LIFE IN LOCKDOWN
How Asia is adapting to social isolation and economic disruption
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VOICES FROM THE PANDEMIC

Living in coronavirus lockdown, Asia adapts to a new abnormal

RURIKA IMAHASHI/ERWIDA MAULIA/
DYLAN LOH/MEGHA BAHREE
Tokyo/Jakarta/Singapore/New Delhi/Ho Chi Minh City

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The Asia300 companies are leading businesses selected by Nikkei from six major ASEAN countries, India, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, based on such factors as market capitalization and growth potential. The names of Asia300 companies that appear in articles are highlighted. We also have a special Asia300 section on our website, where you can find information about sales, profits and market values of these companies, as well as the latest news and more. Find out more at asia.nikkei.com/Asia300
NEW DELHI – For nearly a week after the Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown in its effort to rein in the spread of the coronavirus, Chotu Kumar went hungry. A laborer in Ahmedabad, in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s home state of Gujarat, he wasn’t alone.

Kumar, and nearly 80 others from his village — some 1,700 km on the opposite side of the country — work and live together, between five and eight of them occupying a single room.

On March 24, Modi announced an almost total lockdown of India’s 1.3 billion people with just hours’ notice, giving Kumar and other migrant workers little time to buy supplies. In any case, they had little money to do so.

“If I don’t work, how am I supposed to buy any food?” Kumar said.

Food finally reached him and his fellow villagers when ANHAD, a nonprofit working to help stranded migrants in the state, heard about their fate.

Migrant labor fuels large sections of the Indian economy. Millions across the country work on construction sites, in agriculture and in factories big and small. In many cases, they live on the
MEGHA BAHREE

same premises where they work. With the lockdown, which also banned interstate transport, hundreds of thousands of these workers became jobless and homeless in the blink of an eye. They tried to make their way to their villages on foot, swelling into one of the largest migrations in post-independence India. Shamsal, who goes by one name, was one of the lucky ones who made it home before the lockdown. A native of the eastern state of Bihar, one of the poorest in the country, he works with a contractor in Delhi, fixing peoples’ homes. As news of the virus spread, fear grew, work came to a standstill and he resolved to head home. “There were so many rumors, so many stories about the virus that I got scared and left everything and came back,” he said.

His employer still owes him 15,000 rupees ($196). That could have supported his family of eight. The government has promised ration cards and medical supplies, but those are yet to materialize.

Once the government lifts its moratorium, Shamsal will be heading back to Delhi. “There is no work here in the village, so how will I earn any money, how will I look after my family?” he said. “I don’t have any option but to return.”

Kumar longs to go the other way – back to his family.

Cases of COVID-19 have been rising in Ahmedabad, and authorities have reduced the number of available travel passes, making it harder for ANHAD to move supplies around the city, said Dev Desai, the nonprofit’s Gujarat coordinator. Their task has been further complicated by malicious misinformation spreading on social media.

Kumar, a Hindu, saw a video online -- since debunked by fact-checking site Boom Live -- that Muslims were spitting on food to spread the virus, and refused to accept food supplies from his Muslim delivery agent.

For the past two days, Kumar and his compatriots have lived on boiled rice. He can cope with that, he said, but he is struggling not knowing how his wife and children are coping. When they speak on the phone, Kumar lies and tells them that he is eating well, even when he has no food. They say the same, and it is tearing him up. “I just want to go home and see how they really are,” he said.

\*[Image: Singapore COVID-19 lockdown]

**SINGAPORE** The day the Singapore government announced its “circuit breaker,” a monthlong shutdown of workplaces and a ban on public gatherings, vlogger Ghib Ojisan went outside to shoot one last time.

In “Singapore Semi-Lockdown Diary Day 6,” posted on his YouTube channel on April 7, he showed the long lines building at supermarkets, all the patrons waiting a meter apart from each other. Osaka-born Ghib Ojisan, who asked to be referred to only as “Ken,” has built a following of around 130,000 people with a video diary of his life in Singapore, mostly filmed outdoors.

Ken lives on the advertising revenue from his videos, and in the months leading up to the lockdown his earnings fell 30%-40%.

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Under the circuit breaker rules, people can exercise outside -- alone -- and some public spaces have been closed. Food outlets are only open for takeaways, and supermarkets are operating with strict social distancing measures in place.

“I cannot do my normal vlogs outside filming the neighborhood,” he told the Nikkei Asian Review. “It’s a big change, because I need to come up with a new series.”

As a self-employed foreign national, he does not qualify for the state’s emergency income support.

The circuit breaker, which was imposed after a rise in COVID-19 cases in the city-state, has disrupted many lives and businesses, particularly for the self-employed. Essential services like health care and logistics are still allowed to operate, but almost all other workplaces are closed, meaning that people have to adapt to working remotely.

Real estate agent Gerald Leong usually spends four or five hours a day meeting with potential clients and showing them around properties. That has all had to be suspended during the shutdown, and he has had to switch to offering advice to clients through videoconference, in the hope that he can close some deals once the shutdown ends.

He does not qualify for the government’s income support scheme due to the value of his property, and with no income likely, at least for the next month, he is having to rely on his savings.

“This is primarily a face-to-face business,” he told Nikkei. “If you take away the face-to-face element where I can’t meet the person, like physically, right? Then, it’s very hard to do business,” Leong said.

The circuit breaker is scheduled to end on May 4, but the disruption caused by the pandemic is likely to last for a long time. Tan Ern Ser, associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, told Nikkei that the indefinite time frame of the outbreak means that these temporary measures may evolve into permanent changes in how people live and work.

“Employers and employees now have to get used to telecommute and videoconferencing,” Tan said, adding, “this means a further blurring of the boundary between work life and family life.”

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MEGHA BAHREE

**CONTRIBUTING WRITER**

**Nikkei staff writer**

DYLAN LOH
I have only 100,000 yen left and nowhere else to go

TOKYO On April 6, the night before the Japanese government declared a state of emergency over Tokyo, 23-year-old Sekito Yoshikawa collected all of his belongings and moved out of the internet cafe where he had lived for the past few weeks. His space was not even big enough for him to stretch his legs, but at 1,298 yen ($12) a night, it was affordable.

Yoshikawa’s plans have been thrown into chaos by the COVID-19 pandemic. First, he had to quit his job delivering for Uber Eats in Australia and return to Japan earlier than he expected. He found a role as a teaching assistant in Tokyo; then the schools were shut, and he was out of work again.

“I expected none of these to happen. I have only 100,000 yen left and nowhere else to go,” he said. Then, when the state of emergency was declared, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe requested that many businesses shut down, including internet cafes, in seven prefectures, including Tokyo. For Yoshikawa, one of thousands of people who have come to rely on these spaces for accommodation, it meant losing his home.

“I don’t know where to go. Libraries are closed and even McDonald’s closes at night due to the virus,” he said. He has struggled to understand what government support, if any, is available to him.

“This anxiety makes me look away from the reality and robs me of the energy to crawl out of this situation,” he said.

The pandemic has left many people in Tokyo struggling for money. Taxi driver Shigeo Oyama used to pick up white-collar workers on their way home from drinking in the upmarket Ginza district, but since the state of emergency began, the streets have been empty. His earnings have fallen by more than 30%.

