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ESSAY

From Ise to the World in a Time of Pandemic

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Abstract

A collection of reflections on COVID-19 by scholars from around the world who relate their participation in a study program in Japan in the early stages of the pandemic, and their subsequent experiences returning to their home countries. As the virus spread around the world, they communicated with each other from their respective countries and documented their experiences. Written in multiple styles and with diverse perspectives, these reflections provide insight into the similarities and differences and the shared and dis-equalizing aspects of the world's response to the pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19; Japan; Ise; Pandemic; Experiences; Comparative

In February 2020, a group of scholars from around the world met for a three-week program in Ise, Japan. Participants included scholars from the US, Iran, Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, Finland, Germany, Italy, India, Hong Kong, and China. The participant from China was unable to attend as the virus had already restricted the movement of Chinese people.

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We met in Ise on February 16 and stayed as a group until March 7. During that time, we witnessed Japan rapidly change its response to the pandemic including the closing of schools and the use of face masks. Some of the scheduled activities were canceled and towards the end of the program, everyone grew concerned about their journeys home. After arriving at our respective destinations, we maintained contact, experienced the prejudices that the virus provoked, suffered the seemingly random regulations of unprepared bureaucracies, and gained interesting perspectives of the pandemic from across the globe. The chronology of the spread of the pandemic was insightful: the US was feeling smug while the Italians and Iranians were reeling. Situations soon reversed. While participants in March were concerned about getting home from Japan, restrictions are now placed on travel in the opposite direction. The following reflections show the progression of the pandemic from seven perspectives and highlight ways COVID-19 served as both a shared experience and a great dis-equalizer.

David Rands—Clarksville, Tennessee

Two days after arriving in Ise, I received a package of face masks from my mother-in-law in the Tokyo area. This was my introduction to inequalities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though I didn't grasp the ramifications, I had the personal protective gear that others couldn't find in stores. During the next three weeks, we were given precious masks and hand sanitizer. We were able to visit historically and culturally significant shrines in Kyoto and Nara without the crowds of tourists that usually flood the cities. As the program drew towards its conclusion, returning home became a concern as airlines started changing schedules. One of the participants was scheduled to fly from Japan to Seattle and then back across the Pacific just to get to Hong Kong. Flight changes and uncertainty of what awaited us at the airports upon our return caused anxiety. Mask usage increased. At Nagoya airport, I sent a picture of the traditional girl's day dolls wearing little medical masks to the participants who would be flying out later, then got on my flight to Tokyo, where I would connect with my US-bound flight.



Traditional Girl's Day Doll; © David Rands

Traveling at the outset of the pandemic allowed me to witness different national reactions. In Japan, masks were highly recommended and on the flight from Nagoya to Narita there wasn't a person without one. On the flight to Los Angeles, however, many of the masks disappeared. There was no screening, and no one asking if I had any symptoms. I felt conspicuous for wearing a mask. The government was telling people that masks were not recommended. To my shock, the airport was busy. Arriving in Nashville, participants soon started to compare our travels. Kiev was the only airport taking everyone's temperature upon arrival. The biggest problem for us returning home was a broken seat belt that delayed a flight from Helsinki to Poland and strict customs controls in Rome. We may have made it home, but things were far from returning to normal.

Although it was the middle of the semester, my university was just starting Spring Break which had been extended, and once the scope of the pandemic took hold, classes were moved entirely online. Because I had recently returned from abroad, I was asked to self-isolate for fourteen days and prohibited from visiting my office. Those returning from Rome and the UK had no such requests made of them, and I was able to see how the pandemic was considered an Asian issue by Americans. For two weeks I avoided all contact fearing that any positive test would be traced back to me. The lack of direction and uncertainty of the scope of the pandemic was not limited to my situation. Communication with other participants from Ise indicated that others were also dealing with uncertainty. A fellow participant returning to Finland was greeted by a rubber-gloved friend disinfecting her luggage.

On March 9, Princeton closed and the following day schools in Poland closed. People in the Ukraine were told to both stay home and go in to work. The lack of clarity magnified the rumors and illegitimate news stories. Our discussion of whether Russia was letting the lions out of the zoos to keep people out of the streets was one of the more humorous exchanges. While universities in Santa Barbara were closing, people in Hong Kong were considering a move back to normal. On March 11, there was news of closures in Kiev and a shut down in Slovakia. In Rome the report was that the 'streets and shops are empty; you rarely meet people going for a walk. It's surreal.' By March 14, boredom was setting in as people realized that the disruption was going to last beyond a week or two. In Russia nobody was wearing a mask, there was no disinfectant, and everything was quite normal. In Slovakia, borders, airports, and schools were closed, but people were ignoring the quarantine and going skiing. In Hong Kong, announcements were made that from March 23, the normal workweek would resume, but two days later, Russia and India were closing universities and going into quarantine. American media was awash with images of death in Italy. As I was finishing my required self-isolation, participants in Russia, Finland, and Italy were starting to be locked down.

