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**Pandemic Life in South Korea**  
Tracing, Stigma, and Masks

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## Abstract

By zooming in on Seoul and Daegu, this thesis explores how the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in South Korea in 2020. In this thesis, focus is put on both the government- and public's response and tactics, as well as the forces of stigmatization and the role of the face mask in South Korean society. The thesis is based on six months of digital fieldwork conducted from the end of April 2020 until the end of October 2020, and it aims to display a broad range of reasons as to why South Korea managed to “flatten the curve” so effectively, and how they have been able to keep the number of COVID-19 cases relatively low considering their large and dense population. Had the majority of citizens in Korea not been responsible and careful, the situation would have been drastically different. Ethnographic emphasis is put on the experiences and pandemic lives of a selection of young adults residing in Daegu and Seoul, to better understand the social and local consequences of this global crisis. The thesis asks and answers how South Korea has dealt with the novel coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic, and what their strategies of containing contagion have looked like. Additionally, the thesis explores how these strategies have both impacted and affected the relationship between Korean citizens and the state, perhaps for the better. Where disease goes stigma often follows, and the thesis therefore delves into how forces of stigmatization, blame, and discrimination have been present and shaped the pandemic experience in the two different cities. Overarching every topic and context, the thesis also aims to answer how the issue of masks fits into all of this, and makes a case for an understanding of masks as a symbolic object imbued with social credit and a strong social force of *reason*. Lastly, the thesis examines the changing of habit(u)s, looking at the differences in the mask discourse in Korea versus in Norway, and concluding that over time, stigma *does* fade, and habits *can* change.

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# 1. Introduction

“Honestly...I wouldn’t dare to go outside without a mask”, Lily said. We were in the middle of our last interview, and it was not the first time an interlocutor had told me something of that nature. In fact, similar sentiments had been uttered multiple times over the course of my research period. You can interpret that sentence in several ways, as it could have various different meanings. In the context of this COVID-19 pandemic, it could simply mean that she would not dare to go outside without a mask on in fear of contracting the coronavirus, or in fear of infecting someone else by accident. But it could also mean that going outside without a mask on seemed impossible or even frightening for other reasons, perhaps reasons that have less to do with the medical, and more to do with the social. The first time one of my interlocutors told me something of that nature in the early months of the pandemic, I was having quite the opposite experience here in Norway where I live. I was struggling with daring to go outside *with* a mask. Not because I did not want to protect myself and others, but because I was reluctant to stand out in an otherwise maskless crowd. This was the exact opposite of what my interlocutors were going through, because if they left their homes without wearing a mask, they would stand out as maskless in an otherwise *masked* crowd. The forces of social stigma were very much present in both cases, albeit in different ways. By the end of my fieldwork, the situation had completely changed for me, as the face mask had triumphed across Europe at last, and the people I met on the streets here in Norway would no longer look at me twice for wearing one. Over time, habits had eventually changed, and the stigma surrounding masks had gradually faded.

But how come our experiences with masks were so drastically different, especially during those first six months of the pandemic? How had masks ended up becoming such a big part of daily life in Korea, and how was this affecting people? And why *was* Lily afraid to be seen outside without a mask on? The emphasis here is on the word “seen”. Noticed. Watched. Looking at how the pandemic unfolded in Korea, this thesis explores the many social forces and impacts of contact tracing, stigma, and masks. Taking my interlocutors’ and research participants’ experiences and “pandemic lives” into consideration, this thesis puts focus on

how the current Korean government's transparency has made a majority of citizens trust the state more, making testing and tracing an easier task simply because citizens are more than willing to be tested and traced. However, I have also found that for already stigmatized minorities within the country, the government's transparency proves a challenge due to the potential risks of getting their personal data leaked. As a cause of this, I stress that stigma and processes of "othering" pose serious health hazards during pandemics, and that discriminatory forces of the like do nothing but make an already challenging situation even worse. Through my research, I have gathered that forces of stigmatization and discrimination that previously appeared somewhat more "masked", have now been *unmasked* as a consequence of the pandemic. Following this, I argue that in Korea, masks are more than mere apparatuses of disease prevention. They are imbued with social credit (or capital), and they serve as both a symbol of medical modernity and as a force of *reason*. During this pandemic, a mask is not a silent and neutral piece of cloth. A mask carries politics, and it is a loud statement piece that signals several messages about the wearer to the surrounding community. In this thesis I will explain what these messages are, and how they might have an impact on society as a whole. Living in a practically maskless society here in Norway, I have witnessed my country go through a huge transformation in terms of maskuse. Comparing the mask discourse here in Norway with the mask discourse in Korea, I end this thesis by showcasing how the symbolic meanings of masks are neither culturally nor historically fixed, and can always be subject to change.

## Research Questions

*“The pandemic is a new and universal human experience, projected through the lens of myriad local contexts. If not to try to make sense of circumstances like this, what is anthropology for?”*

(McMurray 2020: 321)

In this thesis I seek to explore how the Korean government has dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it has been for a selection of young adults in Seoul and Daegu to live through this historic moment. Which strategies has the Korean government used to contain the coronavirus contagion, and how have these had an impact on the relationship between citizens and state? How have the forces of stigma and blame been present and shaped the pandemic experience? And last but certainly not least, how does the issue of masks fit into all of this? These are the main questions I will be focusing on throughout this paper.

Going into this fieldwork, I was curious about several things. After all, the modern world has never experienced a coronavirus pandemic like this before, so anything and everything related to how it was affecting the everyday-lives of citizens in Korea was of interest to me. At the start of it all, I was mostly concerned with how and why the Korean government kept getting international praise for their approach to slow down the virus spread, and so I started focusing on government control of public space and implementation of new rules and systems regarding testing and tracking of the virus. The debate on contact tracing versus surveillance quickly became relevant, especially in the case of the government’s response and methods. Because as much as Korea has received praise for their tactics, they have also been criticized. Eventually I realized just how much the issue of masks intrigued me. New questions emerged, like why are masks so normalized in Korea? And why is that not the case here in Norway? How would it feel for me to walk out on the streets of Oslo wearing a mask, compared to how it felt when I wore a mask during my study-abroad-year in Seoul? What does Korea’s mask-culture really look like, and additionally, how do my interlocutors feel about mask-wearing being such a big part of their daily lives? Spurred by my own experiences early on in the pandemic, I found myself wanting to explore the stigma surrounding the wearing, and the *not* wearing, of masks. And with the topic of stigma in mind

comes more questions and curiosities connected to the stigma that is attached to contracting this novel coronavirus. Lastly, how has this pandemic shaped and changed peoples' habit(u)s? These are all questions of relevance to this paper.

## **Previous Research**

When I started my research in April of 2020, there were only a small amount of research papers regarding COVID-19 that had been published. Now, nearing the end of 2020, the situation is looking quite different. It is nearly impossible to keep up with all the articles that are being released, as there are more and more papers written from all around the world, telling of the different experiences in different countries. This is a global pandemic that has had very local consequences, and everyday we get to learn more about them, both the good and the bad. What we yet do not know (given the fact that we as a global community are still very much in the middle of the storm) is what kind of long term effects the pandemic will leave us with, both in terms of the medical and the social. As a social anthropology major, the social aspects are naturally the ones I am mostly concerned with in this thesis.

While we have never had a coronavirus pandemic like the one we are experiencing right now, this is by no means the first large disease outbreak the world has witnessed, and it will most likely not be the last one either. When new disease outbreaks take place, they bring with them a unique opportunity to study both the material, symbolic- and social structures of the societies they impact, and anthropologists and social scientists of other practices have studied epidemics and other infectious disease outbreaks in several ways over the years. They have looked at everything from state control technologies, material politics and power relations, to stigma and various other social impacts. As Lynteris and Poleykett (2018) showcase in "The Anthropology of Epidemic Control: Technologies and Materialities", anthropological studies of infectious diseases have generally focused on the cultural, social, and political aspects of the means that have been employed in the control of disease outbreaks. Anthropological interests within the sphere of infectious diseases have often been surrounding topics like geographies of blame (see for instance Former 1992; McMillan & Hedges 2020), marginalization and stigmatization (see for instance Kleinman & Lee 2006, Hyde 2007, Littleton, Park, and Bryder 2010, and Venables 2017), social, economic, or communicative

inequalities (see for instance Lockerbie & Herring 2009), and community participation and resistance (see for instance Pellechia 2017, and Richards 2016), many of these overlapping the topics I will touch upon in this thesis as well (Lynteris & Poleykett 2018: 434).

## **Methodological Reflections**

This thesis is based on six months of fieldwork conducted online, from the end of April 2020 until the end of October 2020. Since I was unable to collect my data through participant observation in the traditional sense due to the pandemic, I had to find other ways. These included hosting interviews over Zoom, sending out questionnaires and receiving written testimonies from my interlocutors, gathering photos and video diaries, logging statistics on confirmed cases of COVID-19, keeping up with Korean government briefings, and reading and categorizing news articles. As I could not actually be in Korea myself as a “participant” in daily life there, I put extra emphasis on the “observation” part. In many ways, I became what Koreans often refer to as a “netizen” (네티즌, a combination of the word “network” and the word “citizen”, a “net citizen”). The word is typically used to describe someone who spends a considerable amount of time online, often eagerly keeping up with news and leaving comments, almost as if though they “live” on the internet. And it sure felt like I did. I have never spent so much time online before in my whole life as I did during those six months. But what else could I do as an anthropology graduate student who was about to embark on my very first fieldwork when a global pandemic struck, and the world suddenly “locked down”? I could go online, and so I did. And though it was not the traditional fieldwork I had originally pictured for myself, I could still work with anthropological research methods of observing, experiencing, writing, and as Adams and Nading put it, I could still “find ways to wedge critical insights into situations that seem obvious and tacit” (Adams & Nading 2020: 461).

Having studied at Seoul National University as an exchange student from 2018-2019, and having visited Korea twice before that both for a vacation and a cultural exchange program, I was lucky enough to already have established a network of people I could contact when I was looking for interlocutors. When I reached out to people to ask if they might be interested in talking to me about their experiences, I gave them the option of talking to me over Zoom, or

answering my questions by text in a document. This was done on purpose, because I knew that some of them might be more confident writing in English than speaking it. And I did end up having a couple of my Korean interlocutors expressing that they preferred to answer my questions through text, so I am content with giving them that option. All the interlocutors that I interviewed through Zoom were fluent in English, and so the language barrier did not become a challenge. If there were ever any Korean words my interlocutors would have trouble translating to English, we always figured out a way of explaining it. When I lived in Seoul I did study Korean, and so understanding and speaking Korean at an intermediate level did come in handy for those brief moments of confusion.