“Even though my salary is decreasing, the bills won’t wait,” he said. “I have to pay my property and automobile taxes soon.” It could be worse. On April 8, Tokyo-based taxi company Royal Limousine fired almost all of its 600 employees. “Everyone in the taxi industry was talking about it,” Oyama said.

Abe envisions a V-shaped recovery after the pandemic, but Oyama doubts that. “It will take a lot more time to get back to normal. Many people are trying to make it through by spending their savings now, so they won’t consume like they used to. People won’t use cabs even if the pandemic ends,” he said.

The uncertainty over how the state of emergency will develop, and how long the pandemic will last, has disrupted many lives. Joan Quintoriano, a migrant worker from the Philippines, said that both of her workplaces—a hotel and a school—are now shut, and she has had to reduce the amount of money she sends back to her family. “Next month, I don’t know how to pay my bills,” she said.

Quintoriano lost a friend in the U.K. to the virus, and said that she is struggling with the sense of insecurity that comes with living in a foreign country during a crisis. The virus does not only harm the body but also “mentally and emotionally hits you,” she said. “You have to embrace whatever you have right now because you don’t know what will happen on the next day.”

Some residents have continued to go to work despite the restrictions on movement, and worry that they are putting their lives at risk. One teacher working at a Tokyo nursery school, who asked to remain anonymous, said that all of her colleagues were afraid of infection before the school was closed in mid-April. While many workplaces have been shut, central and local governments have asked nurseries to stay open to support essential workers.

“There were parents who wanted to leave their children at the nursery just because they cannot concentrate on their work at home with them,” the teacher said. “We stressed many times that even a nursery is not safe, and finally all the parents agreed to close the nursery.” She herself was afraid of infecting her young daughter with the virus.

At the nursery, there are no surgical masks, sanitizers or thermometers. “I am doing the best I can now, but I am not sure if I can make the right decision every time I have to, because there’s much uncertainty about the virus,” she said. “The government seems to put the economy first over life, and I think it will be too late at the end.”

RURIKA IMAHASHI Nikkei staff writer

JAPAN

Confirmed cases: 10,797
First reported case: Jan. 16
State of emergency since: April 7 for Tokyo and six other prefectures; extended nationwide from April 16
Restrictions cover: Schools, businesses, malls, cinemas, restaurants and bars; cherry blossom-viewing festivals canceled, residents urged to stay in place during May’s Golden Week holiday
Exemptions: Supermarkets, banks, gas stations
Penalty: None, due to legal limitations
Confirmed new cases: 566

*All figures as of April 20
Source: Johns Hopkins University, WHO, government announcements, media reports

INDONESIA

Confirmed cases: 6,575
First reported case: March 2
Jakarta on partial lockdown since: April 10
Restrictions cover: Schools, workplaces, mosques, businesses; reduced public transport (running at half capacity and limited hours) and limited ride-hailing services (motorbikes can carry only goods, not passengers)
Exemptions: Supermarkets, banks, gas stations
Penalty: Fine of up to 100 million rupiah, up to 1 year’s jail time, and/or revocation of business permit (applies in Jakarta and on paper only)
Confirmed new cases: 325

*All figures as of April 20
Source: Johns Hopkins University, WHO, government announcements, media reports

JAKARTA Tifa Asrianti, 40, began 2020 with ambitious plans. Two years ago she left her office job to go freelance, and was making a decent living doing translation, media monitoring and content writing. She was preparing to buy her first property, a studio apartment in Bekasi, in the suburbs of Jakarta, and to invest her extra income in the stock market. She even had a holiday to Canada booked.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put all of those on hold. Indonesia has already been hit hard by the virus, and some health experts fear that it could become a new center for the outbreak. The economic damage is also likely to be severe, with the International Monetary Fund predicting that the economy will grow just 0.5% this year.

Asrianti said she no longer plans to invest, and will keep her cash in savings. The developer of the property she was purchasing has told her that it will no longer be ready on time. She is trying

I'm bored. I'm just stuck in my room in the boarding house all day
to get her money back, but it is proving hard. On April 10, the government ordered a shutdown of many businesses in Jakarta, and people are not responding to her requests.

“I thought, given the current market condition, some good locations may become more affordable,” she said. “But how would I be able to properly check when everybody responds very slowly?”

Still, Royhan said she’s feeling sad. At least one of her friends working for the same coffee chain has been laid off, and another put on unpaid leave, as many booths in shopping malls and office buildings in Jakarta are forced to close under the partial lockdown measures. “And I’m bored. I usually hang out with my friends on weekends -- went swimming or to the shopping malls, or watching movies at the cinema. But now, I’m just stuck in my room in the boarding house all day,” she said.

**VIETNAM**

**HO CHI MINH CITY** Before ride-hailing services Uber and Grab came to Ho Chi Minh City, Tran Van Phuc, 58, could make around 300,000 dong ($12) a day as a xe om, or motorbike taxi driver. Since the platforms set up in Vietnam, he has struggled to make half that. Most of his remaining customers are older people who have not taken to the apps.

The Vietnamese government imposed a lockdown across 12 provinces on April 1, attempting to stem the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic. Businesses have closed, and people are required to stay home except to buy groceries or in emergencies. That has left Phuc without any income at all.

“I came home empty-handed yesterday,” he told the Nikkei Asian Review, “and I don’t know what is going to happen in the next few days. Shops and restaurants are closed, people stay at home, work from home -- but I still have to come and wait here, hoping someone will suddenly need to use my service.”

Phuc has had to turn to nongovernmental organizations to get food for his family, along with many others whose street-level jobs -- selling lottery tickets, shoe-shiners and vendors -- have almost disappeared during the lockdown.

“Today, we are in the situation of surviving through the day and then hanging around waiting to die,” he said.

We are surviving through the day and then hanging around waiting to die

**Confirmed cases:** 268
**First reported case:** Jan. 23
**On city- or locality-based lockdown since:** April 1

**Shutdown covers:** Businesses, schools, casinos, festivals, meetings, and religious gatherings of over 20 are banned; tens of thousands are quarantined in camps

**Exemptions:** Some factories and production facilities, supermarkets, pharmacies

**Penalty:** Fine; amount varies by incident and location

**Confirmed new cases:** 0

*All figures as of April 20
Source: Johns Hopkins University, WHO, government announcements, media reports

ERWIDA MAULIA Nikkei staff writer
KUALA LUMPUR  Lim Wee Chai became a grandfather on April 6. For the 62-year-old, it was not the only thing to cherish in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

Lim can also find satisfaction in the way Top Glove — the surgical gloves maker he founded in Malaysia almost three decades ago — has taken on a crucial global role in helping doctors, nurses and other health care professionals confront the coronavirus crisis.

And the past few weeks have not been bad for business either.

Top Glove’s 44 factories and 18,000 employees are working around the clock to try to meet a massive upsurge in demand amid the spiraling health crisis, in which gloves are a vital barrier against coronavirus transmission.