Student visas began to be cancelled on March 18. To a group so invested in international studies, the prospect of being unable to travel is dire. Summer programs started to be cancelled and I had to tell my students that our annual study-abroad trip was postponed. By March 21, Hong Kong was experiencing another outbreak. In Germany people were requested to stay home. Now out of self-isolation, I was able to venture back to my office to gather materials and survey the situation in Tennessee. It was not very different from the images I was getting from other places. Limits on commodities like toilet paper were common and rice, flour, and noodles were disappearing from store shelves.

By April, the pandemic was ravaging New York, and the cavalier attitude of the previous month was disappearing from American media and policy. Many Americans had grown weary with social distancing while in Russia the same feelings were held in check by governmental pressure. Japan, too, declared a national emergency with everybody on red alert. However, our Ukrainian colleague noted, 'unlike war, pandemics somehow unite people. We all have the same problems and have to struggle together.' The dis-equalization of scarcity became a uniting factor. While living in quarantine we shared pictures of the Japanese cherry blossoms, pets, and views from our windows. Our Italian friend even tried pineapple on his pizza. By the end of May, the lockdown led to the realization that we could value everything around us that

we had missed. While we do not know what the future holds, the pandemic has allowed us to see similar dis-equalities in places as diverse as Moscow, Kiev, Delhi, Rome, Nashville, and Hong Kong.

Mária Kubincová—a Slovak living in Turku, Finland

When we were kissing the last minutes of 2019 goodbye, few of us could imagine what 2020 was about to bring. As the first three cases of COVID-19 were detected in France on January 27, the threat of the novel coronavirus stopped being an alien (read: Asian) concept. Finland was yet to have any confirmed cases, so talk about whether it was safe to travel to Asia were common. I found myself considering cancelling the trip particularly due to pressure from my parents in Slovakia. Nevertheless, I decided to travel to Japan and follow the rules and restrictions that were in force.

After the initial cases in Finland, people hurried to buy hand sanitizer, disposable face masks and various other goods, which seemed to be in high demand in many countries with confirmed cases (such as canned foods, toilet paper, and soap). I was unable to buy face masks in bulk before my flight to Japan. I could only find pricey N95 masks at a pharmacy in the Helsinki Vantaa airport. Naively hoping I could buy more masks in Japan, I only bought two and ended up having to use a scarf to cover my face until I arrived in Nagoya. Fortunately, the host university provided us with face masks for the entire duration of the program, but pharmacies, supermarkets and convenience stores in Japan were hopelessly sold out. The program was conducted under certain restrictions, which became stricter towards the end of our stay. I was amazed to see the cities so empty. It was a refreshing experience.

The situation during the first half of the program was not as concerning as the second half when flights were being cancelled or rescheduled. Some participants were forced to return using very indirect routes. Each day, the participants became increasingly concerned, often exchanging fears of not being able to return, or being stuck at an airport. Fortunately, all participants got home safely. It was intriguing and sometimes bizarre to follow up on everyone's experiences in their home countries upon returning from Japan. Some were clearly advised to self-quarantine, while others were told it was optional. I arrived in Finland on March 8, and as Japan was not on Finland's list of high-risk countries, neither a COVID-19 test nor quarantine was required from me. However, I voluntarily decided to self-quarantine to rule out the possibility of spreading the virus asymptotically. Three days later, on March 11, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. On the last day of my fourteen-day self-quarantine I started feeling unwell with dry cough and sneezing, but as pollen season was just starting in Finland, and I had no signs of fever or any severe symptoms, I was advised to just continue my self-quarantine. At the time it was virtually impossible to be tested in Finland unless returning from a high-risk country or had severe respiratory symptoms.

The countermeasures against COVID-19 have been somewhere in-between strict and mild. Schools and universities reacted quickly by shifting to distance teaching. Workplaces transitioned to remote work wherever possible and restaurants, cafes and certain shops temporarily closed. Social distancing was enacted but in Turku masks were scarcely worn. News about the coronavirus was broadcast in several minority languages, such as Somali or Farsi, as the contagion quickly spread among minority communities, where large families often live in crammed apartments. Most of the restrictions were gradually lifted throughout the months of June, July and August and Finland enjoyed a rather quiet summer. By the end of summer, cases began to rise as the country prepared for a second wave.

Meanwhile, in my home country Slovakia, the first coronavirus case was detected on March 6, and the government promptly adopted some of the strictest precautions in Europe. Primary and secondary schools closed and shifted to remote learning, events were cancelled, border controls reinstated, and airports shut down. Compulsory fourteen-day quarantine for returnees from abroad was introduced. Face masks in public transport and shops were required. From March 16 only essential shops could stay open and from March

25 face masks were ruled compulsory in all places. A new government was elected in February. Several political scandals came to light including the lack of disposable face masks, despite the new law that made them compulsory. Yet, citizens took matters into their own hands and via social media, organized a country-wide initiative to produce hand-made face masks and distributed them to those in need, as well as medical professionals. People learned how to make masks by watching trending instructional videos on social media.