All my Zoom interviews were semi-structured, as I wanted the conversations to develop in a natural way, but still have an easier ground for comparison. So, after asking an initial set of questions, I would let the interview flow in whatever direction my interlocutors took me, and as a result each interview differed from one another in more ways than one. After all, what I was interested in was the realities and experiences of my interlocutors, and so I wanted to hear about the things *they* deemed relevant.

As part of my everyday routine during the fieldwork, I checked up on online Korean newspapers, and I logged and collected news articles related to COVID-19. Since there are only a limited amount of Korean newsletters written in English, that was something I *did* consider a possible drawback. Throughout the fieldwork I kept asking myself how I could get a holistic picture of what was happening when I only had a limited amount of sources, but then again I believe this may be a challenge for anyone who finds themselves doing anthropological research. I did however feel like this was the part of my study where language was a barrier. Had I been more fluent in Korean, I would have been able to read Korean news articles (and research papers, for that matter), and that could perhaps have contributed to a more nuanced understanding.

Doing everything digitally, I obviously could not see how things were in South Korea for myself. I could not be there and experience it first-hand. Therefore, I asked my interlocutors if I could “see through their eyes”, using videos and photos. Three of my interlocutors agreed to send me photos from their daily lives out and about in Seoul and Daegu, so that I could see what has changed since before the pandemic. One of them also makes YouTube videos about his experiences as an exchange student in Daegu, so he told me I could use his videos for

reference as well. I also reached out to several other Korea-based digital content creators on YouTube, one of them who I had already met a couple of times in Korea, who all film their everyday lives and share their thoughts and reflections on how Korea is handling the pandemic. Four of them told me they were ok with me using their videos and experiences in my project. Even though YouTube is a public platform, I felt more comfortable asking them for permission first, and they expressed gratitude for that. Several of their videos were related to masks, which was a topic I found myself very intrigued by during the course of my fieldwork, so having their videos to look back at was of great help. Using YouTube videos might seem like a controversial (or at least unorthodox) way of doing ethnographic research, but I wholeheartedly believe it helped me connect to my field. It made me feel like I was not that far away from “it”, even though I was in fact practically on the other side of the world.

## **Doing a Digital Fieldwork**

Start. Connecting. Join with computer audio. Start video. “Hello?”. Nothing. Her microphone has not connected yet. Neither has the camera. “Hi! Wait...can you hear me?” she asks. Yes, I hear you, I reply. “Can you see me?”. No, not yet, I chuckle. “Hold on, let me just fix the camera...”. A moment of silence. “Can you see me now? Is it working?”. Yes, I see you! I am looking at my interlocutor through the screen. There is a slight delay, but it will suffice. This is how we meet now. And this is how the first minutes of our Zoom meetings tend to go. Just like there is a high chance that we will end our meeting by agreeing that “yes, these are indeed strange times...” or “I wonder when this will end...”. If you had told me at the end of 2019 when I was planning my fieldwork that I would be writing my master's thesis on something pandemic-related, I would probably not have believed you. Just as I never would have imagined that I would be conducting my fieldwork interviews on my computer. How different would it have been if I had talked to my interlocutors “in person”? Would there perhaps still be lagging and delays, only in the form of natural stutters and loss of words? Probably. Maybe (if you add a little goodwill) there is not *that* much of a difference between talking to someone through a computer, and talking to someone “in real life”. But it certainly feels different. And in many ways, doing fieldwork digitally *is* quite different from the traditional anthropological doctrine. Usually anthropologists go “out there”, they travel to a “somewhere”, a “somewhere” referred to as “the field”, to collect their ethnographic data.

That being said, many anthropologists have written great research papers without actually being “in the field” physically, and I believe off-site fieldwork should not be disregarded as research of less value. One could also argue that “the field” we are told as anthropologists to immerse ourselves in has now broadened as a concept to include anywhere humans may be, because as Sluka and Robben put it, we have come to a point in time where: “...every imaginable human group and context has become an actual or potential research site” (Sluka & Robben 2012: 2). And going by that definition, it is absolutely valid to conduct a digital fieldwork. Because if there is one place humans are nowadays, it is online.

Another anthropologist who also argues that “the field is everywhere” is Deborah D’Amico-Samuels, who stresses that there is in fact no clear division between home and the field any longer because they both exist in the same holistic context of globalized power relations (Sluka & Robben 2012: 27). The physical distance between “home” and “the field” can now be largely relieved by instantaneous means of electronic mass communication, so what used to be the simple dichotomy between being “in the field” and then leaving, does not hold as much ground anymore. Today, many anthropologists also consider that in a sense, they never really leave the field entirely, and thus their fieldwork never really ends either. Keeping contact with your research participants after the research period is over is very common, and if you are on a phone call (or in my case, a Zoom call) with your interlocutors, are you not essentially “in the field” with them, regardless of being at different places physically? (Sluka & Robben 2012: 27-28). But even though I firmly believe doing a digital fieldwork is both a very valid and safe way to maintain human connections in this context of contagion, I must admit that it was difficult to adjust to the fact that my fieldwork would not be done in the traditional “Malinowskian” way. When it is instilled in you from day one of an anthropology degree that, to use the words of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson:

“...it is fieldwork that makes one a “real anthropologist,” and truly anthropological knowledge is widely understood to be “based” (as we say) on fieldwork. Indeed, we would suggest that the single most significant factor determining whether a piece of research will be accepted as (that magical word) “anthropological” is the extent to which it depends on experience “in the field.”

(Gupta & Ferguson 1977: 101)



And the words of Roger Berger:

“One of the most enduring, perhaps *the* most enduring, metaphors, or “keywords”...in modern anthropology is “fieldwork”...“fieldwork” is - it goes without saying, and thus must be said - the *sine qua non* of modern anthropology, the ritual initiation experience in the discipline.”

(Berger 1993: 174)

And lastly, the words of Nancy Howell:

“Fieldwork *is* the central activity of anthropology.”

(Howell 1990: 4)

I deem it important to mention that I did in fact struggle with feeling like a “real” anthropologist at the start of my research. And I am confident I was not the only anthropology graduate student who was suddenly faced with this challenge. With the pandemic changing everything right before my planned departure, I was suddenly not able to do the kind of fieldwork that I had been told was the “right” kind ever since I started my bachelor’s degree. I was not “out there” in the field, I was not physically in Korea, I was sitting at home on my computer. Digital fieldwork (or “netnography”, or “webnography”) was something I was not properly prepared for. That being said, I am aware that there is a high chance I would have felt similarly if I actually *did* get to do my original fieldwork. That is because when I spoke to others who had already finished their fieldwork pre-pandemic, they all told me that they had felt those exact emotions, and that they had asked themselves the same questions. “Is this even anthropology?”, “What am I even doing here?”, “I’m just a phony, I have no clue what I’m doing”. Although hearing that *did* make me feel better, I must admit that I still felt “inferior” in a way, however unreasonable that may sound. This all feeds into a bigger discussion about how we define anthropological research, and what we deem as “proper” and “improper” fieldwork. There are a lot of deep-rooted traditions at play here, and I could feel that on my body when things did not go according to plan. Maybe the year of 2020 and COVID-19 has shown us that we need to restructure and renew our thoughts surrounding fieldwork, so that the anthropologists of the future will not feel like they are “lesser” anthropologists if they also have to, for whatever reason, do their research online.

Because “going online” might yet remain the safest way to do anthropological research for a while longer.

## **Interlocutors and Research Collaborators**

As mentioned, since I could not be in Korea in person during this fieldwork, I contacted and interviewed my interlocutors online. In total, I was in contact with nine different people, six residing in Seoul, and two in Daegu. Daegu was the first city in Korea to experience a big outbreak, and this outbreak is considered by many to be the “real” start of the pandemic for the country. Knowing that, I was interested to see if there were any regional differences between Daegu and Seoul, when it came to the experience of the pandemic and how it was handled.

I want to make a distinction between people I consider my interlocutors, meaning people I interviewed and talked with throughout the whole fieldwork period, and the people I consider research collaborators and important source providers, but not interlocutors, as I did not officially interview them. These are people that have allowed me to use their YouTube videos as empirical sources for my thesis, mainly consisting of video diaries about life in Korea during the pandemic. Using their videos as material has allowed me to feel more connected to the field, and to get a better grasp of how things have visibly changed because of the pandemic. My interlocutors provided me with photos, and my other research collaborators provided me with videos.

All the people I was in contact with were in their twenties or early thirties, five of them women, and four of them men. Out of them, there were two women in Seoul (“Yoona” and “Lily”) and two men in Daegu (“Taemin” and “Rick”) that I spoke to and interviewed the most, and therefore these four are what I would call my “core-interlocutors”. To ensure the privacy and safety of my interlocutors’ identities, all their names are protected with pseudonyms.

All of my interlocutors and research collaborators live in Korea working or studying, except for Sienna. She was visiting Korea for the summer, and was making video diaries about life

in a mandatory quarantine facility when I stumbled upon her on YouTube. As I was interested in “quarantine culture”, and what life might look like for people going through that mandatory two-week isolation after arriving in Korea mid-pandemic, contacting her seemed only natural. Lily had also gone through this quarantine process when she came to Korea to work, but since she had her own apartment she did not have to stay at a government facility (or “quarantine hotel”, as they are often called). Their experiences were interesting to compare, and I will come back to this in Chapter 3, Containing Contagion: Test, Trace, and Separate

As all my contacts were in their twenties or early thirties, this thesis mostly focuses on the pandemic experiences of young adults. Further, it would be interesting to see how the pandemic experience has been for other social groups and demographics, as they all provide different perspectives and voices to this universal context of contagion.

## **Introducing My Core-Interlocutors**

### **“Yoona”**

Yoona is a Korean woman in her early twenties who lives in Seoul and who during the fieldwork was a graduate student at Seoul National University. I got to know Yoona when I was an exchange student at the same university from 2018 to 2019. Yoona was the first person I contacted regarding my fieldwork, and also the first person I interviewed. When I first reached out to her at the end of April 2020, I asked how her daily life looked now compared to before the pandemic. To this she answered:

“Compared to other countries with stricter lockdowns, I feel like there’s not as many drastic changes here in Korea as in other countries across the globe. Considering the situation, I feel like I’m still living my life relatively normally. I can still go to campus to work, and many places are still open, just with limited opening hours and access. The delivery business is doing really well, because everybody orders a lot more online now. But you know how it is in Korea, the delivery system has always been really good. It’s nice to have something like that during a pandemic.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on the 26th of April 2020)

Yoona offered me insight into how it was for a graduate student in Seoul during the pandemic, and it was always interesting to compare her experiences to my own, being a graduate student in Oslo. We shared a lot of the same worries and concerns, and a common denominator was uncertainty. Uncertainties about our studies, uncertainties about the future, uncertainties about how the pandemic might affect us both personally and on a larger global scale. “Nobody really knows anything”, she told me at the end of our first interview, and that sentence in its simplicity seemed to sum it all up.