Orders have more than doubled. As a result, Top Glove — already the world’s largest supplier of nitrile and latex medical gloves — is on track for a bumper year and a market share of between 30% and 35%.

Already global demand for gloves was expanding at a rate of 10% annually. Now Lim, who is Top Glove’s executive chairman and largest shareholder, expects that rate to double this year, as annual global demand surpasses an astonishing 300 billion single pieces.

COVID-19 has focused the world’s attention on supply chains for everything from hand sanitizer to masks and medical gloves — putting Malaysia’s key role in this vital but often overlooked part of the health care industry in the spotlight.

Before the outbreak, sales orders came mainly from China, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea — but now they are pouring in from Europe and the U.S.

“Governments from various countries are also approaching us, with a view to sourcing gloves directly from us,” Lim told the Nikkei Asian Review in an email interview.

“In order to cope with demand, we have upped our utilization close to 100%, while our lead time has increased from 30 days to as much as 150 days,” Lim said.

Lim is also balancing orders with keeping his company on track — stepping up internal housekeeping and taking the chance to review stock levels, pricing and payments.

“During this critical time, it is not only important to look after one’s personal health, but we must look after the financial health of the company,” he said. “To ensure we are prepared to face and overcome these pandemics, we need to work hard to stay healthy — physically, mentally and financially.”

Malaysia’s rubber industry began in 1878, supposedly on the back of seeds brought out of Brazil, which until then had dominated supply. Rubber production quickly became a pillar of the economy, and Malaysia remains one of the top three producers, along with Indonesia and Thailand.

The country’s 1.7 million hectares of plantations, ranging from small privately owned plots to vast estates, produce almost 20% of the world’s natural rubber. Malaysia is also the world’s largest exporter of natural rubber medical gloves, catheters, latex thread and condoms.

Lim, a self-made billionaire whose parents were rubber plantation owners and traders, started Top Glove in 1991 with 100 employees and a single production line at a factory in Meru, Selangor, about 40 km from Kuala Lumpur. Today, the company has dozens of plants in its home country, as well as four factories in Thailand and one in China. Some 700 production lines can produce almost 74 billion pieces annually.

Its gloves go to 195 countries, and the company has sales offices in Germany, the U.S. and Brazil, selling to more than 2,000 customers including governments, hospital chains and retail giants. Top Glove claims to have a 26% share of the rubber
Takaki Kashiwabara

Top Glove says it has been able to work with us to ensure timely production and delivery of gloves, which are essential items, especially during this critical time," Lim said.

He noted that even before the coronavirus outbreak, Top Glove had aggressively invested in automation and digitalization to try to future-proof the business, with innovations including robotic arms and more automated packing.

"Challenges such as worker shortage are external and not within our control," he said.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Top Glove and its investors have been some of the corporate winners from the coronavirus crisis. Its shares have rallied over 33% year-to-date and are trading at around 33 times its forecast 2021 earnings.

AmInvestment Bank’s Nafishah Azmi said she expected Top Glove’s year-on-year revenue and net profit to grow by 12% and 44%, respectively, in the current financial year — but said a slowdown might be in the cards in 2021.

"Assuming the COVID-19 outbreak is contained within the financial year 2020, we anticipate a slower sales growth in the financial year 2021 (ending in August 2021) due to an excess supply of inventory. We forecast Top Glove’s net profit to contract by 8% in the financial year 2021," the analyst said.

One issue for Top Glove to consider is whether this increased demand will remain after the pandemic is contained.

According to MIDF Investment Bank, there should be higher demand for gloves due to increased awareness of hygiene standards — especially in developing countries that the bank said only consume about 30% of total global supply. It estimated that developing regions including India and Africa use less than 10 pieces of gloves per capita per annum, compared with more than 100 pieces per person annually in the U.S.

"New users who have started using gloves during this period are also expected to continue usage even after the outbreak recedes, having gained an appreciation of their importance in protecting lives," Lim said.

On a more personal note, Lim has been able to spend more time with his family due to Malaysia’s lockdown that began in March.

"I have dinner with my family every night now," he said. Before, "I would eat with them about two times a week, owing to dinner appointments with business associates and other friends."

"I find that I am now even physically healthier than before the coronavirus because there are now very few external meetings and functions, hence less exposure to health risks. I also have more time to sleep now."

But the company’s 44 plants, now deemed essential services, are not escaping Lim’s attention as he steers Top Glove through extraordinary times.

"I make it a point to visit them regularly, at least one factory a day," Lim said. "Factory visits proceed as normal."
Myanmar has seven banks from across Asia the green light
to set up operations as the country courts more investment

YUICHI NITTA Nikkei staff writer

YANGON Myanmar’s efforts to open up its banking sector and encourage investment across industries received a major boost recently as the government gave seven Asian banks permission to set up services in the country.

Currently, 13 foreign banks have branches in Myanmar, including Japan’s megabanks. The seven incoming banks are expected to start operations by early 2021, after licensing procedures are completed. One of the banks, Siam Commercial Bank, a top-three bank in Thailand, said it would initially focus on Thai corporate clients with investments in the country “and others who want to expand their trade and investment in Myanmar.”

Arthid Nanthavithaya, CEO and chairman of the executive committee of the bank, said in a statement, “We are ready to serve clients with a full range of financial solutions like loans, foreign exchange, trade finance, supply chain management and cash management.”

The other banks are South Korea’s Industrial Bank of Korea, KB Kookmin Bank and Korea Development Bank; Taiwan’s Cathay United Bank and Mega International Commercial Bank; and Bank of China (Hong Kong), a leading Hong Kong lender affiliated with Chinese government-owned Bank of China.

The banks’ entry was approved by the Central Bank of Myanmar in early April. In a statement, the central bank’s licensing committee said it “looks forward to all applicants’ continuous involvement in the development” of Myanmar.

Myanmar’s government, led by State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, has been working to open up the country’s banking sector. These moves include the relaxing of regulations on foreign financial companies in phases since 2018.

In November 2019, it introduced a “subsidiary license” system in which it gives banking licenses to local subsidiaries of foreign banks, allowing them to offer financial services targeting retail customers. The licenses allow such subsidiaries to offer a range of services — from accepting deposits to providing loans — similar to domestic banks.

Before 2019, Myanmar had a “branch license” system for foreign banks that limited holders to operate only services targeted at corporate customers.

That year, the country shifted from a policy to protect domestic banks from international rivals to a policy of encouraging competition. The Myanmar government also abolished a 35% limit on foreign banks’ ownership in local banks, paving the way for their acquisition by foreign banks.

Of the seven banks, Industrial Bank of Korea, KB Kookmin Bank and SCB were granted subsidiary licenses; the rest obtained branch licenses.

The Myanmar central bank has also approved a plan by Kasikornbank, a major Thai lender, to acquire a stake in Ayeyarwaddy Farmers Development Bank, a domestic player. The Myanmar Times reported earlier this year that Kasikornbank was planning to acquire a 35% stake in Ayeyarwaddy.