The scale in which Slovaks made thousands of face masks is rather exceptional. Slovaks showed a heart-warming unity when it came to mask production, but many underestimated the severity of the situation and when schools closed went on vacation to popular ski resorts. Testing became relatively accessible in the country, and the government launched an initiative to send medical staff to poor Roma settlements to ensure the virus would not spread due to lack of access to information about the dangers of the pandemic. Slovakia was able to control the numbers of new cases and even enjoyed consecutive days with no new cases. It was even named a success story in the international media. However, an easing of the restrictions and re-opening of airports and borders led to another surge. My daily reading of the latest news in Slovakia was coupled with video calls with my parents and siblings. Fortunately, we have access to video calls, and this has certainly helped me better cope with the lockdown, as I had to cancel my plans to visit my home country in summer.

Comparing the three countries, I see drastically different approaches to the pandemic. Being in contact with friends and family, I was able to see how a lockdown was very difficult for many to endure. The sudden loss of personal freedom weighed heavily on people, especially those who are highly sociable. While Slovaks might have disliked the idea of a complete lockdown, many abided by the restrictions, whereas in Finland many strongly criticized the government's decision to impose a lockdown on the capital city area. The lockdown in Japan was never enforced and treated as more of a recommendation. The idea of lockdown evokes many strong emotions in people, including sadness, anger or even relief. I spoke to several people who found the lockdown to be a salvation from their stressful jobs or studies. However, a rise in cases of domestic violence and divorce was an undesired side effect as people suddenly had to spend prolonged time together. This is one of several areas where a lockdown poses a threat to certain citizens and makes it more difficult for victims to reach out for help.

It is ironic to think how one virus can create a shared experience all around the world, and people of different nationalities, cultures, or religions, face the same situations. One virus could put an entire country in lock down, leaving buzzing international airports deserted and popular tourist destinations ghost towns. I hope that whatever lessons we learn the outcomes of this pandemic will not surprise us in the future.

Anastasia Petrova—Moscow, Russia

In Moscow we started to receive news about COVID-19 sometime in January. But this was a story about China. It was far away, so we paid little attention to the news. Nobody really cared (masks, sanitizers, washing hands; who even thought about all this every day?). This would surely not touch us. Would it? A consequence was that people started to be afraid of China and everything Chinese. A typical joke at that time was: 'Just in case, we decided to throw away all Chinese things. Now we're sitting nude in an empty apartment.'

People reacted to my planned trip to Japan by questioning whether it was a good idea and safe. I said I was going to Japan not China, that I believed Japan to be the safest country in the world. In mid-February I arrived in Japan and found myself on a different planet. People were wearing masks, COVID-announcements were broadcast on every train, and sanitizers were available at the entrance of every supermarket. I thought, 'wow, people here in Japan are really serious about this disease!' I was not surprised, but a little confused.

It was thrilling to watch the situation become more curious. During the first week of our program we were given masks and hand sanitizers in class—but we were quite free to use them or not. During the second week, we were required to wear masks on the campus and during our study trips. During the third week, the prefectural government started to cancel public events, so some of our excursions were canceled as well. At that time, Italy experienced a sudden COVID-19 outbreak, and some airlines started changing and cancelling schedules.

On March 8 I arrived in Moscow (I flew from Nagoya via Helsinki), and found myself (again) on a different planet. Nobody was wearing masks, no COVID-19 announcements, no sanitizers, no screening or taking temperature at the airport. I thought, ‘wow, people here in Moscow don’t seem to care about this disease!’ I was once again not surprised, but a little confused. I called the special hotline to inform the government that I had come from Japan. They assured me that neither Japan, nor Finland, were considered dangerous, so I did not need to quarantine. I put on my mask and went to work. I felt like I was the only one in the whole Moscow Metro who was wearing a mask.

Everybody was discussing Italy: ‘Poor Italy ... it’s so terrible ... we’re so sorry ... we wouldn’t be so stupid to let this virus attack us ...’ People returning from Italy, Spain, Iran, Germany and some other countries were asked to self-isolate for fourteen days. A typical joke of that time was, ‘You know, I’ve got the virus!—Oh, I’m so sorry! You mean that Chinese one?—No way! It’s pure Italian!’ On March 16, our Moscow government suddenly closed schools, universities and some other institutions. My work moved entirely online. I received a message from the Moscow government that read, ‘As you’ve returned from Finland, you have to stay in self-isolation for fourteen days.’ I could not help laughing because it had already been twelve days since I returned from Finland.

