

“Being Asian in the time of COVID-19 in a Western country is tough.”

Berlin, Germany, South Korea, 19 March – 27 April 2020

Already half a year has passed since the start of the pandemic of COVID-19. Dramatic changes have occurred ever since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments have imposed restrictive measures to stem the spread of the pandemic. However, in each country, the public responded differently. As an Asian minority in Germany, I could compare several perspectives of the developing situation in Germany with my home country South Korea. Among them, two issues appeared to be the most prominent: wearing masks and anti-Asian racism. My diary between March and April 2020 reflects my observation, experiences, and thoughts on these issues. I am a Ph.D. in social and cultural anthropology, currently teaching at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and looking for new options in applied anthropology and data science.

2020/03/19 Thursday

The first thing I do in the morning these days is to check up the increased numbers of corona infected people around the world. The outbreak is progressing simultaneously on different continents and in different time zones. In the morning, I read the numbers in Asia and America. During the daytime, the development occurs in Europe too. Germany now has more than 10,000 cases. The Robert Koch Institute reported that there were 10,999 infection cases in Germany as of 19 March 2020 (at 00:00 O'clock), among them, 573 were in Berlin. Last night the German chancellor Merkel appealed to the nation. This is the most severe challenge for the country since World War 2. It seems like people still do not think of the developing situation seriously enough. Many newspaper articles indicated that people sat together in the

park shoulder to shoulder.

This morning, I went to the pharmacy to get a thermometer. I have never needed one so far. But as the situation worsened, my partner suggested me to buy one. In the pharmacy, the pharmacist asked me to keep my distance in front of the counter; I was subconsciously walking toward the counter. Then the pharmacist freaked out and shouted: "Please stay there, don't come close. Stay there, there!" I asked her whether she did it to everyone these days. She said yes. Because I look Asian, I thought she might have overreacted. In my eyes, she behaved like she was dealing with a dirty person with her disgusted facial expression and distanced behavior. Moreover, there were no special announcements or indications in the pharmacy (yet) to keep a distance in front of the counter. But I cheered myself up that the pharmacists are particularly careful as they face many patients and are at risk. There were ample thermometers at the counter. Apparently, many people are buying thermometers. The pharmacist told me that I could pay only with a card to avoid any contact with her. But the thermometer was only 2.95 euros. I told her I could give her a five euro note. She luckily accepted it and picked the bill with the tip of her fingers. She threw the change on the table, and I collected them carefully to avoid potential contact. I noticed that I recently try not to be close to any person in public because I do not want to agitate the local people. I am aware that people are especially careful towards Asians these days, even though the virus in Germany spread among Germans and was transmitted from other European countries at most. At home, I rapidly checked my temperature: I had 36.5°C. I was fine.

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2020/03/22 Sunday

Why do people in Europe rarely wear masks to protect themselves from the virus? I thought it was partially the central government's decision to prevent a potential shortage of supply. The masks should be prioritized for the healthcare workers at the moment. The central media suggested people just to keep their distance, to stay home, and to wash their hands, instead of wearing a mask. In particular, ARD (German public broadcasters) published a precise video on Twitter about why it is not necessary to wear a mask (As of July 2020, I couldn't find this video anymore on Twitter.). But wearing masks in public helps to prevent potential infection from the people in the incubation stage. Asymptomatic carriers can spread the coronavirus. Therefore, the whole population was requested to stay at home to curb the further spread of the epidemic. Then why should people not wear a mask for the same reason? My friends and families in Korea are concerned that I am not wearing a mask in Germany. Even though I have a mask, wearing it in public would make other people consider me as a virus carrier. A Chinese friend of mine told me a story yesterday. A Chinese person was wearing a mask in a German shop. A German then asked him: "Why are you wearing a mask? Because you are infected by corona?" Then the Chinese answered: "Do you wear a condom because you are HIV infected? I wear a mask to protect myself from getting infected by corona."

“Even though I have a mask, wearing it in public would make other people consider me as a virus carrier.”

2020/03/24 Tuesday

In the morning, my mom called me hastily and said that she could send me masks to Germany. The situation in Germany became more severe than in Korea, and my parents were exceedingly concerned about me for not wearing a mask and being exposed to the coronavirus in Germany. As it is difficult to get the masks here in Germany, which protect against the virus, they have wanted to send me some. The South Korean government has banned exporting masks abroad, but it just allowed sending masks to direct family members overseas for a limited time and number: maximum eight masks once and per month. The German government also banned exporting masks since early March 2020, but incoming masks are still allowed. Masks to protect against the coronavirus should have one of the following standards: KF94, N95, KN95, IF94, and FFP2. In Germany, shops usually provide simple masks without such quality. The virus-resistant ones are purchasable in online stores. They are mostly produced and delivered from China. But such masks are available only in limited supply with a 1-4-week delivery delay. My parents will send me the first package of masks tomorrow, and I would see how long it took to get here in Berlin.

