

COVID-19 in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

Northeast Asia was the first region to experience the fear and uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 virus. Yet this earlier introduction to the virus means that some Northeast Asian countries have passed through the worst – even though a second wave looms in the horizon – making it possible to look back upon responses to the global pandemic by the various regional governments and societies. Understanding these responses is necessary since not only do they have implications for future public health policies, they also provide important insights into key issues, central to each Northeast Asian country, which have come to light as a result of the disruption of the *status quo*.

In this issue of News from Northeast Asia, we explore how governments and societies have responded to the COVID-19 crisis in China, South Korea, and Taiwan. In 'The politics of COVID-19 in China. Examining challenges in social governance and diplomacy', Woo Park of Hansung University examines how ongoing debates resulting from COVID-19 are now affecting China's social governance and diplomacy. Jae-Hyung Kim of Korea National Open University maintains, in 'Mask dynamics between the Korean government and civil

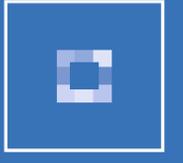
society in the COVID-19 era', that a key factor in South Korea's successful response to the virus was the belief held by Korean citizens that access to a means of self-protection against the virus is a basic right of citizenship and the government's acceptance of this duty. In 'Taiwan, COVID-19, and the fortuitous lack of politics', Chun-Fang Wu of National Quemoy University notes the various factors that have fortuitously come together to contribute to Taiwan's successful containment of the outbreak. In the fourth and final contribution

to the series, 'Negotiating the new normal in the COVID-19 era', Jongseok Yoon of Seoul National University introduces SNUAC's initiative to launch the Seoul National University COVID-19 Research Network (SNUCRN), a platform for global cooperation and mutual assistance in dealing with the cumulative effects of COVID-19.

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SNUAC

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The Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) is a research and international exchange institute based in Seoul, South Korea. The SNUAC's most distinctive feature is its cooperative approach in fostering research projects and international exchange program through close interactions between regional and thematic research programs about Asia and the world. To pursue its mission to become a hub of Asian Studies, SNUAC research teams are divided by different regions and themes. Research centers and programs are closely integrated, providing a solid foundation for deeper analysis of Asian society.



Left: An almost empty subway carriage in Shanghai, April 2020. Photo by author's friend.

The politics of COVID-19 in China. Examining challenges in social governance and diplomacy

Park Woo

On 30 December 2019, signs of an unexplained pneumonia were reported in Wuhan, a metropolis in central China. The symptoms were similar to that of the common cold, such as a fever, coughing, and respiratory problems. In reference to the earlier SARS virus of 2003, doctors on the first line came to refer to it as the Novel SARS or Novel Coronavirus. When the virus was first reported in Wuhan, experts from China and the World Health Organization said that there was no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission and that the situation was easy to control. It is not yet clear whether such a claim derived from a lack of information about the virus or from other reasons. However, China's way of dealing with the epidemic was met with much domestic and international condemnation after it was revealed that the whistleblower Li Wenliang had been admonished by local authorities, and as more and more confirmed cases were reported in other countries.

Viruses have always existed alongside human civilization and appear irregularly as plagues, regardless of region. Viruses that use humans and animals as their hosts, such as MERS, H1N1, and swine fever, have emerged in the past decade. Compared to these viruses, COVID-19 features significant

virological characteristics such as a marked ability to infect and transmit. This has resulted in considerable difficulties in the prevention of the spread of COVID-19, not only in China but also in other countries. However, the key debates sparked by COVID-19 have concerned the Chinese government's actions in dealing with this novel virus and the resulting epidemic/pandemic, rather than the unique virological characteristics of the virus. Although the Chinese government has managed to effectively control the virus at the state-level, ongoing debates resulting from COVID-19 are now strongly affecting China's social governance and diplomacy.