Rumors were in the air that we all would enter lock-down soon so people started to panic. Almost all shops had run out of toilet paper, buckwheat, canned food and sugar. Somehow, I felt united with the world. I realized that although the world is big, in this moment, everybody everywhere was facing the same situations. Social media allowed us to share our experiences.

In Moscow, the elderly and people with chronic diseases were asked to self-isolate. On March 20, everybody was locked down. In April and May, we were not allowed to leave our houses without written permission and had to wear masks in public places. People could only leave their homes to shop, throw away garbage, or walk their dog (within 100 metres from their house). A typical joke of that period was that Sharik, the only dog in a multi-story apartment block was exhausted because he went for 156 walks per day.

Everything moved online. There were online lectures, online meetings, online discussions, and even online parties. Everybody learned how to use Zoom and social media. We were isolated but not alone. I felt like I had more social interaction those days than ever before. I was teaching online and I was learning online. I learned to play the koto, a traditional Japanese instrument. During the quarantine, my teacher and I tried to organize online lessons and it was terrible. My husband who plays taiko, Japanese drums, also tried to take lessons online. This turned out to be entirely impossible because Zoom does not transmit the sounds of the drum!

After two months of self-isolation, people got very tired and angry, so more of them started to ignore the quarantine. People went for long walks and ran away from the police to avoid punishment. There were many people who refused to believe that COVID-19 really existed. Some people blamed the government or other countries. Some espoused that it was all an American plot.



Koto; © David Rands

At the beginning of June, the Moscow government initiated a schedule for walks. It stipulated which days people from each house could go out for walks so that people would not be out at the same time as their neighbors. It is impossible for me to express the disdain people had for the policy. On June 7, self-isolation was suddenly cancelled. Many think this cancellation was political and had nothing to do with the virus. Our government wanted us to go and vote for changes to our constitution. A typical joke of that time is difficult to translate completely but explains the situation well. It reads, 'Our country began a recovery.' In Russian, the words 'recovery' and 'changes' sound very similar, so this joke is a play on words, with the second meaning that 'Our country goes for changes (meaning 'changes to Constitution')'. The prevailing feeling was that the Russian government forced the Moscow government to end the quarantine early.

Some quarantine measures are still in effect. We must wear masks and gloves in public places and keep social distance. There are people who ignore these restrictions, but they are not as numerous as expected. The Moscow Metro now has free sanitizers at every station. There are some restrictions for public events, but schools reopened in September.

Our world is separated, but at the same time, we are united like never before. It is the same virus, the same situation, and the same problems everywhere. Our future is uncertain but there is one thing of which I am sure. The world will never be the same. Still, I hope that eventually there will be many positives among the changes we are going to witness.

Yuliya Grikun—Kyiv, Ukraine

THE CAMELLIA BUD: OR HOW WE REALIZED THE VALUE OF REAL-LIFE

The Land of the Rising Sun is truly a country full of wonders that are expressed every time a new side of Japan is revealed.

Ise City is a pearl of hospitable Mie prefecture and the capital of Shintoism. Perhaps this explains why this region has a wealth of nature. Wide ranges of greenery, mostly evergreen shrubs, soften the gloom of wintertime. My attention was especially drawn to enchanting shrubs of *Camellia Japonica* with their red, pink and white flowers. Their simple and sophisticated beauty cannot leave one indifferent. Among all the discoveries Ise gave me, I would like to recognize this magically beautiful flower. One can come across blossoming camellia shrubs near shrines and temples, in mountain landscapes. As the poet Issa noted (2000):



Camellia Bud; © Yuliya Grikun

also facing

the sea...

winter camellias¹

The camellia's beauty fascinates as it adds bright colors to winter. Not without reason the camellia became an object of various poems (haiku) and paintings. And for me it is one of the symbols of Japan (in the Ukraine camellias are only found in private gardens or as an indoor plant). That led me to investigate this beautiful and mysterious flower. I found out many interesting facts about the camellia flower and, needless to say, as a lecturer, I was eager to share these and many other discoveries with my students upon my return to Ukraine.

1 Lanoue, D. G. tran., 2000, Haiku of Kobayashi Issa. Online, available: <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index.html> [Accessed 12 November 2020].

At the beginning of March, however, COVID-19 started to get worse in Japan. Even though the situation was still calm in Ukraine, I realized that everything could suddenly change. The calm could quickly become turbulent. Ukraine news discussed the prevention measures that would be taken in the case of an outbreak of the disease. On March 3 the first case of COVID-19 was registered in Ukraine. My concern was how to reach Ukraine safely. Doctors boarded our plane upon landing in Kyiv-Boryspil airport on March 8 to take everyone's temperature. Fortunately, they let all the passengers disembark, alleviating the tension and anxiety. Upon my arrival to Kyiv, I could not meet my colleagues, students, or friends, because I was asked to self-isolate for two weeks.

