

DISPATCH

# THE COMFORTS OF SOUTH KOREA'S CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

By Colin Marshall

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*Life in Seoul, South Korea, has not gone unchanged, but the government's approach to combatting the coronavirus makes the American one look absurd.* Photograph by Lee Jin-man / AP / Shutterstock

**A**sked why I moved from the United States to South Korea, I often say that it was because I wanted to live in the First World. Though it began as a half joke, this response has recently

gained a new and discomfiting plausibility. Visiting Americans always express envy at Seoul's subway system, perhaps the finest in the world, and also at a host of other major pieces of infrastructure and minor everyday conveniences unimaginable back home. Still, just a few weeks ago, when I was receiving concerned messages about the coronavirus outbreak here from friends, family, and even editors, it was possible to believe American life was the safer, more stable option over all—a belief that the pandemic's Stateside rampage has made untenable.

COVID-19 has been unavoidable in the Korean news media since the country's first confirmed case, in late January. "Kim Eo-jun's News Factory," a radio program I listen to every weekday morning, now leads with nothing else, though the improving domestic situation has widened the show's purview to include other countries' coronavirus struggles. On some days, the show incorporates clips of speeches by American officials, from the Centers for Disease Control and other organizations, praising South Korea's testing and containment strategies and asking why the United States can't replicate them. Kim, the program's outspoken host, has more than once followed up with this comment: "Don't you think we're a developed nation now?," spoken with a faintly startled satisfaction, as if he'd only just realized that fact himself.

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*The New Yorker's* coronavirus news coverage and analysis are free for all readers.

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Of course, Kim doesn't say "developed nation": he uses the Korean word *seonjingu*, a term for the advanced countries of the world, as opposed to all the *hujingu* lagging behind. Though South Korea has been seen for well over a decade as one of the most strenuously impressive of all *seonjingu*—with its unceasing production of pop-music spectacles, its "wiredness" across all sectors of society, its recently demonstrated ability to clean up at the Academy Awards—South Koreans themselves have a tendency to see their country as, in essence, still a *hujingu*. A Korean friend, a prominent economist, once described this to me as a national inferiority complex; it flares up in times of disaster, such as the 2014 sinking of the M.V. Sewol, the kind of accident seen as embarrassingly characteristic of an underdeveloped society.

Overviews of modern South Korea seldom fail to take note of this phenomenon, though they trace it to a variety of different causes. Some ascribe it to the legacy of Japanese colonial rule, which lasted from the early twentieth century through the Second World War. In "The New Koreans: The Story of a Nation," Michael Breen writes of the "constant bombardment" of negative Japanese propaganda that "led some Koreans to conclude that their reputed backwardness was the result of a

natural inferiority,” at the same time that their Japanese rulers were forcibly leading them into “the real world, the civilized world of trains and telephones and electricity that had hitherto passed them by.” Even things genuinely Korean have been framed as sources of shame: in “The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture,” Euny Hong posits a “cabbage inferiority complex” brought on by the national staple of kimchi, a fermented mixture often made with cabbage and garlic that once rendered Koreans in America “pariahs with filthy smelly habits that made our friends not want to come over to play.” Korea, as the former Korea correspondent for *The Economist* Daniel Tudor has put it, “is a country that wants to be recognized, particularly by Americans.” The irony is that, now, “Korea has in many ways overtaken the U.S. Its citizens live longer, and are healthier, better educated, less likely to be unemployed, and less likely to live in poverty.”

And yet, during certain troubled stretches of South Korea’s short history, those who could leave often left, and those who could resettle in the U.S. did so. In her acclaimed short-story collection “Drifting House,” the Seoul-resident Korean-American Krys Lee writes of one Mr. Rhee, who fled the developmentalist dictatorship of Park Chung-hee to pursue the American Dream. Thereafter, he “watched Korean news clips of the developing country’s daily disasters—student demonstrators attacked by pepper-spray bombs in 1986, the Sampoong Department Store collapse that killed generations of families in 1995—and convinced himself that he had been right to leave, even after the country flourished and began giving academic scholarships to the brightest from Guatemala to Mongolia, and setting trends in film and technology.”

Today, the generations who experienced the Korean War and its aftermath tend to take as a given America’s beneficence. When first I came to Korea, even more “globalized” younger people couldn’t figure out why I would choose it over the U.S., the ultimate *seonjingung*. In response, I’d list what Seoul has that even the biggest American cities lack, beginning with a relative lack of violent crime and the presence of usable public restrooms; now I can simply compare the two countries’ responses to the coronavirus. “Long accustomed to thinking of itself as the best, most efficient, and most technologically advanced society in the world,” as Anne Applebaum wrote in *The Atlantic*, the United States “is about to be proved an unclothed emperor.”

Life in Seoul, which reported its first coronavirus death on April 8th, has not gone unchanged. Several times a day, each and every cell phone buzzes with national emergency-alert-system announcements of new confirmed cases, the total of which passed ten thousand in early April. This number, which sounds high but reflects an apparent stabilization of the virus’s spread, owes in

part to the rapid establishment of testing facilities across the country, their ease of access symbolized by the drive-through centers that have drawn media attention around the world. Seoul hasn't been subject to the kind of general lockdown that has turned other global capitals into ghost towns. Individuals who are either infected or suspected to have had contact with the infected are, however, in isolation from the general public, supplied by the government with shipments of hand sanitizer, masks, fresh produce, and other necessities. April 1st saw the introduction of a two-week quarantine for all arrivals from abroad, foreigners and Koreans alike.

As relatively commendable as it now looks, the South Korean government's early response to the outbreak provoked public anger at home: anger at President Moon Jae-in's premature assurance that the danger would soon end; anger at the ever-changing, self-contradicting information about the availability of masks; anger at the government's unwillingness to heed the Korean Medical Association's recommendation that it restrict entry from China. Nevertheless, scrolling through news reports and social-media posts of the United States's ongoing lockdowns, rising infection rates, plummeting stock values, and vanishing toilet paper, I feel like Mr. Rhee, shaking his head at his unravelling homeland.

I then look up and see the relatively normal life of Seoul (around a hundred and fifty miles northwest of Daegu, the city from which the virus has spread across South Korea, and which Kim Eo-jun last month seemed to blame for the country's outbreak, drawing criticism) continuing all around me. Schools and other public institutions have temporarily closed, as have, more recently, crowded businesses, such as gyms. Still, the cafés are busy, the streets and parks are peopled with members—albeit masked ones—of every generation, the stores have plenty of toilet paper, and never has it been easier to get a seat on the subway. Suddenly I feel, despite the virus—or, indeed, because of it—like I'm living a Korean Dream.

## A GUIDE TO THE CORONAVIRUS

- How to practice social distancing, from responding to a sick housemate to the pros and cons of ordering food.
- How the coronavirus behaves inside of a patient.
- Can survivors help cure the disease and rescue the economy?
- What it means to contain and mitigate the coronavirus outbreak.