### **“Lily”**

Lily is an Asian-American woman in her early twenties who lives in Seoul, teaching English to Korean preschoolers at a *hagwon* (private academy/cramming school). She moved to Seoul from Seattle, Washington state, and that is also where she was when the pandemic started. After a month-long delay, Lily arrived in Korea on the 31st of March 2020, and was put in quarantine from the day of arrival until April 14th. Lily was also a fellow exchange student at Seoul National University, and that is how I got to know her. When our exchange year ended in the summer of 2019, Lily stayed behind in Korea for a while before moving back to the US. I had kept up with her through social media, so I knew that she had moved back to Seoul again when my fieldwork started, and thus she became an obvious person to contact when I was looking for interlocutors. I had also seen on her instagram profile that she had posted about her experience being in the mandatory 15-day quarantine, and that was also a topic I wanted to know more about. During our conversations, Lily often shared comparative reflections on the differences between Korea and the US’s response to the pandemic. One sentiment that continuously shone through, was that she felt safer in Korea than in the US. When we were having our first interview at the end of April, she explained:

“I don't know if I'm being biased, but I think they've handled the situation really well here, they didn't wait for things to get worse before taking action. When it comes to COVID, in my opinion, it's better to be overly cautious than to not. And it's also about transparency. Korea's numbers were really high at the beginning, but that was just because they were testing so many people, and because they were being honest about it. I'm sure other countries had higher numbers of infected people than they thought, because they simply weren't testing as much. So, I feel like Korea's methods have been

really effective, they've been open and transparent about the numbers, and they've been really thorough. And now Korea's numbers are going down for a reason; like I said before, they weren't waiting for things to get bad to start implementing safety measures. Even at my academy they started taking precautions back in January, when they first heard news of the outbreak in China.

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 28th of April 2020)

When I asked Lily if she knew for how long she wanted to live in Seoul, her answer was the following:

“I feel like being in Korea is safer than being in America at the moment. So...I'm planning to stay at least for a year and a half more, but ideally 2 to 3 years more. Actually I wanna stay as long as I can, but things are unsure. I love living in Korea, though. Things feel pretty normal here compared to in the US, we're just living our everyday lives with masks. I can actually go out and do things. I really wish masks were normalized in the West...people need to get on the same page about the virus, masks *obviously* help. We haven't had a single sick person at our academy, and we have like what...a thousand kids there? So the safety measures we've implemented are definitely working, and I think wearing masks play a huge part in that.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 15th of May 2020)

## **“Taemin”**

Taemin is a Korean man in his late twenties who lives and works in Daegu, a three hour drive from Seoul (or two, if you take the train). I met Taemin on a culture exchange program in Seoul in 2017, and since I knew Daegu was the place where the first big COVID-19 outbreak took place in Korea, I thought Taemin would be a good person to contact. I was also interested in the potential differences between pandemic life in Seoul and Daegu. When we had our first conversation, I opened up with the same question I always started with; has everyday-life changed for you since the pandemic started? If so, how? Taemin's answer was the following:

“The biggest change is that I'm wearing a mask everyday like a normal piece of clothing even in the workplace. I'm also packing a lunch box each day to avoid getting in contact with other people, both coworkers and strangers. We are also not going out for drinks or meeting people outside of work. I haven't been in a proper quarantine myself, but I try to do it voluntarily (staying home and practicing

social distancing), by not making plans to see friends or having dates. Of course, I should mention that people are always wearing a mask wherever they go. The biggest difference in everyday life is wearing a mask all the time, and it was a challenge at first because we were not used to it in daily life to this degree. Now I would say most people are used to it, and sometimes I even try to drink with my mask on.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Taemin on the 26th of April 2020)

## “Rick”

Rick is an American man in his mid-twenties who lives in the city of Daegu and studies Korean full time. I had only met Rick once through a friend when I lived in Seoul, so I was unsure if he would be interested in being one of my interlocutors, but when I reached out to him he was more than happy to help. Through the snowball effect he also connected me with a friend of his whom I had never met before, who also ended up becoming one of my interlocutors. When the pandemic started, Rick was fascinated by the difference between the public response in the US and Korea in terms of social distancing and mask-wearing, as he felt like they were complete opposites. His and Lily’s comparative reflections on pandemic life in the US versus in Korea were both insightful and interesting. I started our first interview with the same questions as usual; how has everyday-life changed for you since the pandemic started? His answer was the following:

“Everyday-life is mildly inconvenient now. I’m feeling bored, but also lucky. In the beginning of the pandemic I was feeling anxious, but because Korea jumped straight to action, that concern was quickly squashed. And you know those text messages that we get from the government if there’s bad weather coming, or bad air quality? We’ve been getting a lot of texts like that regarding the virus, at least once a day. I’ve gotten three so far today.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Rick on the 14th of May 2020)

I could remember those text messages vividly, as they came with a loud alarm-like beep, even if you had your phone on mute. They always startled me, but at the same time served as a helpful ‘heads up!’.

### **Short facts about my interlocutors and research collaborators:**

“Yoon”: woman, early twenties, Seoul resident (Korean)

“Lily”: woman, early twenties, Seoul resident (American)

“Taemin”: man, late twenties, Daegu resident (Korean)

“Rick”: man, mid-twenties, Daegu resident (American)

“Junho”: man, mid-twenties, Seoul resident (Korean)

Sarah: woman, early thirties, Seoul resident (Canadian)

Kyuhoo: man, early thirties, Seoul resident (Korean)

Sara: woman, late twenties, Seoul resident (Australian)

Sienna: woman, early twenties, visiting Seoul (American)

## **Thesis Overview**

This thesis is constructed in the following way: in Chapter 2, I place Korea’s COVID-19 response in both a global and a local context, providing an historical backdrop whilst introducing “the field”. In Chapter 3, I go more into depth on the preventative strategies Korea has been known for implementing during this pandemic, specifically looking at the “3 T’s”; testing, tracing, and treating (or as I would have it; separating). I then share reflections on the bond between citizens and the state in Korea, looking at the concept of trust in light of Korea’s tracing methods. I also discuss theories of the state of exception, suggesting that we might perhaps benefit from rethinking states of emergency. Additionally, I look at the Korean government’s methods of “containing contagion” in public spaces, focusing on the blurred lines between tracing and surveillance, as well as share my research participants’ experiences and reflections. In Chapter 4, the focus is on the forces of stigma and blame, and how they have been at play within three distinct contexts in Korea during my fieldwork. Here I discuss the Shincheonji outbreak, the Itaewon outbreak, and the stigma of *not* wearing masks. This leads me to the main focus of Chapter 5, which is the concept of the mask itself. In this chapter, I put the role of the mask in Korea in both a historical and cultural context, looking at the “how’s” and “why’s” of mask-wearing. In addition, I share more of my interlocutors’

thoughts on masks and mask-wearing being such a big part of their daily lives. Towards the end, I discuss the changing of habits (and maybe even habitus), as I look at the changing mask landscapes and differences between the mask discourse in Korea and Norway, drawing on my own experiences and observations.



## 2. Contextualizing COVID-19 in Korea

### COVID-19 appearing in the World

At the very end of 2019, Chinese authorities reported that there had been some cases of pneumonia with unknown etiology in the city of Wuhan. Approximately 7 days later, it was revealed that this was a new coronavirus, which was subsequently named SARS-Cov-2. The SARS-Cov-2 virus is what causes the disease we now know as COVID-19. On March 11th, The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, pointing to more than 118,000 cases worldwide, and 4,291 lives lost. At the time, more than 90 percent of the reported cases were found in just four countries, and two of those – Korea and China - already had significantly declining numbers. By March 18th, 2020, over 218,000 infected patients and 8,900 deaths had been reported, and the virus had reached 173 countries (Moradi & Vaezi 2020: 873). Globally, as of 11:14 am CET on November 18th 2020, the number of registered infections stands at over 55,064,128 million, while the death toll stands at over 1,328,015 million (WHO 2020). But as Taylor P. van Doren (2021) argues, these numbers are more than just numbers. Behind them there are people, whole complex individuals with diverse and important lives. Though epidemiological methods depend on this kind of data, all the numbers, the percentages, the curves, and the rates, anthropologists might argue that it is also essential to account for the human experience to best understand the true impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The human beings behind the numbers matter. And in this thesis I will explore how this pandemic has affected the daily lives of humans living in Korea. COVID-19 will undoubtedly shape the future, and people's pandemic experiences may lay the groundwork for changes in the way the next generation of both social scientists and public health experts are holistically educated to better understand the totality of both local and global lived experiences. We can learn a lot from what is happening all over the world right now. After all, both anthropology and public health depend on "centering the human experience and the value of life to determine how to make the next move" (Van Doren 2021). Now I will zoom in on Korea, to see how the lives of some citizens in Seoul and Daegu were affected as a consequence of the pandemic.

## COVID-19 appearing in Korea

Korea was one of the first countries to experience a COVID-19 outbreak after China, with its first case found through an airport screening on the 20th of January, 2020 (Our World in Data 2020, Moradi & Vaezi 2020: 873). Four days before the Korean government confirmed its first case, the country's leading applied scientists had already created test kits for COVID-19, predicting that the virus would reach them sooner rather than later. The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) quickly incorporated these new test kits into the national pandemic response, and prepared for large-scale testing. The first month after the first confirmed COVID-19 case went by with daily cases only ranging from zero to two, as health administrators had carefully traced and isolated the first registered thirty patients. It almost seemed like the country had avoided a big outbreak all together, until a cluster infection was identified in the city of Daegu on February 19th, and the infamous "patient 31" appeared.

Patient 31 was a 61 year old woman who belonged to a megachurch called Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (hereafter just Shincheonji), and although the authorities had successfully traced and isolated the first 30 cases, patient 31 "slipped under the radar" long enough to infect numerous others. The reason I am mentioning her religious belonging is because it is highly relevant for how the cluster infection happened, and the stigma that followed. Before getting diagnosed on February 17th, patient 31 traveled around both Daegu and Seoul, and attended at least two services in her church together with approximately 1000 other worshippers present. The Shincheonji group is known for their large, crowded, and mandatory gatherings, where members sit side-by-side singing and chanting, and where being sick does not qualify as reason enough to skip mass (Hancocks & Seo 2020). I will come back to the Shincheonji outbreak and the aftermath of it in Chapter 4, where I discuss stigma and blame. After patient 61 was identified, cases in Daegu spiked, and the number of registered cases went from 30 to 977 in just eight days. Over the next two and a half weeks it had gone from 31 cases to 6767, and at that point in time a majority of all COVID-19 cases in Korea were connected to the Shincheonji outbreak (Lehto 2020, Volodzko 2020). What followed is much of the reason why Korea has gotten an abundance of international praise for how they have handled the pandemic, as well as some criticism.