The entry of more foreign banks will mean more options for depositing money among Myanmar’s emerging industrialists and middle-income earners, whose numbers are growing as the economy expands. According to central bank statistics, cumulative savings in the country came to 37.5 trillion kyat ($26.5 billion) at the end of 2018, 2.5 times more than four years earlier.
A battle against bad information

Nobel Prize winner Shinya Yamanaka worries that Japan risks more infections if misconceptions fester

MITSURU OBE Nikkei staff writer, KIYOSHI ANDO Nikkei senior staff writer

TOKYO Shinya Yamanaka could not sit by as he considered the possibility of a major coronavirus outbreak in Japan. To the 57-year-old cellular biologist, Tokyo appeared to be about a month or so behind New York in how the deadly respiratory disease was spreading. Yet people in the Japanese capital appeared to treat the coronavirus pandemic as something behind New York in how the deadly respiratory disease was spreading. Yet people in the Japanese capital appeared to treat the coronavirus pandemic as something.

MITSURU OBE Nikkei staff writer, KIYOSHI ANDO Nikkei senior staff writer

Shinya Yamanaka, winner of the 2012 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine, is not a virologist but decided to start a blog to correct public misconceptions about the coronavirus.

One of Yamanaka’s goals is to correct public misconceptions about the coronavirus. When, for example, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Feb. 28 that “the next one-to-two weeks will be key” after requesting a nationwide school closure, many people in Japan took that to mean that life would return to normal after a couple of weeks. People’s eagerness to put the outbreak behind them contributed to a spike in infections in late March.

That sudden rise in infections prompted Abe to put heavier restrictions in place. He declared a state of emergency on April 7, asking people to reduce their contact with others by 70% to 80%. To keep the outbreak under control, epidemiologists say such restrictions will have to be maintained until a vaccine is found.

So far, however, Japan’s lockdown has been voluntary — there are no legal sanctions for those who refuse to go along. Yamanaka believes scientists have a vital role to play in helping citizens understand the need for such measures, as the country struggles to contain the disease without resorting to government surveillance or the threat of force.

Yamanaka, an avid runner, compares the fight against the coronavirus to a marathon. “I am not at all optimistic” about the prospects for achieving a critical mass of support for a voluntary lockdown in Japan, he said, but added that scientists must continue the educational effort because the alternative is an explosion of infections.

“Social distancing would be easier to achieve with [legal] enforcement measures, as other countries [have done], but Japan has a different political system,” Yamanaka said. “We have to do what we can, which is to explain to people patiently” what needs to be done.

Scientists are also called on to find treatments for COVID-19, but Yamanaka said fierce competition among researchers and the race to patent treatments can stand in the way of breakthroughs. He urged the government to put in place a system that rewards scientists for sharing their knowledge and discoveries.

So far, however, Japan’s lockdown has been voluntary — there are no legal sanctions for those who refuse to go along. Yamanaka believes scientists have a vital role to play in helping citizens understand the need for such measures, as the country struggles to contain the disease without resorting to government surveillance or the threat of force.

Yamanaka’s website has been put forward as another explanation for the low rates of infection in countries such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore. But so far, none of those theories has been proven empirically.

Yamanaka, who also works for the Gladstone Institute in San Francisco, does not think Japan has a unique immunity to the disease. “It would be nice if there were reasons to believe that the novel coronavirus spreads more slowly in Japan,” he said. “But you’d have to be a real optimist to bet on such a possibility.”

“I really hope that Japan will be spared a major outbreak, but the chances of one happening are actually growing.”

Shinya Yamanaka

2012 Nobel Prize winner in physiology or medicine

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job cuts rather than staff
Nikkei KOYA JIBIKI and TAKASHI NAKANO
drivers on payrolls through cash to keep Grab and Gojek burn
Assistance JAKARTA/SINGAPORE
Grab and Gojek, and Malaysia have imposed stay-at-home
before the coronavirus epidemic.” ($1.94), he said. “It’s a third of what I made
skimping on food. Demands for rides has spiraled downward at double-digit rates in Indonesia, leaving drivers struggling to make a living. Amir, who drives a motorcycle for Grab and Gojek, said his daily pay has fallen to … a third of what I made before the coronavirus epidemic.” My daily pay has fallen to … a third of what I made before the coronavirus epidemic.”

Amir A Gojek driver in Indonesia

Reuters in late March that the company intends to drivers infected with COVID-19 and who are forced into quarantine. The startup has spent nearly $40 million on such financial support. Gojek in late March established a relief fund of 100 billion rupiah, financed in part by executives donating one-quarter of their annual pay. The fund will subsidize drivers in areas such as medical care and supplies. The Indonesian company said on April 7 that it will give 1 million coupons weekly, each worth 5,000 rupiah, to drivers in Jakarta for use at participating restaurants. Grab and Gojek are going to these lengths to support drivers because they form the backbone of the services offered by the two startups, which span ride-hailing to home deliveries and digital payments. Drivers often are the ones who convert cash into credit that is added to online account balances. Also, Gojek’s drivers transport masseuses and cleaners to the homes of clients. In Singapore and elsewhere, Grab rents out vehicles to many of its drivers. If these drivers ceased business, the company would be saddled with fleets that are non-performing assets. Another factor at play is the heavy social pressure typical among Southeast Asian startups to maintain jobs. Gojek hires 2 million drivers in the region while Grab has a few million. Both companies built their names on being job creators. Gig driving was already an unstable trade before the pandemic. The two companies would run major risks to future growth if they turned their backs on drivers now. Political considerations also seem to be involved. Gojek co-founder Nadiem Makarim joined Widodo’s cabinet last fall as the minister of education and culture. Gojek co-CEO Andre Soelistyo told

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Unusually empty

Members of the media walk through an otherwise deserted field of flowers at Hitachi Seaside Park in Hitachinaka, Japan, on April 16. The park normally draws tourists from all over the country around this time of year, but the park has been temporarily closed to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Photo by Tomohiro Ohsumi/Getty Images
The U.S. Navy’s video had little drama to draw the world’s attention away from the coronavirus pandemic. In a clip uploaded to YouTube, a small missile lifts off, orange flames glowing against the black of the Hawaii night. It’s over in a mere five seconds. The unremarkable March 19 footage, however, showed another step in a rapidly accelerating arms race. What looked like an ordinary missile was in fact a hypersonic glide vehicle, a newfangled weapon that flies five times the speed of sound and changes direction midflight to evade defenses.

The successful American test came as all three powers rush to upgrade their nuclear and conventional arsenals, and as the post-Cold War arms control framework collapses. The last vestige, the 2010 U.S.-Russia treaty known as New START, expires in February 2021, removing limits on the number of strategic nuclear weapons the countries can possess and deploy. The Donald Trump administration insists any extension should include China, which wants no part of the deal. Now some experts are warning that the end of New START, coupled with U.S. plans to place conventional intermediate-range missiles in Asia, could mark the beginning of a true China-Russia military partnership.

“Although the perception is that the United States is using this New START extension opportunity to impose pressure on China, and such a move is viewed as illegitimate from the Chinese perspective,” said Tong Zhao, a senior fellow at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy in Beijing. “China believes that because the United States clearly has a much more powerful capability than China, it simply does not make sense for China to be part of a trilateral arms framework.”