Our university shifted teaching online. I did not feel like sharing my impressions and discoveries of my study trip to Ise with my students online since I value real-life interaction and communication. I had a dream of making this presentation, drinking Japanese green tea, and enjoying the matcha-biscuits from Ise with my students, and in the process increasing their interest in Japan, Japanese language, and culture.

I was hopeful that at the beginning of April the quarantine would be over. Alas, the situation got worse and the lockdown was extended until April 24, and then again until May 11. Both my students and I are still looking forward to meeting in person. Although the biscuits had to be eaten, the photographs remain, and I am still eager to introduce my students to Ise and Japan with my story. I desire to push them at least one step closer to this wonderful country and to deepen their comprehension of its culture. Then, as Issa notes, the camellia flower will come into blossom:



Camellia; © Yuliya Grikun

without seeing sunlight

the winter camellia

blooms.²

Luk Sau Man—Hong Kong

The trip to Japan at the beginning of the global outbreak of COVID-19 made me understand how easily one's attitude towards an epidemic is affected by surroundings.

² Lanoue, D. G. tran., 2000, Haiku of Kobayashi Issa. Online, available: <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index.html> [Accessed 12 November 2020].

As early as December 2019, rumors of an outbreak of an unknown disease in mainland China began to circulate. With experience fighting SARS in 2003, many started to wear masks in public areas, despite the risk of getting into trouble with the police, as at the time covering one's face at demonstration sites was banned by the government. By the end of January, you could not see anyone on the street without a mask. Face masks soon disappeared from drug stores in town. People turned to online stores in Taiwan, Japan and Korea, but everything sold out within two or three days.

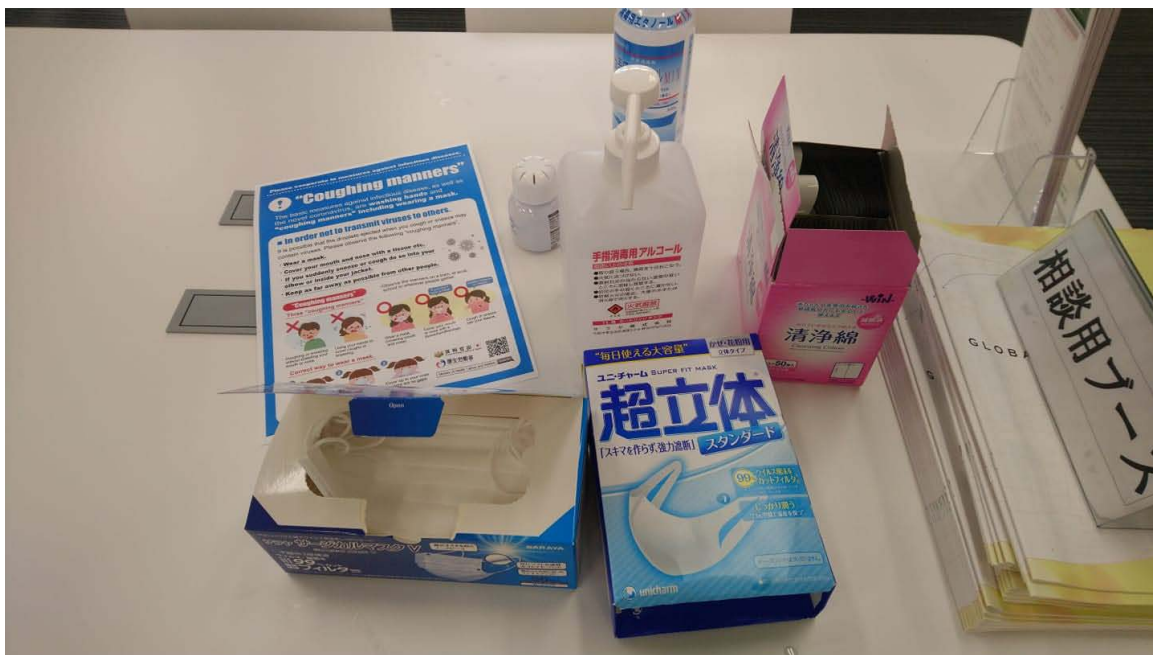
We had an early lunar new year in January. Travelling to the mainland to visit relatives is typical for many Hong Kongers. However, by mid-January people started to consider cancelling their trips. My parents cancelled their tour to the mainland as the situation worsened. One of my colleagues went to China to visit her mother. After the holiday, she was ordered by her company to self-quarantine for fourteen days. Work from home for government employees started right after the Lunar New Year Holiday. The Education Bureau announced an extension of the Lunar New Year Holiday in schools until further notice.



On my way to Nagoya. Doctors suggest wearing glasses over contacts during a pandemic;
© Luk Sau Man

The number of confirmed cases in Hong Kong climbed rapidly. The infected cruise, the Princess Diamond, became the central focus in both Hong Kong and Japan in early February. Only days before my departure, Kansai International Airport announced that flights between Osaka and Hong Kong were being suspended. Fortunately, I was able to get to Nagoya as planned.