## MERS

To better understand the Korean government's response to COVID-19, it is necessary to go back in time and look at how they dealt with MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome). In 2015, Korea was at the epicentre of the largest outbreak of MERS since the initial outbreak in Saudi Arabia in 2012, and it also happened to coincide with my first visit to Korea. MERS, much like COVID-19, is a viral respiratory illness that is also caused by a coronavirus. Like most respiratory illnesses, it is mainly spread through droplets and close contact. On their website, the World Health Organization explains that public health measures like “contact tracing, quarantine and isolation of all contacts and suspected cases, and infection prevention and control” was what brought MERS under control in Korea (Serrano 2015). Sounds familiar, right? The outbreak definitely gave the government valuable practice in how to deal with the medical practicalities of infectious disease prevention, but it also gave the government practice in what *not* to do. And that meant withholding information from the public. Because both during and after the outbreak, the government received stern criticism from citizens for its delayed and inadequate disclosure of information regarding the contaminated sites and the situation in general. It took 19 days from the confirmation of the first MERS case in the country before the government finally released information regarding it, and this lack of early transparency and communication fueled public worry and frustration. Ultimately, this led to Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (the oldest NGO in Korea) filing a lawsuit against the government because of their inadequate handling of the outbreak, representing the victims and their families (Kang, Kim & Cha 2018: 10-11).

When I was in Seoul that June of 2015, I could not feel on my body that I was in the middle of a coronavirus outbreak, if I was to compare it to how things feel now. Nothing felt out of the ordinary, and I remember feeling very safe. Now that I have lived in Seoul for a year, I can say that the popular shopping areas definitely were quieter back during that visit in 2015, and that this was likely partly due to MERS, as local businesses reported a sharp decrease in sales during this time, and tourism and travel in the country had sharply declined (BBC 2015; Kang, Kim & Cha 2018: 11). I remember seeing some people wearing masks on the subway, and I recall being given antibacterial wet wipes at some cafés and restaurants, but then again that is nothing out of the ordinary for life in Korea. It is common in Korea to wear masks for

several reasons other than a disease outbreak, so when I saw people out-and-about wearing them, I did not think anything of it. I will come back to the theme of face masks later on in the thesis, in chapter 5: The Mask. One day during my trip, I went to a café in Seoul that was run by a couple of YouTubers who had a designated video booth where you could go in and answer a “question of the month”. When I was there, the topic was MERS, and the question went something along the lines of “How accurate is the news regarding MERS? The virus seems to be spreading fast in Korea, are we all going to die?”. The people answering the questions were a mix of both Koreans and foreigners, and the consensus seemed to be that both the Korean and global media might be blowing things out of proportion, and that they were not necessarily delivering the news accurately. Rather than being worried about the outbreak, people seemed more worried about whether the government was being transparent and honest with them. Though I had little knowledge of how Korean media was portraying the situation at the time, I myself answered that everything seemed to be fine and normal, and that if you were planning a trip to Korea, you should not let MERS ruin it. Looking back at it now, I can not help but wonder what the answers would look like if the MERS outbreak had happened after this COVID-19 pandemic. Would we have been so quick to dismiss the possible dangers and risks? Probably not.

Nevertheless, unlike COVID-19 where the virus spreads rather quickly and easily from host to host, largely because infected individuals roam freely without even knowing they are carrying the virus until it is too late (a study from January 2021 found that a majority of all COVID-19 transmissions are caused by people without symptoms (Ries 2021), the confirmed MERS cases were mostly confined in a set of specific hospitals. And even though MERS has a much higher mortality rate than COVID-19 (40% for reported cases in Korea), it does not spread nearly as fast nor easily. All in all, the outbreak resulted in 186 confirmed cases and 36 deaths (WHO 2015). Although this 2015 MERS outbreak in many ways may seem small compared to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Korean government still learned quite a lot from it. As a result of this, the government established several new laws during and after the outbreak. To further establish a national approach to disease control, state agencies formed closer relationships with biotech firms, foreseeing future disease outbreaks and possible epidemics (which, to little surprise, they were right about). The authorities instituted protocols and a legal framework codified in a “pandemic playbook” that allowed the government to mobilize biotech firms fast, even bypassing regulations to ensure rapid production of medical devices and services (Baca 2020: 303).

It also seems that the current government in Korea has learned what *not* to do from the previous one, focusing on clear communication and transparency from the very beginning. Because when a public health issue like MERS emerges, it is crucial to communicate health-related info to citizens so that they can understand the issue and respond effectively. The public's risk perceptions can also help the government manage the situation in a better way (Choi, Yoo, Noh & Park 2017: 422). As Kang, Kim and Cha (2018) argue in "From concerned citizens to activists: a case study of 2015 South Korean MERS outbreak and the role of dialogic government communication and citizens' emotions on public activism", conflicting information or silence from the government during an unfamiliar crisis like a pandemic induces a high situational uncertainty and anxiety, which again affects the citizens' approach to the situation both behaviorally and emotionally (Kang, Kim & Cha 2018: 5). I believe the way the current Korean government has seemingly been open and transparent with the public from the get-go has helped gain more trust amongst citizens. I will expand on this in the next chapter under "Tracing VS Surveillance: Trusting the Government".

### **3. Containing Contagion: Test, Trace, and Separate**

#### **Korea's COVID-19 Strategies**

Testing, tracing, and treating. Also referred to as “the 3 T’s”, or “the 3T model”, these three words have been at the centre of Korea’s coronavirus response, and not without reason. The first two T’s, testing and tracing, have especially been the keywords globally associated with the Korean government’s tactics (and as for the last T, I would argue that maybe “separating” would serve as a more fitting word than “treating”). On the official website of Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, you can easily find a page dedicated to “Korea’s Response to COVID-19” where it says: “Key strategies: TEST, TRACE, and TREAT” (MOFA 2020). Korea’s tactics are no secret, in fact, it appears the government is eager to show the world their ways. On June 11th 2020, the Korean government even issued a statement saying they would make their disease-control programs the international standard by sharing with the rest of the world the skills and know-how’s they have attained whilst trying to control the spread of the virus.

The Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy has explained that the country plans to promote the 3T model, and suggest similar tactics to the International Organization for Standardization. Korea seeks to standardize 18 disease-control programs in total that are meant to cover every stage of virus-spread control, everything from how to carry out tests to operating quarantine centers and drive-through clinics. The government has additionally expressed wishes to set global standards for immigration processes to further prevent imported COVID-19 cases, as well as standards for cell phone apps that are made to trace and keep track of people that are quarantined (The Korea Herald 2020b). And knowing how much praise Korea received at the start of this pandemic for their ways of containing contagion, these goals and plans come as no surprise. In fact, since the beginning of the pandemic the country has often been referred to in Western media as one of the most successful countries worldwide when it comes to “flattening the curve” and managing the new coronavirus without implementing a “lockdown” (UN News 2020; Hankyoreh 2020; Hyunjung 2020; McCurry 2020; Scott & Park 2021).

But what do we mean when we use the word lockdown? Locking borders? Closing stores? People staying at home? It appears that people are working with different definitions of the word, because from what I have gathered, many people in Korea have felt like they *have* been living “locked down” lives even if the government never officially closed the borders of the country. A great number of stores and businesses in Korea have still had to temporarily close or shut down completely, resulting in thousands of people losing their jobs. On May 13th, it was reported that since the start of the pandemic, Korea had suffered their biggest job loss since 1999 (at that time, the country was still feeling the effects of the Asian financial crisis that started in 1997). In April alone, over 470 000 citizens in Korea lost their jobs, and irregular and temporary workers were hit the hardest, while job losses were most prominent in the sectors directly affected by social distancing and lockdown-like measures, like that of retail, tourism, lodgings, wholesale, and education services (Kyungmin 2020). On September 8th, another article revealed that Seoul had lost about 20 000 businesses between the first and second quarter of 2020 (Choi 2020). And while COVID-19 has dealt a serious blow to people of all ages when it comes to employment in Korea, it has hit younger people particularly hard. Out of the people that lost their jobs, about half of them were between the ages 15-29, and the steepest decline in employment rate was seen for people between the ages of 20-29 (Kyungmin 2020; Kim 2020).

So, saying Korea has managed without “locking down” might be a stretch, as many businesses *have* had to “lock down”. And it struck me when I was watching my research collaborators’ video diaries, that Seoul had “locked down” way more establishments than I had presumed. Watching Kyuho and Sarah walk around the popular shopping areas of Seoul that I remember being completely packed with people and buzzing stores, I was surprised to see how empty the streets were, and how many establishments had disappeared. Now, this is not to say that Korea as a country has not done relatively well compared to other countries that have suffered bigger losses, because it has. But that does not mean that there has not been unfortunate losses as a consequence of lockdown-like measures. Businesses *have* closed. Schools *have* closed. People *have* stayed at home. Appointments *have* been cancelled. Lives have been “paused”, weddings postponed, education plans altered. Over the course of my fieldwork, I watched Korea go through varying degrees of social distancing measures and restrictions (categorized on a three-tier scale as level 1, level 1.5, level 2, level 2.5, and level 3.0) and I witnessed both permanent and temporary shut-downs and re-openings of establishments like welfare centres, shops, schools, cafés, restaurants, bars, clubs, churches,

museums, theaters, and galleries (Bradley 2020; The Korea Times 2020a; The Korea Herald 2020a; Park 2020; Kim 2020). If we had asked all the people that were affected by those measures if they thought Korea had managed without a so-called lockdown, it would not come as a surprise to me if they answered that they absolutely *have* been living “locked down” lives compared to pre-pandemic.

Take Yoona for instance. Even though she told me that she felt like Korea was handling the pandemic well compared to other countries, she said she still felt like she was in a state of “corona blue”. Corona blue was a term I had never heard before she said it, and she seemed both surprised and amused when I told her that. “They’ve even been talking about corona blue on the news here! Like ‘tips on how to overcome corona blue’. Maybe it’s something we made up?”. Yoona then explained corona blue as a term that refers to feeling down and depressed as a consequence of the pandemic, and how she had also thought to herself “could it be that I’m also corona blue? (혹시 나도 코로나 블루?)”. Her state of corona blue meant that she took down her profile picture in the KakaoTalk app, because she felt like she was living in the past. The girl in the picture was not her anymore, so she removed it. “Me and my friends talk less on social media nowadays”, she said. “You would expect us to talk more, but since our daily lives are taken away from us, there’s not much to talk about...nothing is new”. Because even though Korea had not implemented a “strict lockdown” per se (whatever that may entail), people were still urged to stay at home as much as possible and practice social distancing, and so Yoona and her friends did just that.