China has not been shy about flexing its nuclear muscle. On National Day last October, it paraded the DF-41, an intercontinental ballistic missile that can deliver 10 warheads to the continental U.S., and the DF-17, a hypersonic weapon.

“China has also sought to expand and modernize that arsenal,” Tong said. “On April 15, the U.S. Department of State suggested China may be conducting underground nuclear tests despite having signed – but not ratified – the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. The report cited China’s “extensive” excavation activity at a testing site, "possible preparation" to use the site year-round, use of explosive containment chambers and a "lack of transparency on its nuclear testing activities.”

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Japan-administered Senkaku Islands, which Beijing calls Diaoyu.

“The biggest threat to China securing these interests comes from the U.S. capability and intention to militarily intervene in these areas,” Tong said. “Land-based intermediate-range missiles constitute a very effective tool for China to secure a military advantage around the first island chain and deter American military intervention,” he added, referring to the first line of major archipelagos off continental East Asia.

None of this sits well with Washington. Adm. Harry Harris, then the head of the U.S. Pacific Command, told Congress in 2017 that China “controls the largest and most diverse missile force in the world,” and that 95% of it “would violate the INF [Treaty] if China was a signatory.”

These concerns translated into action when the U.S. withdrew from the INF Treaty last August. While Washington blamed alleged violations by Moscow, the primary motive was to counter potential threats from Beijing, according to Elbridge Colby, a former senior Pentagon official who helped author the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy.

“The Chinese aspect to this is far more important for the United States,” Colby said.

**Any moves by the U.S. to deploy its missiles or missile defense systems in Asia will fuel ever-greater cooperation between Russia and China**

Evgeny Buzhinsky
Former Russian military arms control negotiator

“Although it could be beneficial for the United States to have INF Treaty missiles in Europe, especially some shorter-range variants that cannot penetrate deep into Russia, it is far more important and necessary to have them in the Pacific because of the scale of China’s military buildup and the geography of the region.”

Colby explained that since most American assets in the western Pacific are concentrated on a few bases and ships, placing ground-launched conventional missiles in the region would significantly increase the number of targets China must account for.

Just days after the U.S. withdrew from the INF Treaty, Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced that such missiles would be coming to Asia “sooner rather than later.” The Chinese foreign ministry shot back that Beijing “will not stand idly by and will be forced to take countermeasures” if the U.S. deploys them.

Undeterred, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in late March submitted a budget to Congress that requests over $20 billion in additional funding to “regain the advantage” in the region. This includes money for intermediate-range weapons such as the Navy’s Tomahawk cruise missiles, which can be fired from land or sea.

China would not be alone in pushing back if the U.S. installs INF Treaty missiles in Asia, said Evgeny Buzhinsky, a retired lieutenant general who served as the Russian military’s top arms control negotiator.

He told the Nikkei Asian Review that Moscow may respond by deploying its own intermediate-range land-based missiles in the Russian Far East.

“If the Americans place these missiles in Guam or the Philippines, then fine, let them do so,” Buzhinsky said. “But if they place them in Japan, then that will be a threat to Russia and we will place our missiles somewhere in Chukotka so that they could reach U.S. territory.”

Some Russian experts go even further, predicting that a U.S. missile deployment in Asia would prompt Russia and China to abandon long-standing reservations about a formal military alliance:

“If the Americans will commit the stupidity of deploying missiles in East Asia in a way that is threatening to both Russia and China, then our relationship [with China] will effectively cross a certain line and become a military alliance,” said Alexey Arbator, head of the Center for International Security at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow.

U.S. moves have already nudged Russia and China closer together. In October, Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed Moscow was helping China to develop an early warning system for missile attacks. Only the U.S. and Russia possess such systems.

Buzhinsky, who retired from the Russian Armed Forces in 2009, said assisting China with this would be coming to Asia “sooner rather than later.” The Chinese foreign ministry shot back that Beijing “will not agree to renew the deal, Russia could go so far as to offer China strategic ballistic missiles and bombers. ‘Strategic’ weapons are considered distinct from ‘tactical’ ones, in that they are designed for mass destruction as part of a broad military strategy rather than for use on a battlefield.”

The coronavirus has only further clouded the prospects for saving New START in the coming months. Russia’s TASS state news agency reported that the pandemic has interrupted the regular bilateral inspections stipulated in the deal.

Moscow has also criticized Washington’s call to rope China into the treaty. “It’s an open provocation to insist on China’s participation in the process, as a precondition, despite Beijing’s clearly stated and many times repeated position on this,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared at a nonproliferation conference in Moscow last November.

Yet on April 17, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke to Lavrov by phone and “emphasized that any future arms control talks must be based on President Trump’s vision for a trilateral arms control agreement that includes both Russia and China,” a State Department spokesman said.

If Cold War history is any guide, Buzhinsky argued, tensions in Asia are likely to get much worse before they get better.

“The Cuban missile crisis was what brought about the modern era of arms control,” he said. “It will probably take another crisis for everyone to realize that it is necessary to talk and reach a deal.”
Outbreak exposes ASEAN divisions on rice security

Hoarding in Thailand and an export ban in Vietnam spook importers and trigger an emergency summit

APORNRAITH PHOONPHONGPHIPHAT and CLIFF VENZON Nikkei staff writers

BANGKOK/MANILA The rapid spread of new coronavirus cases in Southeast Asia has exposed the region’s divisions on food security, particularly as rice-growing nations move to lock up supplies of the staple.

In Thailand, the world’s second-biggest rice exporter, a curfew imposed on April 3 is driving consumers to hoard rice for fear of a prolonged stay-at-home order. Mean-

while, Vietnam, the third-largest exporter, imposed a curfew imposed on April 3 to ensure purchases for the national reserve, which is set to reach 190,000 tons. It came after Hanoi’s move to set a quota of 400,000 tons of rice for export.

Cambodia had followed Vietnam’s step for the same reason, creating anxiety among rice-exporting ASEAN countries – particularly the Philippines. The region’s biggest rice importer bought 2.9 million tons last year and is forecast to import around 2.5 million this year, largely from Vietnam.

“At least 200,000 to 500,000 tons of rice are now being held up at ports in Vietnam and Cambodia, and these delayed shipments have caused supply tightness in some counties,” said a Singapore-based trader.

Rice is not only a major staple in ASEAN countries, but also a politically and emotionally charged commodity, particularly for importers such as the Philippines and Indonesia, where governments face pressure to satisfy domestic consumption and keep inflation low.

Philippine Agriculture Secretary William Dar wrote his Vietnamese counterpart in late March asking assurances to keep domestic rice prices high to maintain the support of poor farmers.

The coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating these long-standing tensions. Among ASEAN nations, the Philippines has been the hardest-hit, with 6,399 confirmed coronavirus cases and 437 deaths as of April 21. Indonesia is next, with 7,185 confirmed cases and 616 deaths, while Malaysia had 5,482 confirmed cases and 92 deaths.

This year, severe drought in Thailand and Vietnam, as well as heavy purchases from Asian buyers, have pushed global rice prices to a 7-year-high. As a result, Thai exporters have been reluctant to commit to deals with the Philippines when Manila has approached them for rice after Vietnam imposed its export ban.