Before boarding, about 60 per cent of people put on disposable raincoats, including me. Some even wore goggles. Upon arrival in Nagoya, the customs officials did a semblance of an anti-epidemic check: a simple questionnaire asking if you had been to Hubei, China in the past fourteen days. I stayed at a hotel next to the airport to wait for the others to arrive the next day and went to a nearby shopping mall for dinner. I did not see many people wearing masks. At least not as many as in Hong Kong the day before. The breakfast was a buffet as usual.



Facemasks and alcohol were always ready for use in the classroom; © Luk Sau Man

Ise is a town with a small population making social distancing easy, except on public holidays when tourists rush in. In the first week of our study program, COVID-19 seemed a remote concern for the local people. Young people said things like ‘What a pity for Yokohama (because of the cruise)’ or ‘Tokyo is so dangerous.’ It was always something happening outside to others. Not many people wore face masks on the street. I felt some resistance to taking off my mask on the first two days, but being the minority made me feel awkward, so I eventually stopped wearing a mask all the time.

By the end of the first week, several travelers who had arrived at Chubu Centrair International Airport, Nagoya, had tested positive. Things started to change. Workshops and seminars, which had been planned to be open to the public, were scaled down to closed events. The university and city government office kept on reminding us not to forget our face masks and to disinfect our hands with alcohol before entering any building.



'As an Infection prevention measure, the temizuya is closed. Thank you for your understanding';
 © Luk Sau Man

It was easy to notice that people in big cities like Kyoto and Nara were more alert to COVID-19, compared to people in Ise. Some shrines allowed people to pray with their masks on, while some closed the *temizuya* where people were supposed to purify themselves before praying.

The situation became worse in other parts of the world, including in some of our home countries. Some members of the group had families who were worried, requesting them to return as soon as possible, or their government or workplace ordered them to self-quarantine for 14 days. We joked about those things, feeling that people were overreacting. Our understanding of the pandemic was overwritten by our localized experiences in Ise.

After being annoyed by chaotic flight arrangements, we were all able to leave Japan by March 8. I again stayed at the same hotel near the airport to wait for the early morning flight. Breakfast reflected a change in people's awareness—set meals were prepared beforehand, wrapped in plastic.



Breakfast on March 8: wrapped set meals; © Luk Sau Man

Soon after arriving home I started another round of readjustment. While Japan was just starting to discuss measures such as Work-From-Home and remote learning, those were all in effect in Hong Kong. My three weeks in Japan made me think about living in an overcrowded city. Maintaining physical distancing is a major challenge in a city like Hong Kong. In contrast, it is much easier to require face masks in Hong Kong compared to where my colleagues and friends live.

Normal working hours and classes resumed in April and May, and most restrictions on public gatherings in indoor areas were lifted in June, but the masks never left our faces. Things change every day. Hong Kongers thought they were going to say goodbye to COVID-19 but the third outbreak came in late July and even stricter restrictions were enforced. Although we are facing the same virus, and the same disease, the situation differs from place to place, and person to person. Our experiences may help others to overcome something in the future. Who knows what happens next?

Elham Saberi—a Persian Living in Hiroshima, Japan

A LETTER TO MY SON

I spend my days away from you, and they are the most painful moments of my life. I never thought I would spend my time away from you while I was achieving my life's biggest goal. I dreamt for years that this would lead to the most fruitful and beautiful moments of our lives together and never thought it would keep us apart for so long. I know you have grown from the last time I saw you. You are taller. Indeed, it will soon be the second year that I am not with you on your birthday. Know that I wrote this letter to you with tears in my eyes and a saddened heart. On the day when all hopes of bringing you to Japan were dashed, I determined to show the bureaucracy that separated a mother and her son that I could overcome all difficulties. My only hope for life and support was God. However, I have to say that now Coronavirus has added another obstacle.

With all its cruelty, Coronavirus reinforced the bureaucracy in keeping people apart. It seems the more I struggle, the farther I am pulled away from you, but know that my heart aches every moment that I am not with you. I am not laughing as I did in the past. You may not believe it, but I have been crying for days and asking God to defeat this disease because I miss seeing you.

I hope that this disease will be overcome soon, so that this oppressive separation can end. There are nights that you are unaware of; nights when I am alone in these streets crying out in hope of seeing you and holding your hands and hugging you. It is a relief that no one knows my language and does not understand me here. They just look at me in surprise. Maybe they think I am crazy; a madwoman who cries to see her love. I try my best to build a successful life here, but you cannot realize how I spend my time without you. Watching and seeing beautiful photos and videos is a relief to my broken heart and helps me persevere. I know this virus will be overcome. Do not the cries of a mother's begging have some impact? How can this pandemic be so insensitive? I am sure days of kindness will come back. I know that we will be reunited someday soon. Our merciful God does not leave us alone.