When I asked her what a typical day looked like for her, she laughed a little and said: “I wake up, I do online courses, I go work at school as part time staff, I eat, I go home, and then I do online shopping. And then the next day I wake up, do online courses, go work at school, eat, go home, and do more online shopping”. It was a repetitive pattern that I could relate to, as days seemed to blend into each other and become one. Rick, who had moved to Korea for the sole purpose of attending Korean language school, expressed to me how discouraging it had been for him to suddenly have to do everything online. It was almost like a bittersweet comedy, given that he had moved to the other side of the world only to be stuck at home doing tasks on his computer and phone, something he could have easily done back in the US as well. When I interviewed him for the first time in early May 2020, he thought he might still be able to go back to class for his last tests of the semester, but they ended up being online after all, to his disappointment. He shared that he felt “beyond frustrated” about his



education not reaching its full potential seeing how he was unable to attend class physically and practice talking with his classmates. Curious about how a typical day looked for him when he had to stay at home, I asked if he could describe it for me, and he explained:

“I wake up, then I do the bare minimum in terms of hygiene and dressing up. I make sure to do my ‘morning transition’ though, putting on new clothes and sunscreen, so that there is a difference between my ‘school clothes’ and my ‘day clothes’. I feel like when I make that distinction, I’m tricking my mind into being productive. I usually go for a quick walk outside with a mask on, and then I come home and do my online class. There’s basically no interaction with my classmates, but I have gotten closer to my teachers than ever before. My teachers record the lessons and send them to us, and then we can send them text messages in return. For evaluations, we record audio clips and send them directly to our teachers using Kakao. It’s sort of funny actually having a conversation with my teachers on Kakao, that has actually been kinda cool. But I’d rather take a normal situation and ‘disconnect’ with the teachers over this current situation. I miss being in class.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Rick on the 14th of May 2020)

Though somewhat bored and restless, all my interlocutors and research participants maintained that at the end of the day, they were pleased with how the Korean government was handling the situation. Even though they could not do everything they wanted to like before, they still felt that being in Korea was better than being elsewhere. Korea was, after all, taking the situation very seriously. Korea’s focus on widespread and easily available testing was especially a tactic that often got mentioned as something my interlocutors felt like the country was really excelling at. And they were not wrong, for Korea *had* done a formidable job with their persistent testing strategies. As of March 5th 2020, Korea had already tested about 145 000 people, which was more than Italy, the US, the UK, Japan, and France combined (Thompson 2020). The principle was made to be that getting tested should be easy, fast, and cheap (often free). Across Korea (most prominently in the Seoul area, given the dense population) drive-through testing stations and walk-in testing booths were quickly made available, so that citizens could easily go get tested. Results were usually ready within a day. “One of the best things about Korea’s way of handling corona has been the aggressive testing”, Yoona concluded. Other than rigorous and easily available testing, Korea has also been known for their tracing strategies. Which leads me to the next T of the 3 T’s.

## Tracing or Surveillance: Trusting the Government

As part of Korea's strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the country, The KDCA (Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency) has disclosed parts of COVID-19 patients' contact trace data to the public as a safety measure. If you contract COVID-19 in Korea and this is registered, local officials have the authority to look into your credit card- and cell phone records, as well as closed-circuit camera recordings (or surveillance footage) of your recent visits out and about in whichever city you live, so that they can disinfect the areas and contact people you might have spread the virus to (Kim 2020). Seongdong-gu district in Seoul also started to use QR code phone scanning as a tracking method in May 2020, and as of June 10th 2020, establishments regarded as "high risk", like clubs, bars, restaurants, noraebang (karaoke) rooms, and churches nationwide were also ordered by the government to require that visitors scanned a QR code when they entered, so that it was clear who had been there. Several other countries have also utilized this QR scanning method, including Norway. All these tracing measures that the Korean government used were backed by the legal framework that was formed after the MERS outbreak in 2015 to ensure more transparency, as mentioned earlier in the thesis.

One day in May, when I was looking for YouTube videos related to COVID-19 in Korea, I came across a video where the comment section had turned into quite a heated debate on the issue of contact tracing. While a lot of comments were positive, praising Korea for their successful efforts in "flattening the curve", some commentators showed great disdain for Korea's tracing tactics, calling the strategies a "dystopian abuse of power". Other people argued against this again, commenting that the Korean government was simply doing the best they could to help stop the spread of the virus, and that they were in fact not overstepping privacy boundaries they did not *have* to overstep for the sake of the greater public health. Then, I read a comment with hundreds of upvotes that said: "When Western countries do it, it is called tracing. When Korea does it, the Western countries call it government surveillance". This comment got me thinking, where do we draw the line between tracing and surveillance? And how much personal privacy are people willing to give up for the sake of communal safety in Korea versus in other countries? This pandemic has truly put the power relations between "the governing" and "the governed" in the spotlight in several different ways, and I could not help but wonder what my interlocutors thought about this whole "tracing versus

surveillance” debate, and if they felt like what the Korean government was doing was a problematic breach of privacy. During one of my interviews with Yoona later in May I asked her what she thought about the matter, and she answered the following:

“Honestly? I think the measures the government is taking are ok in regards to privacy safety. We have no point but to trust the government in times like these. Besides...this is just my personal opinion, but I look at it this way; our info is already out there. I feel like Google knows more than the government anyway, and even though I’m a private person, this is a risk we have to take even if we don’t really want to. It’s for the greater good, you know? And I feel like the government is actually using big data really well, and as far as I can tell everything on the app is anonymous”.

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on the 10th of May 2020)

The app she was referring to was the KakaoTalk app (often referred to as just “kakao” in Korea), which is the most common text message app there. On this app, other than chatting with people, you can now also see how many people have been verified with COVID-19 within Korea, and the routes of recently diagnosed patients. Because the map in the app showed her where people that had recently tested positive for COVID-19 had been, she could easily stay away from those areas to minimize her risk of getting infected, which she greatly appreciated. Whenever there was someone in her local area that had been confirmed to be infected, she would also receive a text message from the government telling of the routes of that person, so that she knew if she should go get tested herself, had she been in close proximity to them.

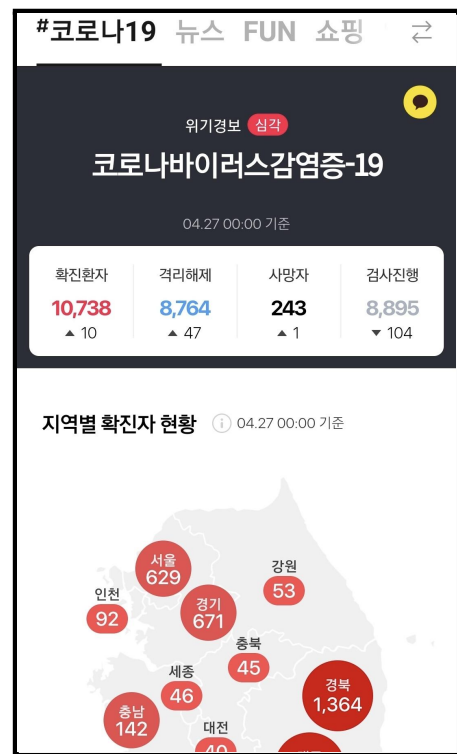


Figure 1: the new COVID-19 feature in KakaoApp

Over the course of my fieldwork I realized that even though my interlocutors and research participants were very aware of the fact that they could potentially be traced, they did not really mind. In fact, if anything, the Korean government’s adamant efforts to trace and track infected citizens and publicly share their routes of possible contagion made them feel safer.

As Lily told me during one of our conversations when we were comparing Korea's measures to fight the novel coronavirus with measures in other countries: "It's better to be overly cautious than to not be cautious at all. It's better to be safe than to be sorry". Dispelling concerns on the privacy risks of contact tracing, Kim Il-Jae, who is the chairman of the Personal Information Protection Commission under the Korean Interior Ministry, said in a conference held online in June 2020 that the legislation governing how personal data is handled by the government when a contagious disease like COVID-19 surfaces, was supported by "public demand" and "social consensus" (Kim 2020). And I could see that reflected in my informants' arguments. Because even though they knew they were being "watched" and "controlled" to a larger extent now during this pandemic than previously, they did not mind. In fact, they practically encouraged it. And here I want to mention '*We are doing better*': *Biopolitical nationalism and the COVID-19 virus in East Asia*' by Jeroen de Kloet, Jian Lin, and Yiu Fai Chow (2020). In their article, they look at how citizens of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan support, applaud, and compare the biopolitical efforts their states are making, and they found similar results as I found in Korea. People generally seemed fine with being traced and tracked, "...perhaps even more than fine - they seem to be stating: the more we are being controlled, the more we are in control" (Kloet, Lin & Chow 2020: 636).

It occurred to them, as it occurred to me, that this new coronavirus does not only infect, it also affects. Kloet, Lin, and Chow argue that this phenomenon is a form of "biopolitical nationalism", a dynamic between geopolitics, body, and affect. They use that term referring to Foucault's argument that power is always a productive force, as well as their observations of the many ways biopolitical efforts of nation states are being supported, applauded, and compared. They also argue that this public support and "celebration" of biopolitical control does not fall into the typical reproduction of capital, but rather speaks to "geopolitical identification" (Kloet, Lin & Chow 2020: 636). In other words, this pandemic has stirred up strong localist- and nationalist sentiments, state leaders and people of different nationalities are priding themselves on containing the virus more effectively than others. "*We are doing better than them*". In Korea, as Kloet, Lin and Chow also observed in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, people seem to want to be "controlled" more, or at least more effectively, and people seem to be angry at the states in other parts of the world that have failed to do so.

Lily and Rick, both from the US, often expressed to me their deep frustration and worry over the US coronavirus response. They both told me they were glad they were living in Korea during this pandemic, and not in the US, as they felt that Koreans took the situation more seriously. They felt safe in Korea. Instead of being worried about themselves and the Korean population, they were mostly worried about their friends and family back in the States. Rick described the response in Korea as the “complete opposite” of the response in the US, comparing the situation in the US to a “horrible TV show”. He further explained: “I’m so disappointed in the US. It’s so disheartening to watch the news and see people protesting the concept of staying home for the benefit of the nation...and people protesting because they don’t want to wear masks. I’m just really disappointed in how American people are taking this socially”. One of the last things he told me during our last interview was: “I’m not scared for Korea. I’m scared for America”.