Even though I want to wear a mask, it would not have been easy for me to do so in public. In Germany, no one is wearing a mask in public, and wearing one means that you have been directly exposed to the virus. In particular, as an Asian, this stigma could cause additional aversion to me. Every year in spring, I do not hesitate to wear masks as I have a pollen allergy. Recently, when I wore a simple mask against pollen, my neighbor made fun of me that I should change my mask every few hours to protect me against the coronavirus. He also added that Asians could easily get the coronavirus. Thus, even though I wear a mask for other reasons, people around me might think that I already am infected.

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Being Asian in the time of COVID-19 in a western country is tough. Recently, I was waiting for the train at the station alone. A group of people called me repeatedly “corona.” I generally react to such outbursts of bigotry in public, but at that time, I did not say anything. The young men and women seemed to be aggressive, perhaps being drunk. I felt that had I reacted, the situation could have escalated and could have turned violent. When my friends complained about their experience being called corona by strangers these days, I thought those people were not worth caring about. I believed that I could simply ignore them because the majority of people in society were still tolerant. But as I experienced anti-Asian racism myself, I started feeling unsafe to go outside. I might be considered as a potential virus bomb and mocked for my Asian appearance.

“Recently, I was waiting for the train at the station alone. A group of people called me repeatedly ‘corona.’”

2020/03/30 Monday

More and more people are wearing a mask in Germany. It is interesting to observe how people around me changed their opinion about wearing masks. For instance, my neighbor, a German grandma, was against wearing masks. A few days ago, however, she told me that her son gave her a few highly protective masks, and she was then willing to wear them. That day, she told me that she saw more and more people wearing a mask in the city. She also showed me a newspaper article describing how to make a mask with simple kitchen towels and rubber bands. Is a mask crisis underway in Germany? Another friend of mine sent me a link describing how to make a fabric mask from old clothes (<https://maskeauf.de>). The medical masks are reserved for healthcare workers, whereas others are expected to make with whatever is available. Mask wearing seems to be one of the critical topics in the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It is interesting to observe how people around me changed their opinion about wearing masks.”

I decided not to read any news feed today. I also do not want to use any social media. I am not feeling well and want to withdraw from media for a day, perhaps the next day or the day after that too. This is a kind of dispiritedness, the “corona blues.” The situation is not getting any better—high death rates and ever-increasing infection numbers were reported. I do not feel safe to go outside, but staying home alone is also detrimental. I am a precarious person in this society as a migrant. This all gives me uncertainty on another level in the time of the corona pandemic.

2020/04/01 Wednesday

Yesterday, I received the masks from Korea that my parents sent me last week. It took about a week to arrive in Berlin. There was no delay or any other problem. These days many people wear masks, and I finally did not feel awkward to wear one myself. My family wants me to come back to Korea, but no flights are available. I also received an email from the conference organizer that the conference in Seoul in June this year was canceled. I looked up the trips that I booked before the corona outbreak for this conference and notified the organizers that my flights have already been canceled. I read the news that warns of potential food shortages in April and May. As food-exporting countries are locking down, there could be a shortage of rice, flour, etc. It frightens me. What would happen in the next few months? I called my mom and asked her to send me some supplies from Korea, as it looks like this mobility ban would last longer. Moreover, I could not foresee when I would be able to go back to Korea.

2020/04/12 Sunday

Going outside in general made me anxious due to the potential of facing racist behavior. Today, I was walking in my neighborhood and was enjoying the sun talking to my mom on the phone until a boy (around 13-15 years old) called me corona. I reacted immediately and asked him why he called me corona. He looked surprised but soon said he did not say such a word to me: "Why would I have said such a word?" But there was no one else around except him. Moreover, my mom on the phone also heard that word. I looked around and noticed that this boy was playing table tennis with a male adult (his father?) in the garden. I asked the boy again that I heard someone called me corona. The boy insisted again that he did not say that. I

told him then it is fine. But I immediately regretted that I did not say that calling an Asian person corona is racist behavior, and you were aware of it. I hope he learned at least a lesson that it was not appropriate and could hurt someone, in particular, people of Asian origin. To be honest, I was more hurt by the adult who was next to the boy. Even though the boy's reaction was not ethically correct, he simply stood idle. This kind of incident intensified my disappointment in this society.