I forgot to wish you a happy birthday. This is the second year that I am not with you. I hope that we will be together from now on, and this will be the last year that I cannot be with you on your birthday. Always remember these things:

When there is a God, there is hope.

Time and distance do not mean anything when we know we will embrace and hold each other again.

Without you, it seems like living in a cage without my strength. However, the times of this evil will soon end, and I am sure the bright future that awaits us will appear. Please forgive that I was not there with you as the heartless virus infected you. It hurt me that I could not care for you, but my heart was with you and cared for you in spirit.

Please be strong,

Please let us be strong.

You do not know how much I cried and begged for this virus to go.

Please forgive that I could not be there to protect you. I promise to you to build the life that you have always wanted. Please do not lose hope. I know we are desperate, and you are disappointed; but realize the entire world is in this situation.

Who ever thought the earth would be locked down? However, we have each other. Let us pray for the wonderful day when we will see one another's smiles instead of masks. When everyone smiles, we will defeat the pessimism of this pandemic.

Sincerely,
Your mother Elham,
She who has cried a thousand times in the days away from you.

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STAGE 1: DENIAL

When I left California for a three-week study program in Japan, my greatest concern was catching all my flights on time. COVID-19 posed a danger to my relatives living in Wuhan, China, but certainly not to me. At several family members' request, I grudgingly wore an N95 mask that I had been saving for the next wildfire season. I confidently told airport security on each leg of my journey that I had not been to China in a few years, and I had not had a fever or flu-like symptoms in the last 14 days. Soon enough, my worst fears came true—my arrival at Nagoya airport was delayed an hour.

When my fellow participants and I entered the international building classroom that would be our home base for the next few weeks, we found that our hosts had set up a table at the entrance with disposable masks, hand sanitizer, and printouts with hygiene guidelines. This gesture—taking contagious illnesses and the safety of others more seriously—struck me as quintessentially 'Japanese.' How does the cliché go? When in Rome ... I followed along as any good guest and international ambassador would, conspicuously grabbing a mask to wear outside during our daily excursions out into the city and a handful of sanitizer on my way in and out of the classroom. At this point, my concern about the COVID-19 virus was primarily performative.

STAGE 2: ANGER/FEAR

After a week or so, the omiyage gifts I had painstakingly chosen and brought to show my appreciation for our local hosts—seasonal goodies from California's own Ghirardelli chocolate company—sat ungiven in my backpack. I started to wonder what was going on. If we were not going to be meeting lots of people, why were we instructed to bring gifts? Planned events and activities slowly began to disappear from our program schedule without explanation. Eventually, it started to dawn on me that I was missing something. My suspicions were confirmed when our program leader made a special announcement stressing that we wear masks every time we were out in public. He explained that a large group of foreigners wandering around the city without masks would be a bad look for the program's image and could cause our neighbors alarm. Several more activities and lectures in our program were cancelled, and scrutiny on our rag-tag group of international scholars increased, as we were an obvious potential vector for COVID-19.

It did not seem fair. Here we were, risking international travel to participate in this program to bring global understanding to the region; our foreign-ness was both commodity and curse. In retrospect, this was the privileged, self-centered naiveté, born from the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, that, as an aspiring East Asian studies scholar, I work to dispel in the classroom. However, in the moment, as everything around us started to shift, I admit that I was most concerned for my individual welfare. Suddenly, the Wuhan virus affected me—affected all participants—on a personal level.

STAGE 3: BARGAINING

Over meals during our last week in Japan, we agreed our relatives back home were overreacting. News sources were reporting that COVID-19 was just another strain of flu, and no one shut down schools and cancelled flights during flu season. My parents urged me to buy my own plane ticket home, abandon the program, and leave immediately. I assured them that I was fine; we were being careful and well cared for.

I did not want to miss the opportunity to present my dissertation research in Japanese, attend the closing ceremonies, and thank my hosts and new friends for their kindness and generosity.

Then, airlines began to cancel international flights in droves. I started to panic—not because I feared the spread of COVID-19, but because I feared becoming stranded in a foreign country, or worse, missing more classes and my quarterly exams back home. I was scheduled to take my comprehensive exams to advance to PhD candidacy in June. What would I do if I had to undergo two weeks of quarantine in Los Angeles, or was stranded in Japan until April?

As the global response to COVID-19 grew more serious, it dawned on me that perhaps the virus was something to be worried about after all. My friends' return flights to Italy, India, and Hong Kong were cancelled and rerouted multiple times a day. OK, I said to myself, things might be worse than I thought. Just let me get home. I don't care about quarantine anymore, as long as there is wi-fi.