Rick and Lily’s remarks made me think about the responsibilities we have as a community during a crisis like this pandemic, and how the smaller political bodies working together at a micro level makes up the larger political body at a macro level. The people and their believed and imagined community is what makes the nation, as Benedict Anderson showcased in *Imagined Communities*. Taemin, my other Daegu-based interlocutor, told me that rather than just saying that *Korea* is getting through this crisis, he wanted to say that the *people* of Korea are getting through it. “Getting over the corona crisis depends on having positivity, not only the government, but also all the people of the country. This crisis can’t be solved by the government alone”, he shared. And he had a valid point. Unless the citizens of Korea complied and followed the recommended guidelines the government had laid out, the situation would look drastically different.

On June 8th, 2020, a research team from UC Berkeley published an analysis that concluded that 11,55 million additional citizens in Korea would have gotten COVID-19 had it not been for the early implementation of strict disease control measures (Lee 2020). At the time of the study, that was about 1165 times more than the number of citizens who had actually been infected. Solomon Hsiang, who is the director of UC Berkeley’s Global Policy Laboratory, shared that: “There have been huge personal costs to staying home and canceling events, but the data show that each day [of sacrifice] made a profound difference” (Lee 2020). State-implemented emergency health measures will not work properly unless citizens actually respect them and uphold them. And from what I gathered through my research, it seemed that

the majority of people in Korea were prepared and willing to respect the guidelines and make these “sacrifices”, for the sake of their safety and freedom. Freedom is an important keyword here, as it was a word that kept coming up both during the interviews with my interlocutors and in COVID-19 related YouTube video comment sections.

In addition to the comment I mentioned earlier on tracing and surveillance, there were three other comments that stood out to me. All of them were written by Koreans, and two of them had a significant number of upvotes and replies from other commenters seemingly from Korea who agreed (I say “seemingly” because they all had Korean usernames, but then again this is the internet, and so I cannot guarantee that the people who commented were actually Korean). The first said: “Freedom is not free. If you want freedom, act accordingly”. The second one said: “There is no freedom without responsibility”. And lastly, the third one said: “Koreans learned from the painful past and never let it happen again, just like our immune system does. Just like we need an immune system, the nation needs to have an immune system, too.” When I read these comments, the first thing that came to mind was a conversation I had with Yoona about masks, where she told me that “Korean people want their freedom”, and that if that entails following measures like wearing masks all the time and being extra careful, then they will do that (I will come back to this statement in Chapter 5: The Mask). The community response in Korea at large seemed to reflect this type of thinking. Of course, there are also some people in Korea that strongly disagree with these arguments, and I will also come back to these protests in the next chapter on “Stigma and Blame”.

Nonetheless, it seems that the current government in Korea has gained back some of the trust they lost during the last presidency with the way they have handled this pandemic. Sociologists Kye Bongoh and Hwang Sun-Jae (2020) published in August of 2020 a relevant article named “Social trust in the midst of pandemic crisis: Implications from COVID-19 of South Korea”. Their study sought to contribute to the understanding of the relations between social trust and risk management, focusing on the response to COVID-19 in Korea. What they found was that since the start of the pandemic, trust in society, people, and both the central and local governments had improved considerably, while trust in the press, judicature, and religious organizations had distinctly decreased. They also found that the improvement in trust was associated with “proactive responses to the pandemic”, and that failure to do so was what resulted in deteriorating trust, especially when it came to religious organizations (Kye & Hwang 2020: 1). Kye and Hwang concluded that their findings illustrated the importance of

risk management when it comes to formation of trust, and that the results imply that Korea might be undergoing a transformation from a low-trust to a high-trust society. When I was in Korea during the MERS outbreak in 2015, social trust amongst the public towards the government was exceedingly low, ending in the impeachment of Park Geun-hye in 2016, who served as the president at the time. The level of Koreans' trust in the government was as a matter of fact amongst the lowest out of the countries surveyed in East Asia from 2001-2015. Park Geun-hye and her administration had received intense public criticism for their involvement in several crises since their inception in February of 2013. Prior to the 2015 MERS outbreak, public support for the president had hit an all-time low at less than 30%, and the negative rating of her performance was at 60%, also a record low. Remember the YouTuber video booth I mentioned in the MERS section in Chapter 2? Some of the people that were answering the questions were a group of high school students, and their answer was simple: Park Geun-hye was to blame. After the MERS outbreak, public support and trust further declined, ultimately leading to the president's impeachment in 2016, and in 2017 Park was charged with corruption and put in prison (Kang & Kim: 10).

During my time in Korea, I always felt like there was a high sense of social trust between Korean citizens. People would walk away from their personal belongings (laptops, cellphones, cameras, wallets, you name it) at cafés and public libraries without question, because they trusted that nobody would steal them. And as far as I could tell, nobody did. While trust and distrust have generally been treated as opposite ends on a single continuum, several scholars have recently started refuting this by examining trust and distrust as empirically and conceptually distinct and coexisting concepts (Kang & Kim 2018: 5). Looking at the case of pre-pandemic Korea, I argue it is highly possible to trust fellow citizens of a nation-state all the while having low trust in the state-leaders. It is also apparent that despite Korea moving towards becoming an increasingly biopolitical disciplinary state, with its use of contact tracing tools and digital surveillance, Korean citizens' trust in the government has improved considerably (Um 2020: 6). It may be that "tracing" seems less like "surveillance" when you trust the ones that are watching.

## Containing Contagion

As mentioned previously, Korea's 3T model consists of the words "test", "trace", and "treat". If the 3T model serves as a summary for Korea's COVID-19 strategies, I would deem "separate" as a more fitting third word. A crucial part of Korea's containing tactics (given the fact that they so far have never closed their borders for incoming travelers) is the mandatory 15-day quarantine that people who arrive in the country have to go through. When you are in quarantine in Korea, you are not allowed to leave your room/apartment at any time, and you are allowed absolutely no visitors. I preface this because I am aware countries do quarantines differently, and some places (like here in Norway) you are allowed to go outside. Lily and Sienna had both gone through that process, and when I asked Lily how it had been to travel to and arrive in Korea during the early months of the pandemic, she explained:

"I think I chose to travel at the right moment, cause when I arrived in Korea they had handled the situation really well and cases were really low. And back in the US, well... things were *not* going well there. The first plane I took was basically empty, but the second one was packed. It was mostly just Asians, and I'm guessing most of them were Koreans that rather wanted to stay in Korea than the US, seeing how the US was dealing with the situation. I could see people on the plane in full hazard gear, gloves, mask, face shield, the whole thing. The girl who sat next to me was even wearing a rain poncho to cover herself. So people were being really cautious. When I arrived at the airport in Korea everything was really strict and controlled, they even had a designated line in immigration for people coming from Europe, separating us from the rest. Before leaving the airport they made me download two apps, like you had to, which were linked to the closest medical official and clinic in the area I was staying. Through those apps I had to send in my symptoms every day while in quarantine. When we left the airport they had a separate transport system for us (the "us" being people who had traveled from overseas), we couldn't take public transportation, so they had arranged busses for us, and we were 10 people on each bus. The bus dropped me off at a drop-off point, and then I was driven straight to my apartment in a car. After I had arrived there, a health official personally called me and made sure all my contact info was correct, and then told me I was gonna get a care package. I think everyone who's in quarantine gets a package, but the amount of stuff in it varies. In my care package I got hand sanitizer, masks, disinfectant, soap, eggs, rice, coffee, water, sweet potatoes, apples, ramyun, things like that. I was actually really surprised and appreciative that a real person called me, because I feel like that's not something that would happen in the US, you know? It would just be like an automated voice or something. The fact that an actual health official personally got in contact with me definitely made me feel safe, like I was in good hands".



(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 28th of April 2020)

Lily continued to explain how even though quarantine was a bit boring, being unable to leave her apartment for 15 days, she still thought of it as a generally good experience. She got to relax, she got free food, and she loved that she could get in direct contact with officials about the situation and get answers to whatever questions she might have. She was told that a health official might pop in for a surprise visit at any time to see if she was following the rules and actually staying at home, and that if she got caught having broken the quarantine she would be fined or deported. “It seemed like they were taking things seriously, and I don’t mind that. That’s better than to *not* take it seriously, you know?”.

Sienna, who was only staying in Korea short-term, and who therefore did not have a long-term visa or a permanent apartment to her name, spent her quarantine at a government-run facility (often called a “quarantine hotel”). And it *was* in fact a hotel, and a rather nice one at that. When Sienna arrived at her room she was visibly surprised at the standard of it. To stay at a quarantine hotel, she had to pay about \$1400, and she commented that she felt it was a fairly good deal considering everything it included, and the amount of days she was staying. When she arrived at the hotel (after going through the same process as Lily at the airport), she was given several care packages to last her the two weeks. Inside them, there was a thermometer for her to use to check her temperature every day and a paper sheet to fill in the information on, a big pack of masks, a big dispenser of hand sanitizer, packets of tea and coffee (and disposable cups for drinking), two big water bottles (she was also informed that the hotel would provide more water, sugar, coffee, tea, adapters, toilet paper, sanitizer, and towels if she requested it), a toothbrush and toothpaste, laundry detergent, an exercise band, trash bags, a pamphlet of general instructions, rules and guidelines (for instance on how to disinfect and dispose of whatever trash she might have accumulated each day, how to wear a mask properly, when her daily meals would be provided, and so on), instant noodles, a baked pastry, an apple, Korean churro snacks, several different soda cans, and chopsticks. Sienna said she was genuinely surprised at how many things she was given, and that all of this made her feel like she was well taken care of by the government, and she appreciated it greatly. Looking at how they were handling it in Korea, she was embarrassed by the US’s response. She concluded that she would like the US to learn from Korea.

One of the first things I focused on when I started this digital fieldwork was how public spaces in Korea were being organized to contain the contagion. Lily, Yoona and Rick all told me about their experiences with various testing and tracing technologies, and they sent me photos from when they had encountered such technologies out-and-about. These technologies include everything ranging from actual COVID-19 tests to thermal cameras, temperature screenings, and QR code scanning procedures. Yoona would encounter these technologies at her university campus, Lily would encounter them at the hagwon she works at, and Rick encountered them on public transportation in Daegu. They also encountered several “separating” and anti-contaminating measures out and about in Seoul and Daegu. When Yoona was at the campus of Seoul National University for her part-time job at the end of April 2020, she noticed that there was anti-bacterial film on the doors. Later on in June, when she was out shopping for groceries with her mother, she also noticed that the shopping carts had a similar type of antibacterial film on them. Both Yoona and Lily said they had seen antibacterial film on the buttons of elevators around Seoul as well. Other than antibacterial film, Yoona also found separating plastic screens in her university’s cafeteria and at restaurants in Seoul. Lily had the same kind of screens installed in the classroom she worked in, in an attempt to keep the children from being in physical contact with one another.



