what happened during MERS. Indeed, the memories of the MERS crisis is something that makes a difference with other countries.

The awareness of the dangers of COVID 19 is such that, this week when the number of infections in the whole country surpassed 300 persons per day, the government decided to move to alert level II. Among other things that means that more than 10 people may not assemble in one private or public place.

## 4. Epidemic Orientalism in Germany and in the West

Looking at the current situation in Germany and Europe, one can ask what the European governments have learned from the Corona experience during the last ten months. Even though the number of positive confirmed cases a day reaches more than 10000, some argue that Germany is more successful in preventing the spread of the Corona virus than any other countries.

Scholars who analyse modern German society say that discourses on Germany generally has a tendency to characterise Germany as "the best" or "worst". The German Corona discourse is an example of the dominant narrative that Germany is "the best" regardless of the objective facts. Germany supposedly was the most successful country, as if it had secured a gold medal at the Corona World Championship, while reports that Germany is leading the development of Corona vaccines too reveals the pride that "Germany is the best". Discourses related to East Asia can also be seen in the framework of the narrative of "Germany is best". East Asia is just used as a "mirror" to prove Germany's excellence.

The news of the Corona virus outbreak in China in January 2020, along with the formula of Corona = China, gave a fresh wind to the narrative that China is still not a civilized country.

The perception that the civilized “us” could be threatened by the uncivilized Chinese virus, as such has made the presence of Chinese people in Germany suspicious and a risk factor for spreading the Corona virus. As a result, we observe that Chinese and East Asian looking people have been made targets of acts of hatred. At the same time, the media, including German public broadcasters, criticized China's “dictatorship” for not only responding late to the corona crisis and for trying to conceal its mistakes. They blame China for overreacting with far too radical measures to combat the virus. The claim that the virus would not have spread across China's borders if the Chinese government had responded quickly and adequately passes as a matter of course. It is not possible to prove a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the continuing “China bashing” in the German media and the violence against Asians, but equally, it is difficult to say that such incidences have nothing to do with it.

Historically, when epidemics occurred in a society, often scapegoats were found. These scapegoats, normally minorities like the Jews, were then subject to discrimination and hatred. The content and form of hate are often based on long-existing prejudices which are mobilized on such occasions. Apparently, in the hate and discrimination of the Chinese and East Asians, long existing concepts like the one of the “yellow peril” gain a new life.

There are many examples of discrimination against East Asians in everyday life. A prime example is the children's song “Three Chinese with the Contrabass”. In itself it is a sort of caricature of East Asians, which is considered to be just funny. East Asians are teased by phrases like “ching chang chong” if they happen to walk by in European streets. But these acts were not seen as being discriminatory and young children were not scolded using them. Making fun of East Asians was just a thing you did in everyday life.

As soon as the China= Corona narrative was created in early 2020, ordinary citizens began to make fun of East Asians by calling them “Corona virus”. Such acts of verbal violence were tolerated. In downtown Berlin, even spraying disinfectant on Asians' faces has been viewed as insignificant. East Asian protests in the German public arena that they were not a virus did not really matter. Even wearing masks was seen as a typically Asian phenomenon, and became the subject of even more cartoons of East Asians.

In early 2020 some epidemic experts in Germany and the West stressed that the use of masks did not help prevent Corona infections. They explained that it was morally correct for the general public not to buy masks to avoid disrupting the supply of masks for medical facilities. Wearing a mask was just “psychological self-deception”, and it was even defined as unreasonable, shameful behaviour for healthy people without medical indications.

In Germany and the West, a culturalist interpretation of anything that happens in East Asia as Confucianist, including the idealisation and degrading of Confucianism, has become deeply engrained since the mid-17th century. This culturalist view forms the context for explaining why East Asians wear masks.

When at the end of March, wearing masks became mandatory throughout Germany, rightist groups are leading a campaign against wearing masks. Racial attacks on East Asians wearing masks continue. Despite a social consensus in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, discrimination against East Asians continues, and a critical discourse on East Asian otherization is almost absent.

On the contrary, as South Korea gained international attention as an exemplary case of a successful Corona strategy, the argument that Germany could not share South Korea's



experience due to cultural differences became stronger. Prominent politicians, experts and journalists refer to South Korea as an authoritarian or even totalitarian state like China. They claim that in South Korea, mobile phone apps are being used to check every movement of the people and that that information is in the public domain. It is argued furthermore, that the supposed “surveillance system” operates without conflict. They argue that such a system could not and should be established in a democratic and freedom-loving country like Germany. Such ridiculous claims were delivered through the media without verification of the facts.

The East Asian correspondent of Germany's most influential daily newspaper FAZ is not ashamed to say that in terms of privacy protection, Korea was a nightmare, supported by a digital infrastructure at the service of the government.

On the other hand, in Germany, unlike Korea, the new Corona app is supposed to fully protect the privacy of the users. Again, one suspects that one wants to prove that Germany is the “best” country in Corona prevention as well.

There is no doubt that the quarantine method chosen by the South Korean government protects individual rights far more and interferes with individual rights far less than that of Germany and other European countries. Simply the severe lockdown measures involve serious violations of political freedoms and individual rights. However, Europeans stuck in the framework of East Asia = Confucian culture = authoritarianism do not even try to see such objective facts.

Europeans facing East Asia still have a paradigm of “modern and democratic European society” versus “East Asian society dominated by collectivist and Confucian authoritarianism”. The view that Europe has nothing to learn from East Asia still prevails. In the process of responding to the Corona crisis, this orientalist prejudice was revealed. Even after the Corona virus, these prejudices are unlikely to disappear.

In Europe, few people criticize the culturalist prejudices and the arrogance that Germany and European countries have demonstrated through history and at present toward East Asia. However, the criticisms of the few does not protect East Asians who are subject to racism and hatred in their daily lives. This is why I, as an East Asian living in Europe, I wonder to what sort of new normality we will get, once the COVID 19 pandemic has been defeated. With the tradition of racism and hatred not being overcome, what is normal and what is the new normal.