Although Vietnam’s deputy minister for agriculture and rural development, Le Quoc Doan, said Hanoi will honor its export commitments to the Philippines, it is unlikely that Vietnam can deliver rice to Manila immediately, as it is already busy meeting skyrocketing orders from China.

China’s rice imports from Vietnam increased 595% on the year, to 66,000 tons during the first two months of 2020. Rice imports have also been rising in such markets as Malaysia, Taiwan, Iraq, France, Russia and Senegal.

The increased competition has forced Manila to seek rice from Myanmar, but Naypyitaw has also suspended rice export licenses, making it more difficult for the Philippines to secure immediate supplies.

The Philippine leader stressed that the bloc must remain “open for trade, crisis or no crisis, as no country can stand alone.

“Let us, therefore ensure the supply chain connectivity and the smooth flow of goods within our region.”

Additional reporting by Erwida Maulia in Jakarta.
100,000 yen for everyone
Abe broadens relief plan after earlier idea is criticized

TOKYO  Japan plans to send a cash handout of 100,000 yen ($930) to every resident, regardless of income, to lessen the economic blow from the coronavirus pandemic after an earlier income support scheme met with resistance.

The government withdrew its proposal to give 300,000 yen to qualified households that had lost income, which was criticized even by some in the ruling coalition as too limited and complicated.

“We need a measure that will pay benefits to more people,” Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in an April 16 meeting of the government’s coronavirus task force.

The decision came as Abe extended emergency declarations nationwide. The new cash handout proposal will cost three times as much as the earlier limited-income plan, which would have entailed proving economic hardship as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Abe’s shift came at the urging of Komeito, the smaller party in the Liberal Democratic Party-led ruling coalition, which pointed to the poor public reception of the earlier plan and even threatened to switch its support to a competing opposition proposal, according to a source familiar with the situation.

The government had considered doing both, sending the 300,000 yen to the hardest-hit households first and the smaller universal payments later. But Komeito, which had advocated for the latter plan, urged Tokyo to focus its resources on the broader measure.

While some in Abe’s LDP had also argued that universal payments were necessary, the first sign of a shift in the government’s position was a comment on April 14 from LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai.

“There are urgent calls for proposals such as 100,000 yen payments to everyone,” Nikai said. “I strongly urge the government to take action quickly on what it can do.”

After these comments, Komeito pressed harder for its proposal. Party leader Natsuo Yamaguchi held an impromptu meeting on the matter with Abe on April 15.

Yamaguchi warned that the situation was “critical” and that “the government charging ahead with 300,000 yen payments has badly damaged public opinion of the cabinet,” according to a senior Komeito official.

Distributing 100,000 yen to every citizen will cost over 12 trillion yen, or $111 billion, estimates show, compared with an estimated 4 trillion yen for the earlier plan.

The change requires a major upward revision to the 16.8 trillion yen supplemen-
tary budget. The government aims to submit the new spending plan as early as April 27.
Malaysia’s lockdown burdens women

Jokes about men shopping hide the serious harm caused by a worsening gender imbalance

NORAIMA ENDUT

When the Malaysian government imposed a Movement Control Order in mid-March, requiring almost all workplaces to close and employees to work from home due to a sharp rise in coronavirus cases, the last thing it expected was jokes about men shopping.

But a specific measure of the MCO, is to allow only one person, the “head of the family,” to go out to buy groceries. Despite there being close to 240,000 single mothers in Malaysia, who are likely in charge of their households, the presumption remains strong that the head of the family is a man.

After this announcement, jokes abounded among Malaysians on how untenable it is to make a man go out to buy fish and vegetables because knowledge about these things is the woman’s domain. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development did not ask how this rule might impact single mothers going out to get their home supplies, especially if they have young children and no other adults around to babysit.

Jokes aside, Malaysia’s government does not appear to have considered the distinct implications of the MCO and working from home on Malaysian women, from work-life balance to domestic violence. It needs to rectify this, and fast.

Malaysian women have not experienced a situation akin to a lockdown in 50 years. Few are familiar with the notions of working from home or flexible work arrangements, which have been introduced or implemented as a matter of national policy only in recent years and are not yet widespread.

The MCO means that where ordinarily during the day parents go out to work and children are sent to school or day care, all of them are now to stay in together and establish new routines.

In his speech persuading citizens to stay in, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said: “Mothers now have more time at home and they can try all sorts of new recipes to cook for the family.”

This remark missed the point: Far from giving mothers a break, the MCO actually requires them to continue fulfilling their job obligations while continuously playing the primary caregiving role.

The division of labor in Malaysian families, even when both husband and wife are working outside the home, is already unequal. During the MCO, women’s complex burden of work and family is becoming more distinctive.

In the words of a friend, a senior female professor, scientist and faculty leader, “Working from home for me is one hand on the ladle and the other on the phone.”

A government reminder that all family members should equally contribute toward household chores would have better served to improve the lives of women working from home than half-jesting references to gendered expectations.

The Movement Control Order allows only the head of the family to go out to buy groceries.

Public service announcements from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development further show it is fundamentally unaware about how such narratives, drawing on gender stereotypes, harm women.

The public service announcements, now widely joked about around the world, contained advice to women on preventing COVID-19 and dealing with the lockdown. They asked women not to wear “house clothes” but to dress up and put on makeup while working from home.

They also advised women to prevent conflict with their husbands during MCO by avoiding nagging and to humor their husbands’ ineptitude at housework by, say, using a funny voice fashioned after the magical cartoon cat Doraemon. Predictably, the announcement received much flak and the ministry has since apologized.

But even so, the government’s actions, words and responses in relation to the MCO are continuous demonstrations of deep-seated misogyny and insufficient political will to effectively address gender inequality and insensitivity.

Malaysia has pledged commitments to international instruments on gender equality and empowerment, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals, but visible change is still slow in coming in terms of translating these commitments at the national level.

Malaysia remains trailing in gender equality rankings in the world. The Global Gender Gap Index report for 2020 shows Malaysia ranks 104th out of 153 countries, the second lowest among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In the same survey, it places 97th in economic empowerment, a fall since 2018.

Its female labor force participation rate is 55% compared with 80% for men. Only 16% of Malaysia’s members of parliament and ministers are women.

What the government should have been doing, when thinking about the MCO, is urgently addressing its impact on single-headed households, the surge of domestic violence and child abuse reported during the period, and the unequal gender division of labor at home that affects women’s productive work.

The COVID-19 crisis and the MCO could, ironically, be opportune testing grounds for the Ministry of Women’s new leadership to showcase its readiness and aptitude to deal with women and gender issues. It must be said, however, that it has yet to make the grade.
Fighting a toxic mix of sex, tech and crime

South Korea’s ‘Nth rooms’ reflect the pervasive misogyny that allows online abuse to flourish

HAERYUN KANG

You might not know if you were sitting next to an “Nth room” criminal on the subway in Seoul, even if he was committing a crime at that very moment. All it would look like is a man typing on his phone, scrolling down, snickering, smiling.

Nth rooms are chat rooms on the Telegram messaging app where users illegally produce and trade sexually dehumanizing footage of women. Victims, many underage, are often coerced by Telegram users into abusing their bodies. Perpetrators have reportedly turned real-life assaults into online content.