Figure 2: antibacterial film on a door at SNU



Figure 3: antibacterial film on a shopping cart

When Yoona went to campus in August for a friend’s graduation photoshoot, she found that there had been AI devices installed at the entrance that would check their temperature and whether they had a mask on. She explained: “My friend took off his mask to take a photo and it (the device) said something like ‘you are not wearing a mask, please wear a mask to enter’. It’s really smart.” She then continued to explain that the level of hightech control depended on which college building it was. Some buildings would have students write down their name and phone number to keep track, and at other buildings you needed to go through a student ID card check.



Figure 4: protective screens at the SNU cafeteria



Figure 5: protective screens at a restaurant in Seoul



Figure 6: AI device that checks your temperature and whether you are wearing a mask or not

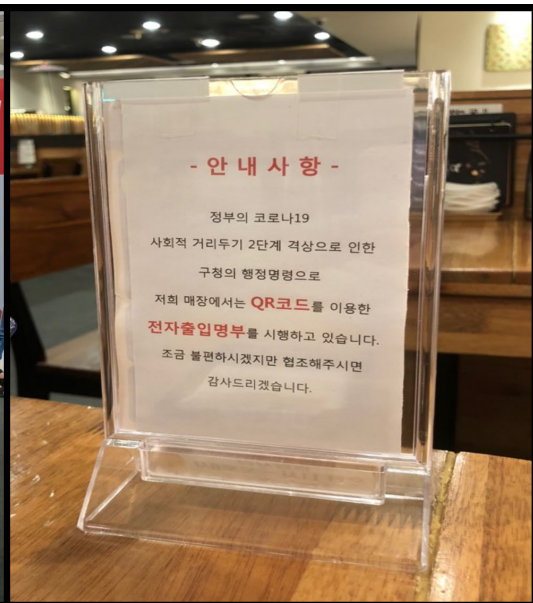


Figure 7: sign that asks customers to register their arrival by scanning a QR code





Figure 8: thermal cameras checking for potentially infected people in Seoul



Figure 9: automated antibacterial disinfecting machines at the train station in Daegu

## The State of Exception and Emergency

As demonstrated above, these are undeniably exceptional times. None of those anti-contaminating measures are under normal circumstances such a big part of everyday-life in Korea. But now they can be seen all over Seoul and Daegu. During exceptional times, it is not unusual for state leaders to use their power to enforce exceptional laws. An example of this is how the Korean government is now utilizing laws and rulebooks written as a consequence of the 2015 MERS outbreak. Laws and rules for times of exception, and emergency, like this pandemic has proved to be. Unusual guidelines and laws out of the ordinary are concepts people all around the world have had to deal with due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Obligatory quarantine, “lockdowns”, social distancing, and mandatory mask-wearing are some examples. The state of exception (also known as ‘the state of emergency’), describes the legal granting of “full power” to the executive branch (here: the state) due to the necessity or urgency of a situation (like that of a natural disaster, or in this case; a deadly virus outbreak).

When a situation like this happens, the government typically gains powers and funds it does not normally have access to. As Greg Beckett (2013) puts it, the state of exception is “in essence, the suspension of the balance of powers and the legitimization of executive decree” (Beckett 2013: 88). Some scholars argue that the state of exception makes it easy for those who govern to exploit the situation, creating a scenario where authoritarian rule is justified, and where there is an unnecessary magnification of state control that may only further benefit the elites. One of the scholars who has been very vocal about his concerns regarding the state of exception and COVID-19, is Giorgio Agamben. He has written several articles on the topic since the beginning of the pandemic, often with special focus on his homeland Italy. In an article named “The Invention of an Epidemic”, Agamben (2020) writes: “Faced with the frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic of coronavirus...why do the media and the authorities do their utmost to spread a state of panic, thus provoking an authentic state of exception with serious limitations on movement and a suspension of daily life in entire regions?”. Essentially, Agamben’s argument is that “...the state, in requiring us to socially distance and self-isolate, severs us from our relation to others and to ourselves, and reduces us to a bare, biological functioning” philosopher Matthew Collins explains (Humphreys 2021). Agamben has since received a great amount of criticism for his stance, and Sergio Benvenuto, another prominent Italian philosopher and social scientist, urged us to “Forget about Agamben” as he wrote:

“A young friend of mine keeps me at a distance of at least three meters and smiles. I very much appreciate this non-gesture of his, because I know that it is mainly he who is trying to protect me; because I’m old. It’s true that he’s also protecting the elderly in his own family: his father, his mother... But in any case I’m grateful to him. The more the others keep at a distance from me, the closer I feel to them. This is why Agamben has failed to understand anything about what’s happening in the molecularity of human relations.” (Benvenuto 2020)

Maybe sometimes, being careful is an act of courage. After all, what is wrong with taking preventative measures in a situation as uncertain as this? In “Rethinking states of emergency”, Susanna Trnka (2020) argues that in light of COVID-19, it might be beneficial to consider the possibility that prominent critiques of ‘states of emergency’ (like that of Agamben 2005, Chomsky 2020, and Foucault 2004) too often fail to portray states of emergency as anything else than inherently unjustifiable, a situation where citizens are depicted as completely powerless and blinded by the state (Trnka 2020: 1). She uses New

Zealand as an example, and argues that their COVID-19 state of emergency and four weeks long lockdown revealed “extensive citizen-state collaboration”, pointing at how collective responsibility, care and blame may be co-constituted by states and citizenries in the midst of a crisis like the ongoing pandemic. I believe similar citizen-state collaborations can be seen in Korea’s response as well, and that we might benefit from rethinking states of emergency, as Trnka argues. Trnka maintains that:

“Despite neoliberal rhetoric’s emphasis on individualism, societies operate through a range of interpersonal, collective and state–citizen obligations. Even opposition or scepticism towards the government doesn’t necessarily dissolve views of the state as the final bastion of protection... or dissipate desires for more ‘caring’ state–citizen relations... Recognising citizens’ involvement in states of emergency requires looking beyond critiques of top-down impositions of power. As fears over containing COVID-19 abound, it’s vital to understand how citizen–state relations co-constitute responsibility and care, and what this might mean for those deemed uncompliant and potentially subject to blame.” (Trnka 2020: 1)

Which brings me to the next chapter of this thesis, where I will explore how the forces of stigma and blame have been part of the pandemic experience in Korea, looking at three different contexts and situations.

## 4. Stigma and Blame

### Stigmatization

As countless previous studies have shown, disease and stigma are two things that have a history of going together (see for instance Nations & Monte 1996 on Cholera; Castro & Farmer 2005 on AIDS; Siu 2008 on SARS; Black 2012 on HIV; Cheung 2015 and Minor 2017 on Ebola; and Abney 2018 on Tuberculosis). Or, to put it differently; where there is disease, there is usually some sort of social stigma attached to it. As Valerie Earnshaw (2020) writes, “...stigma has exacerbated the suffering from every major infectious disease epidemic in our history...”. This goes for COVID-19 as well. Not only is there stigma attached to the disease itself, but large groups of people have been stigmatized simply for being associated with it. Here I am specifically talking about people of Asian decent (especially East-Asians), who since the beginning of the pandemic have faced an abundance of discrimination and racism in the West. In Korea, I have found the forces of stigmatization at work in different ways, and connected to three distinct contexts. The first was the stigma attached to the religious group that spurred the first big outbreak in Daegu, the second was the stigma that followed queer people and foreigners after the outbreak in Itaewon, and the third was the stigma of *not* wearing masks. In the following part of the thesis I will go deeper into these three examples of how stigma and blame has been part of the pandemic experience in Seoul and Daegu.

Erving Goffman described the term “stigma” as an attribute that makes an individual different from others in a social category, reducing the person to a discredited or tainted status (Goffman 1997: 135). In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas described how ideas of “pollution” are symbolic and contextual, and that they work in society at two levels; an expressive one, and an instrumental one. An example of the latter can be when a government makes protocols of social distancing, and citizens coercively enforce them. The expressive kinds of pollution, however, fall into the realm of the moral and ethical (Douglas 2003: 3; Roy 2020). The pollution Douglas talks about, can be explained as the possibility of being “contaminated”. It is about what is deemed

“pure” and “clean”, and what is deemed “dangerous” and “dirty”. Douglas’s theories and arguments are good to think with when looking at COVID-19 prevention strategies and protocols, as she argues that “social distance” enables the separation of the “contaminated” from the “pure”, making it possible for the effects of “dirt” to be contained (Simpson & Morgan 2020: 688). In other words, boundaries are drawn to maintain the purity of order, so that the pure and clean is kept away from the danger of contagion (Simpson & Morgan 2020: 686).

Agreeing with McMillan & Hedges (2020), I argue that stigma and processes of “othering” pose serious health hazards during pandemics, making an already challenging situation even worse. When fear sets in, people have a tendency to divide society into the safe “us” and the dangerous “them”, which becomes strikingly prevalent during times of contagion, something this pandemic is a perfect example of. There are several outcomes to this fear of “potentially dangerous others”, some worse than the other. One outcome seen in this pandemic, is that people might end up physically distancing themselves from perceived sources of transmission, which in times where social distancing is crucial to contain infections might not be all that bad (though the perceived sources of transmission might be merely that; perceived). Then, there are other outcomes where stigma and othering turns into xenophobia and racism of the physically violent kind, as unfortunately seen in many countries across the globe since the start of the pandemic (Human Rights Watch 2020).

When former US president Donald Trump continuously chose to refer to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus”, the “China virus”, and last but not least; the “kung flu”, he fed into a “geography of blame”, which further stigmatized Asia and Asian-American people, commodities and neighborhoods (McMillan & Hedges 2020). Hate crimes targeted at Asians have seen a drastic rise globally since the pandemic started, and as medical anthropologist Schoch-Spana and others had anticipated, referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” ultimately led to harmful and violent actions against Asians, that again ended up delaying emergency preparedness for the general population. During a disease outbreak like this pandemic, stigma and processes of othering create nothing but mistrust, anxiety, confusion, and also denial of risk that might end up hindering effective health emergency responses (McMillan & Hedges 2020).



Both Lily and Yoona expressed that they were worried about their Asian friends and family living overseas. During our first conversation, Yoona told me she had friends living abroad who had told her that they were afraid of leaving their homes and going out on the streets. One of them lives in Austria and had experienced someone shouting “CORONA!” at them while they were just out walking. Another friend who lives in France had been shooed away from a restaurant, simply for being of Asian descent. She also had several Korean friends who had cancelled their planned trips and study abroad exchanges, not only in fear of the novel coronavirus itself, but also in fear of racist attacks.