More flights to the United States were cancelled. My thoughts turned to the hope that if I got stuck, it would be in Japan where friends could let me borrow their couch and not during a layover in Korea. I repeated my contingency plans over and over in my mind. I promised myself to be careful about the virus if only I could get home.

I do not know if it was luck or divine intervention, but somehow my flight was the only one not cancelled, and I managed to make it home. I held up my end of the bargain. I dutifully wore my mask every second. I did my best to avoid touching surfaces. I washed my hands often and for twenty seconds or more each time. In the airports and on my flights, I tried to maintain six feet of social distance between others and myself. During each layover, I checked in with my friends. I let them know that I had made it to my gate in Seoul safely and I would be boarding the last leg of my journey soon. We all commented on how much things had changed since we had left for Japan. Everyone was much more careful.

STAGE 4: DEPRESSION

When I arrived back in Los Angeles, the surge of relief I felt quickly gave way to shock and anger. It seemed like I had traveled back in time while in the air. Huge crowds of people milled around the terminal without masks or regard for others' personal space. There was no mention of quarantine as I made my way through customs. Weren't they concerned that I had been through three international airports in the last twenty-four hours? It was exactly this sort of behavior that was causing the rapid spread of COVID-19, the closing of borders and the cancellation of flights that had made my return home nearly impossible. I was profoundly uncomfortable with the situation.

The following day, I checked my university's student health website. Self-isolation was not recommended if I was not experiencing flu-like symptoms. Having heard that the incubation period for the virus was at least two weeks and knowing that my friends from Japan were in quarantine, this guidance seemed outdated. I stopped by the administrative office on campus where I worked part-time as a funding adviser for fellow graduate students to ask my supervisors if they thought I should stay home. They replied that it did not seem necessary. Still worried, I offered to work remotely if any of my co-workers were immunocompromised or simply uncomfortable with the risk my proximity might pose. Sure enough, one of my colleagues responded that they had a weak immune system and would greatly appreciate my working remotely. I quickly packed up my things and headed home, joking with my boss that in the unlikely case the university closed due to COVID-19, Spring Break was only a week away and it might be nice to have a few extra weeks of vacation.

Less than twelve hours later we got our wish. The university chancellor sent an email that the school was closed effective immediately. Desperately wanting to see my family after the last few weeks' challenges, I moved up my flight to New York. The national conferences I had been accepted to present at were cancelled. International fellowships I had just been awarded were indefinitely postponed and current fellows recalled.

Businesses were shut down. Armed only with the few books I had checked out of the library (now closed) to read on my flights to and from Japan, I prepared for my PhD qualifying exams on my parents' couch. I wrote my essays at the small desk in my childhood bedroom.

I could not quite name the weight that I felt in my heart every day, as all my careful plans and arrangements went up in smoke, until I read an article that was aptly titled, 'That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief.' My carefree travels in Ise with my group of international friends felt like it had happened in another time. In another life. In another world. Such a program is currently unthinkable, with the Japanese border closed to international travel, particularly to citizens of countries suffering severely and dealing poorly with the epidemic like the United States. Little had we known that while we were listening to lectures, taking selfies at tourist destinations, and sharing meals, we were sitting in the eye of a storm the likes of which no one has seen in a century.

STAGE 5: ACCEPTANCE

I would not say that I have come to fully accept the current situation concerning COVID-19 yet. The global pandemic continues to upend my carefully laid plans. Each week, I try to move heaven and earth to begin my dissertation research fellowship in Japan. Each week, the Japanese border remains closed and the visa application process suspended. I run the risk of losing my health insurance, housing, livelihood, and potentially my career in academia if I am unable to start my fellowship soon. I suppose this cycle of contingency and grief for what has been lost is what I understand as the 'new normal.'

It is all too easy to become consumed by self-centered pity and personal grief. However, the relationships that I built with my friends from the Ise program have provided an incredible opportunity to break out of these insular thoughts and refocus my attention as a scholar of Asian religions and as a human being on what matters most while social distancing during a global pandemic: interdependence and mutual aid. The thirteen of us are once again spread across the world, but we remain connected and in communication with one another. Through the internet, we share our challenges and observations of what is going on in our home countries, as well as happy photos and memories of our adventures together. I hope that the world will learn from the hard lessons of the 2020 pandemic, and that we Ise and Japan study program alumni will all be able to reunite again soon.

Conclusion

After spending the beginning of the pandemic together, the authors returned to their home countries to face varied experiences of lockdown. Their reflections highlight some of the common reactions to the pandemic; yet each author's narrative also underlines some of the dis-equalizing aspects of COVID-19, whether it is the inability to share matcha and tea with students, a mother separated from her sick child, borders closed for vital research, increased control by the bureaucracy, or the scarcity of face masks. As COVID-19 continues to rage, and subsequent disasters will undoubtedly follow, it is vital to see the varied experiences as both the shared, yet dis-equalizing, forces that they are.