With the trial in April of Cho Joo-bin, a creator of different Telegram rooms according to the police, South Korea is having to face up to this toxic mixture of tech, sex and crime; to the institutions that failed to stamp it out; and to the national culture of misogyny that enabled it.

The original cluster of chats called “Nth room” reportedly sprang up on Telegram in 2018 or early 2019. Now there is a whole network, each with different names like “slave room,” “female child room” or “violate your acquaintance room.” Underage girls were darkened, forced to bark like dogs or lie naked on the floor of a public men’s toilet. “Let’s rape” was a greeting almost as common as “hello.” Victims were often duped into giving perpetrators personal details, then blackmailed into obeying the Telegram users’ sexual whims.

The exhausting fact is that while the Telegram chats use a new platform, the men’s tactics and their dehumanization of women are oppressively familiar. Soranet was a website rife with spycam footage of women and even real-time invitations to rape women. It was shut down in 2016, but similar websites sprang up before and after its closure.

In last year’s Burning Sun scandal, K-pop stars were sharing illegally filmed videos of women they had sex with. “You raped her, LOL,” said one of their chats.

This might seem abnormal but it fits into a broader pattern of behavior here. It is normal to rate the looks of one’s acquaintances, especially women, even to their faces. Young female K-pop idols fulfill older men’s Lolita fantasies. Gamers objectify women. Men enjoy spycam as a genre of pornography.

Korean institutions are not catching up to rectify this horrifying norm. Law enforcement is more reactive than preventive, often organizing task forces after a scandal has splashed across the headlines. Cooperating with governments internationally, since many criminal activities take place on foreign servers and platforms, is still a lagging process.

Digital sex crimes in South Korea, even those targeting children, are notorious for attracting light sentences. Under Korean law, producers of child porn can receive up to a life sentence, but in reality the average was only two years in 2017.

Cho Joo-bin, leader of South Korea’s online sexual blackmail ring, walks out of a police station in Seoul on March 25. Over 100 suspects have been arrested in the Telegram scandal.

Digital sex criminals need to get tougher. It is not enough to look to precedents for sentencing guidelines. Digital sex crimes are unprecedented; they require new definitions, new guidelines. Improvements are coming, slowly, like the 2018 Supreme Court decision to expand the definition of a sex crime to interactions beyond physical, person-to-person assaults.

Over 2 million people have signed a petition to disclose all the Telegram suspects’ faces, which law enforcement rarely does, reflecting the desperation to punish alleged perpetrators, at least, through public shaming.

There is palpable concern, especially among women, that the perpetrators will not get what they deserve. This concern seems valid. Recently, one of the creators of the original Nth rooms was sentenced to 42 months in jail.

But harsher punishments alone will not be enough. Korean society must confront the uncomfortable reality that sexual dehumanization of women is pervasive beyond the Nth rooms: in schools, workplaces, politics and the seemingly harmless habits of daily life.

Conversations about feminism must go beyond “these women hate men” or “men are suffering too; feminism is just reverse gender discrimination.” Schools need to actively educate students, especially young men, on why gender sensitivity is important.

There is currently only a trickle of voices saying, “We need feminism at school,” especially after an elementary school teacher was severely bullied in 2017 for coming out as a feminist.

Without collaborative, comprehensive efforts from different sectors of society, the Nth room will happen again. And digital sex offenders will slip back into the crowd, their faces indistinguishable from the rest on the subway.
Now is not the time to undercut WHO efforts

Health agency’s role crucial to ending virus pandemic

U.S. President Donald Trump has threatened to pull funding for the World Health Organization, accusing it of being “China-centric” and lacking transparency. While the WHO does have flaws, now is not the time to jeopardize its efforts on the coronavirus pandemic. We must work closely together to stop COVID-19.

The number of infections continues to rise worldwide. The WHO is gathering data and advising member countries based on what researchers have learned about the virus. It is also coordinating international collaboration on clinical trials for treatments and the development of vaccines. The WHO plays a key role in supplying coronavirus test kits and providing health care support to African and other developing countries, which face a risk of a surge in new infections. In the past the organization has fought Ebola, HIV and tuberculosis, taking action on prevention and treatment.

WHO activities are supported financially by member states, with the U.S. the single largest contributor at about 15%. Losing American funding will undermine the agency’s efforts in the pandemic, which is sure to worsen the crisis in developing countries and in turn may lead to a second wave in countries that have brought it under control. Cutting off the money would do no good whatsoever for the U.S. and the world.

Leading contributors, including European countries and Japan, should demand that Washington abandon its funding freeze. As contributors to the WHO, they have a duty to step in and work together for sound management of the agency.

True, the WHO’s handling of the crisis has been less than ideal. Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has repeatedly praised the Chinese response, even though Beijing initially avoided disclosing epidemiological information about patients in Wuhan, exacerbating the outbreak. The organization’s failure to immediately dispatch a team of doctors to the epicenter and assess the situation is also thought to have delayed its declaration of a public health emergency of international concern.

Moreover, the WHO has failed to make any progress on the long-standing issue regarding Taiwan. China has used its political influence to lock out Taiwan from the WHO and its annual assembly meeting — a move that will hamper necessary coordination and exacerbate public health risks in times of disease outbreaks. Some believe the director-general was too beholden to China, a major investor in African countries, including his native Ethiopia. Once the crisis passes, the WHO’s governance and decision-making process must be investigated thoroughly and any missteps corrected.

NIKKEI EDITORIAL

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus speaks during a news conference on Feb. 28. (Yonhap)
Two months in Wuhan showed me what can help us through our darkest moments

WUHAN, China. The day before my departure from Berlin on Jan. 20, I received a message from my aunt in Wuhan: “Don’t come back. The virus is spreading.” Thinking of my parents and the rare chance to spend the Chinese New Year together after six years of separation, I still hopped on my flight. “After all, the situation seems to be under control, right?” I replied to my aunt.

I was locked down in Wuhan on Jan. 23 in the city’s quarantine to prevent COVID-19’s spread, and my 10-day trip was extended into an unforeseeable future. Even now, after the lockdown was lifted on April 8, customs restrictions, flight cancellations and skyrocketing travel expenses keep me here. Such closeness with my hometown has been rare, especially over the years I have been studying abroad. Although I was born and raised in Wuhan until I was 18, there is always a distance between us. I cannot master the local dialect, nor do I find it mentally difficult to emigrate elsewhere.

However, destiny seems to have brought me back just in time for the city’s darkest moment. The COVID-19 quarantine taught me to recognize my city. At the beginning, a friend asked me: “How’s the morale in town?” There was panic; the surge of COVID-19 news and analysis had bombarded the locals. However, it is worth noting that the Wuhanese, known for their explosive temper, largely complied with the confinement measures. There seemed to be a consensus in the air that cooperation and solidarity would help us overcome the crisis.

The state made its muscle evident in Wuhan by supporting the city with financing, logistics and more than 38,000 civilian and military medical practitioners. Wuhan was also sustained by its people. Volunteers aided marginalized communities and tackled important but less noticeable problems, like how the shutdown of public transport was keeping medical staff from their hospitals, so the Wuhanese organized a fleet of thousands of private vehicles to ferry doctors and nurses.