2020/04/20 Monday

I was in the supermarket today and felt that people were noticeably more relaxed. There were fewer people in the market, and the shelves were not empty. However, the toilet paper rolls were still not available. I still feared to come across some rude people on the street who would call me corona. I needed to be prepared to react to them if an incident happened again. But today I did not meet any person like that. Daily racism existed already before the corona outbreak in Germany. On the street, I sometimes met school kids or young students who called me "chiang chang chong," "ni hao," and showing slit eyes to me. I tended to ignore such incidents and thought they were only children. But after the incident last Sunday (diary above on the 12. of April), I realized that I had overlooked a critical possibility. Racist sentiments might have been transferred to children; from adults. I think that not many Germans are aware of and sensitive enough to recognize daily racism towards ethnic minorities. Adults do not correct their children for making racist jokes. This was confirmed by parents of Asian origin who have children in kindergarten and schools. A colleague of mine has two children in kindergarten. One day her son sang a song called "Drei Chinesen mit Kontrabass (three Chinese people with contrabass)," which he learned in kindergarten. My colleague was shocked when her son made slit eyes with the lyric "Chinesen (Chinese)." She soon contacted the teacher to ask about it, but the teacher did not understand why this song and making slit eyes were racist. This indicated that the general population was not much aware of daily racism towards

ethnic minorities. Moreover, anti-Asian racist incidents were hardly ever reported in the media, which disappointed many Asian communities in Germany.

“Daily racism existed already before the corona outbreak in Germany.”

2020/04/26 Sunday

The package from Korea arrived after three weeks in Germany. That was exceptionally long. I generally received a package from Korea within a week. But this time, it took three weeks. Some of the stuff (food) my parents sent me already got spoiled, and I had to throw it away. Wearing a mask in public transportation became an obligation in Germany. I received some cloth masks from my parents and shared them with my neighbors. Last Thursday, I saw that toilet paper rolls were available again in the supermarket. That was after almost eight weeks.

2020/04/27 Monday

I heard about a racist incident in Berlin on the Korean broadcast. I quickly contacted my acquaintances in Berlin, who work in an anti-discrimination organization, and they told me that they were working on it already. This incident happened last Saturday night, or early in the morning on Sunday, in Berlin's subway. Five German people (three men and two women) cursed two Koreans, a married couple, with sexually abusable words. They also called the couple corona, corona party, happy corona day, etc. When the couple told them not to speak such racist terms, the

German people answered: “No, this is not racist.” The situation was recorded by the Korean couple with their smartphone and already spread on social media. After the insults, the situation escalated into physical violence. The German men spat on the Korean man and hurt him physically when they noticed that the Koreans were recording the situation with their smartphone. The couple quickly called the police officers, but the officers’ reaction was not understandable: they said this was not a racist crime. They said: “Do not call it racist.” Moreover, they tried to educate the Korean couple that calling Asians corona was not a racist incident. Then what is a racist crime? The Korean community was shocked by this incident. In particular, this happened in Berlin, Germany. Germany has had a positive image among many Koreans, and the racist attack was not expected. However, hardly any German media reported about this incident. I think German society is not sensitive enough about this type of discrimination and often ignores it in public discourse. I hope that this sentiment improves.

Concluding remark: I revised and summarized my corona diary in July 2020. In the last few months since my latest corona diary entry, many things have changed. Now mask-wearing became common in Germany. Despite the warm and humid weather, almost everyone puts it on in public locations, such as in subways and supermarkets. The city of Berlin keeps strict regulations with masks too. For instance, one has to pay a fine for not wearing a mask in public transportation (50 euros). From the stigmatizer of Asians as virus carriers to the general protector, mask-wearing definitively reflects a significant change in western society during the corona pandemic. Unfortunately, the fear and discrimination towards the people of Asian origin have also increased significantly. Since the Black Lives Matter movement, I hoped that people get aware of everyday racism, and anti-Asian racism also decreases. However, anti-Asian crimes still continued; a Korean man was attacked with a knife in Paris in early July and transported to the hospital. More recently, a

Korean woman was beaten in a supermarket for being Asian and “*carrying the coronavirus*” in Berlin again. (I give examples of Koreans as I mainly get information from Korean broadcasts. But I know members of other Asian ethnicities have also experienced and reported similar incidents.) When I heard this incident happened again in Berlin, I had incremental fear that I could be the next target. Around the world, anti-Asian discrimination was reported multiple times. I still face people on the street who put a mask on when they pass me by, but not when they pass by other local white people. I am afraid that the corona pandemic caused general discrimination of Asians, similar to Muslims after the 9/11 attacks.

“From the stigmatizer of Asians as virus carriers to the general protector, mask-wearing definitively reflects a significant change in western society during the corona pandemic.”

Surprisingly only a few people are aware of the anti-Asian discrimination issue in the West. Many people in Germany sympathized with the Black Lives Matter movement in America after the brutal killing of Georgy Floyd by white police officers. Despite participating in demonstrations against racism, the German public does not recognize racism in its immediate vicinity. The examples of bigotry I provided in this diary are focused on the Asian community and are likely just the tip of the iceberg. The media has not been helpful in addressing these issues. For instance, the media reports positively about the German government’s handling of the Syrian refugee crisis and efforts to integrate them in German society but ignores racist incidents documented by myself and many others. To combat racism, more media attention is

necessary. Moreover, it is essential that every single individual becomes aware of such practices and challenges them in their surroundings. I hope such a process occurs and attracts more attention in Germany, not only in terms of anti-Asian racism but also racism against other ethnicities.

“I still face people on the street who put a mask on when they pass me by, but not when they pass by other local white people.”