First, COVID-19 has created a political phenomenon in which lines have been drawn between those on the left and those on the right of Chinese society. For example, Fang Fang, a writer in Wuhan, recorded in her diary the daily lives of citizens, the deaths of the infected, the role of Shequ [neighborhood associations], the positive role of volunteer doctors and troops from the regions, and the material support from all over the country. Her diary was made public; what followed was scrutiny and disapproval by those who believed that she had revealed shameful aspects of Chinese society. Her statements that the irresponsible cadres and experts of this epidemic should be penalized were not

taken well and headlined as a negative issue. Leading the attacks were groups of Chinese old leftists who tend to reason everything from the perspective of Maoist class struggle. They recklessly declared Fang Fang to be right-wing and worthy of harsh critique. On the other hand, the nationalists were angry that the diary had been translated and published in the U.S. and Germany. They branded the author a traitor, subordinated by foreign influence. Among social media influencers, there were even those who went as far as to dig up the tombs of Fang Fang's ancestors. They also tried their best to establish a link between Fang Fang's ancestors and Kuomintang, highlighting that Fang's family were reactionaries. Some professors who defended Fang Fang were disciplined by university authorities. Fang Fang has counter-attacked, maintaining that the leftists are ruining China. However, many other Chinese citizens are sharing their support for Fang Fang and her diary.

Second, COVID-19 has amplified public distrust of the authorities, leading the relationship between the state and its citizens to be scrutinized. Those interested in public sentiment in China are aware of how many articles and videos presently exist regarding the state's perceived lack of authority. Such media were uploaded on platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Tik Tok in January and February of this year. The act of openly criticizing, with names and faces attached, rather than doing so anonymously has seldom been seen since 1989. In April, these online 'public sentiments', which I had saved as data, were deleted or became inaccessible as illegal content. The reformatting of data may be physically possible, but experience and memory are not easily erased. Chinese people had already seen the dead bodies on their screens, and experienced the fear of losing friends, relatives, and neighbors to the epidemic. Washing away the dread and anger of China's citizens will be difficult indeed.

Third, international opinions of China have deteriorated as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic broke out at a time when various conflicts between the Western world (led by the U.S.) and China concerning issues of trade, human rights, and the South China Sea were particularly tense. Thus, the pandemic became an 'opportunity' for other countries to demand accountability from China. Chinese diplomats promoted the conspiracy theory that the US military had brought the virus to Wuhan, but they have since realized that this was a terrible diplomatic mistake. In May, when Beijing formalized legal governance over Hong Kong, the U.S. and other Western countries

began sanctioning Chinese executives related to Hong Kong. In May and June of this year, there were bloody clashes between China and India at the border, and in mid-July, the U.K. decided to ban Huawei 5G kits. In addition to these conflicts on a national level, public hatred against the Chinese can also not be ignored. On 1 March 2020, a piece on so-called 'China Gate' was posted on Korea's largest online portal, NAVER. It was written that China was manipulating public opinion ahead of Korea's April National Assembly Election. The South Korean authority claimed that 'China Gate' was fake news, but public opinion about China in S. Korea, which had already been rapidly deteriorating since 2017, has changed aggressively as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. And in Southeast Asia, netizens of Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan formed a 'Milk Tea Alliance' to mock Chinese patriotic netizens, often using the new moniker *nmslese* (referencing an oft-used denigrating Chinese expression).

China's left-right and state-citizen relations are presently strained, to say the least. Before COVID-19, social development and changes in the state-citizen relationship produced new and diverse identities, but they were successfully forced into China's logic of social governance by authoritarian rule. Identities deriving from predictable changes could be governed by authoritarian politics that monopolized vast resources and information. However, COVID-19 brought about a sudden and different type of change. COVID-19 proved that the leadership of authoritarian politics fell far below the expectations of the Chinese public. Also taking place is the re-establishment of international relations against China. The U.S. and other countries are attempting to divide the Chinese Communist Party and China and are aiming to attack the former verbally, diplomatically, and economically. Anti-Chinese (social) sentiments that have been formed in other countries in recent years have sharply weakened China's soft power. In addition, the organizational movements of exiles from China residing abroad have also been active. Not only do they function within networks of Western political and economic elites, they also work together with Chinese sports stars and scientists to weaken China's position. In this way, the politics of COVID-19 are presenting simultaneous challenges to China's social governance and diplomacy.

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