Despite the turbulence coronavirus had brought to the city, my daily life was repetitive: After disrupted sleep, I would sit in my study, open my computer, try to be productive with my schoolwork and occasionally look through the window at the trees when my concentration sneaked away. Initially, all the branches were bare. One day they were dressed in fine snow. Then some fresh green dots climbed along them. Now the leaves grow bigger and the color gets darker. My family stayed healthy.

For more than a month between the end of January and early March, Wuhan and Hubei Province were alone in isolation. Already in early February, through communication with my friends outside Wuhan, I realized that most breaking news was local — not beyond China, not even beyond Wuhan. The distance I used to feel from Wuhan was reversed and I felt it now between me and the outside world. Skype images of my classroom in Berlin looked foreign. Pictures of my friends in fancy crowded bars in Shanghai seemed strange. My first reaction when I saw a photo was: “Why aren’t those people wearing masks in public places?”

Since late March, quarantine has loosened its grip little by little. I started to receive notifications that my online shopping had been dispatched to Wuhan. Restaurants were activating their delivery services. Prices fell from their double or triple markups. I could hear people chatting and dogs barking more often from my study.

In the second week of April, Longjing green tea arrived, fresh from Hangzhou. For the first time, I drank this with my family in its proper season.

If it were not for the virus, the warmth and the breeze would already have invited the whole city to go out for a spring walk. Some mobility restrictions are still in place but people are now returning to the parks and the restrictions can no longer flatten the city’s desires. It is like water just before it is boiled.

As the virus transmission is contained, I can distract myself to deeper reflection. My quarantine experience in Wuhan rebuilt my connection with my hometown even as it disconnected me on many fronts with the outside world.

If I did not decide to draw a line between myself and my friends outside Wuhan, rather “disconnection” was a shift of my attention.

In this crisis, individuals’ fear and happiness can be projected on to grand narratives, blame games, well-articulated pieces from experts with sophisticated arguments on economic...
Growing up in the U.K. in the 1950s, I was fascinated by a livid scar on my father’s leg. The size of a small soup bowl, it was all that was left of a putrid jungle ulcer he suffered as a prisoner of the Imperial Japanese Army on the infamous “death railway” in Thailand. He must have got it from an infected cut when he was transported from Changi prison in Singapore in 1943 to work as a slave laborer, breaking rocks through the jungle to build the line to Burma, now called Myanmar.

For me, that scar was a living link to the agony and excitement of a war I had never known. For my father, it was a reminder of a terrible wound that almost certainly saved his life.

He was one of the lucky ones. More than 13,000 fellow prisoners of war and at least 90,000 Tamil, Malay, Burmese, Chinese and Indonesian forced laborers died of disease, exhaustion, starvation and maltreatment while on the project. In an effort to save my father’s ordeal, I recently became what I can only call a “war tourist” in Thailand. It was an unsettling experience, starting with a three-hour drive from Bangkok to Kanchanaburi, where the base camps for the railway were set up. This is where most of the dead are buried, and where the bridge was built by POWs, made famous by David Lean’s 1957 film “The Bridge on the River Kwai.”

Only a short stretch of the infamous railway still runs, largely for tourists, and the death camps have almost entirely vanished into the encroaching jungle. But there are two war cemeteries in Kanchanaburi, beautifully tended, where British, Australian and Dutch soldiers are buried.

There are also four museums, although only one — the Thailand-Burma Railway Center — makes a decent effort to tell the story. In grim detail, it sets out why and how the railway was built, and why so many lives were lost. Those who have done most to preserve the memory of the dead are Australian. Rod Beattie, a former engineer who has spent 20 years researching the railway, founded the museum and runs it with two fellow Australians, both sons of POWs who died when they were young. They greeted me on arrival with a folder of documents about my father. Suddenly, it was far more real.

An hour’s drive northwest of Kanchanaburi is Hellfire Pass, the site of an Australian government-financed memorial where the prisoners hacked out the largest rock cutting along the line. With audio recordings from Australian POWs, the center provides a deeply moving insight into the cruelty inflicted and comradeship inspired as the line was built.

The desperately malnourished prisoners died from dysentery, malaria, beriberi and tropical ulcers, some were beaten to death for attempting to escape or challenging authority. My father believed that he was saved by his ulcer: The stinking wound was so obvious that the Japanese allowed him to be hospitalized. The doctor saved his leg, but it took five months to heal in the primitive prison hospital.

Should I be angry or sad? I don’t know. My father did not entirely blame his Japanese captors for their behavior. My mother did. He recognized that they came from a culture in which surrender was seen as the ultimate disgrace. He knew that Japan had not signed the Geneva Convention, which banned the use of POWs in war efforts. Yet he was convinced that he would survive. That was a huge psychological advantage.

Most of the British and Australian troops on the railway project were young and inexperienced; many arrived in Singapore just before it fell to the Japanese in February 1942. Yet their memory is preserved in the cemeteries and museums and at Hellfire Pass. By contrast, the 90,000 to 100,000 Asian laborers who died on the line are largely forgotten. Theirs was the greatest sacrifice.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. Normally there is a commemoration at Hellfire Pass on April 25 — Anzac Day, which marks the date when Australian and New Zealand troops entered World War I. But this year it has been canceled because of the global struggle to contain the Covid-19 virus.

Are such ceremonies still important, and will there be many memorials left in another 75 years? I fear not. The danger is that we will forget the lesson we should have learned: that war is brutal and stupid. The railway may have been a remarkable feat of engineering but it did not prevent Japan’s ultimate defeat. It was a futile achievement that came at a terrible cost. If we learn those lessons, the railway’s victims will not have suffered in vain.

 Quentin Peel is a former Financial Times correspondent and foreign editor.

[Image of a man walking his dog on April 14.]
Hakodate Onuma Tsuruga Resort EPUY

A luxury resort surrounded by abundant nature

Hakodate Onuma Tsuruga Resort EPUY is located in the Onuma Quasi-National Park area at the south of Hokkaido, Japan, only 3 minutes' walk from JR Onuma-Koen Station.

In Hokkaido dialect, the word “epuy” means “flowers and fruit of trees”. Inspired by this, we named the hotel based on this word. It can also be interpreted as our concept of a wonderful day featuring flowers, greenery and meals. You can see an expanse of beautiful and majestic nature in the garden that features herbs and flowers.

Our Restaurant offers the best food that is to be enjoyed with the five senses in the area of Onuma Quasi-National Park. Your wonderful day in Onuma will start with scenery in which you are surrounded by many flowers and rich greenery in a garden, whatever the season.

Organic healthy vegetables grown with soft rays of the sun are provided alongside fresh and local seafood, all coming from areas within a 50-mile radius (about 80 km) of the Onuma area. We offer a creative meal course using regional ingredients, full of our hospitality.

Please enjoy the local delicacies, relax by soaking in an onsen (Japanese hot spring), and be close to the beautiful natural landscape in each season. We’re sure you will spend a luxurious time and forget your daily stress in EPUY.

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