To avoid the powerful and damaging forces of stigma and discrimination, people may avoid protocols and treatment options that are technically biologically safe, but socially dehumanizing. I could see that this was happening in Korea in two different contexts, revolving around two communities that were already stigmatized, making it even harder for them to seek out tests and answer contact tracers. I will dig into these two contexts under The Shincheonji Outbreak and The Itaewon Outbreak.

The coronavirus does not care about harmful social constructs and stereotypes. It spreads to any suitable host regardless of ethnicity, sexuality and religious belonging. Which means there should be no place for stigma, racism and other sorts of discrimination in these times of COVID-19. It is irrelevant for the virus, and it should be irrelevant for us. Processes of stigma and othering does nothing but worsen the situation. Anthropologists know that there is a very human need to sort the world into safe people and unsafe people, as well as safe places and unsafe places. But by providing “stigma antidotes” and toolkits to combat stigmatization, anthropologists might have an important role to play in this pandemic, providing insight into diverse social dynamics across the globe, perhaps even helping ensure that emergency responses eventually eliminate all forms of stigma and othering (McMillan & Hedges 2020).

## The Shincheonji Outbreak

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the first big COVID-19 cluster infection in Korea happened in Daegu within the Shincheonji megachurch. Regardless of whether or not “patient 31” was solely responsible for that late February outbreak, she and the rest of the Shincheonji church members *did* receive widespread blame for furthering the spread of the coronavirus within the country. My interlocutors also regarded the Shincheonji outbreak as the “real” start of the pandemic in Korea. Following the outbreak, patient 31, the 61 year old woman, quickly became known as the infamous “super spreader”, and all eyes turned to the church in worry and anger. The Shincheonji church has occasionally been referred to in Korea as a “secretive sect” or “cult” prior to the pandemic, and they were already a stigmatized group within the country, but after the outbreak they went from being viewed as “just” a cult of secretive practices to a sudden threat to the nation and the public health of citizens (Lehto 2020). Following the cluster outbreak, Korean media worked hard to identify and shine (negative) light on the practices within the church that may have contributed to the rapid spread of the virus.

Three of the examples that were made are the following: the first was how they use a fingerprint scanner to track the attendance of their members, which means that a lot of people most likely touched the same scanner as patient 31 when they entered the church. The second example was about how the members of the church would sit together during services, often very closely next to each other on the floor, sometimes having their arms around each other’s shoulders, singing and chanting together. It was also made a point out of the quantity of people being gathered in the large windowless worship rooms, where the number of congregants could reach thousands. The third example was that since Shincheonji is a multisited international megachurch, it has a great number of church locations overseas, and dozens of them in China. Reports said that there had been Korean Shincheonji members present at the Wuhan church campus in December 2019, after the initial COVID-19 outbreak had begun in that province. Therefore, there were speculations that those traveling Korean members and pastors could have carried the virus transnationally (Lehto 2020). In addition to these examples highlighted by the media, former members of the church also provided testimonies explaining that even if they were sick, they were still expected by the church to attend services where they sat “packed together like sardines.” Patient 31 also had a fever and

a sore throat when she attended the two services only days prior to her confirmed infection. Some reports have additionally explained how it is not uncommon for Shincheonji members to believe that their faith will protect them from illness, and that illness in itself is a sin (Volodzko 2020).

In “Coronavirus, Cults, and Contagion in South Korea”, anthropologist Heather Mellquist Lehto argues that while identifying those practices within the church naturally served an epidemiological purpose, they also served as evidence of the Shincheonji members’ “deviance from the ideal modern Korean subject,” the ideal rational subject that respects and upholds the corporeal practices of hygienic physical distancing and “personal space” (Lehto 2020). Reading this, I could not help but think of my final interview with Yoona, where one of the last things she told me was that this pandemic had made her realize that Korean people are very “clean”. When I asked what she meant by that, she explained:

“We’re kind of like neat-freaks...or germaphobes. Yeah...I’d say most Koreans are really health cautious. We want to be clean ourselves, and we want things to be clean. So, I think of Korean culture as a “clean” culture. Or at least a culture that *wants* things to be clean.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on October 15th 2020)

Looking at this quote in context with Lehto’s argument above, it is perhaps easier to see how Shincheonji could become a target of criticism. What made the situation worse was the church’s reluctance to provide public health officials with the contact info of the members. As soon as patient 31 and her possible routes of contagion were identified, contact tracers were put on the job to try to minimize the risk of the virus spreading further. Health officials requested for the church to provide them with a list of all 212 000 members so that they could trace the paths of infection, but it took several days before Shincheonji leaders complied. As a consequence of this, it became more difficult for the contact tracers to track the spread of the virus in the crucial early days of the outbreak, and public resentment towards the church quickly grew (Lehto 2020; Volodzko 2020). While one could argue that it is understandable that the church leaders were hesitant to disclose the members’ private info, in Korea, this reluctance ran counter to the broader public health efforts that heavily relied on transparency and willingness to prioritize public health over personal privacy (Kim 2020; Lehto 2020). Many members tried to hide their connection to the church in fear of being scrutinized and blamed, avoiding the contact tracers’ phone calls. As a consequence, unease surrounding the

“hidden” threat of Shincheonji was suddenly layered on top of the general unease and anxiety surrounding the virus itself. It was a double-bladed stigma. Due to the fact that such a large number of people suddenly were revealed to belong to the church, citizens of Daegu grew distrustful of each other, as they did not know who might be a possible “threat”. Stores closed, streets emptied. During one of our first conversations at the end of April, Taemin, who lives in Daegu, told me that when the Shincheonji outbreak happened, people (himself included) were afraid to even go outside of their homes. Rick, my other Daegu-based interlocutor, further explained:

“I was really anxious in the beginning because I could see that my Korean teachers were anxious. When Daegu’s numbers started skyrocketing, we were asked by the government to stay inside, and *only* leave the house if it was to buy food. A rumour started circulating that in 48 hours, everyone would be told to quarantine, so I went out shopping just in case, and it turns out the rumour was true. Everyone was strictly told to quarantine, just stay inside, don’t leave the house. So basically I stayed at home for 7 weeks straight after that. The government kept checking up on us through texts, telling us to wear our masks and things like that.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Rick on May 14th 2020)

There were stories of couples breaking up because neither of the partners could be sure that the other one was not a Shincheonji member, and family members shocking their relatives when it was revealed that they had kept their belonging to the church hidden. Over a million Koreans signed a petition requesting the government to disband the Shincheonji church altogether, and newspapers stressed that Shincheonji and other “cults” like it posed a threat to social order in Korea, and was damaging to the country’s reputation as a “highly developed nation” (Letho 2020; Volodzko 2020).

The Shincheonji example shows us how religious groups whose traditions and practices do not strictly align with public health norms can be treated with a heightened sense of suspicion when faced with an unseeable virus. The “otherness” of Shincheonji, in and of itself, makes them stigmatized, and as Mary Douglas suggested in *Purity and Danger*, “otherness” is often seen as contaminating. Furthermore, as Letho argues, “the threat of contagion is ambiguously biological and social” as we protect ourselves with defensive postures in this context of contagion where blame and scepticism of others easily take place. The Shincheonji cluster infection quickly became a “clean and safe us” versus “contaminated and dangerous them”

situation, and it reminded me again of Douglas' argument that the concept of "cleanliness" involves a set of practices that can become ritualised (like social distancing, hand-washing, and the wearing of masks), which centres around people (re)establishing boundaries, separating the pure from the contaminated and imposing a cultural system on an "inherently untidy experience" (Douglas 1966: 5). The church members touching the same scanner, sitting closely together "sharing" potentially infected droplets through song, all the while not wearing masks, defied the "wanted" cleanliness that Yoona had described to me as integral to Korean culture, perhaps making them an easier target of blame than if it had happened to a different group of people.

## **The Itaewon Outbreak**

The Shincheonji outbreak was not the only outbreak that spurred further stigmatization of a group of people viewed as "abnormal" by many in Korea. A similar situation occurred after a cluster infection that happened in Itaewon, Seoul, the so-called "Itaewon outbreak". From the end of April until the beginning of May 2020, the daily registered cases of COVID-19 had been so low in Korea that people started to relax a bit and go out more. Most of these days the daily number of new infections were lower than 10, and on May 4th, 2020, the Korean government even announced that within the next few days, they would be "ending social distancing" and that they would transition to "everyday disease prevention, or in other words social distancing within our daily routines", as daily cases had gone down and stayed down (Choi & Kwon 2020).

So, during the first weekend of May, many people ventured out to enjoy the nightlife again. One of the areas in Seoul known for its booming nightlife is Itaewon, and so naturally, this was one of the places people visited. Other than a booming nightlife, Itaewon is also known for being the most foreigner- and queer friendly district in Seoul. One of the people who visited Itaewon that weekend was a 29-year old man (known as "patient 66") from Yongin who a few days later tested positive for the coronavirus. He had no symptoms at the time, and visited two convenience stores and five bars and nightclubs on the night of May 2nd (Ock 2020). When he then tested positive, it was the first locally transmitted case in four days, and it triggered widespread fear of further community spread. What it also triggered was hate

towards the queer community in Korea. When the news of patient 66 started being released, some news outlets choose to emphasize that a couple of the clubs he had been to were “gay clubs”. This led to an outburst of hateful comments towards the LGBTQ+ community online, which then again led to less people wanting to come forward and get tested, in fear of being scrutinized and outed. During my interview with Yoona on the 10th of May, right after the Seoul city government had ordered all bars and clubs to close, the Itaewon outbreak naturally became the focus of our conversation, and she elaborated:

“Netizens are so angry, and there are so many hate comments towards the gay community online right now...so people are really scared to come forward and admit that they were at those clubs in fear of being outed. I feel like this is a huge step back in terms of human rights in Korea for sexual minorities, because the hate people already had towards queer people is now being ‘justified’. His sexuality shouldn’t have anything to do with it, though. There’s no need to write that he visited ‘gay clubs’, it’s enough to just say ‘clubs’, right? Apparently the government is gonna need help from the police to find people, because there are over a thousand people who are not picking up the phone when the tracers try to call them...which is really bad. But it’s because of all the homophobia, and I’m actually really shocked at the amount. It’s crazy how there are so many social consequences from this...biological...scientific...disease, if you know what I mean? It’s just a virus, it doesn’t belong to any specific social group or ethnicity or anything like that, but still...it has so many social consequences.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on the 10th of May 2020)

While it is not illegal to be queer or to be in a homosexual relationship in Korea, sexual minorities are still faced with widespread discrimination, prejudice, and social stigma. It is not unusual for queer people in Korea to keep their sexual orientation hidden in fear of harsh judgement and criticism, as being outed can have severe consequences for both your personal- and professional life (Ock 2020). So, even though the government tried their best to test, trace, and isolate the people that might have been in contact with the confirmed case(s), many people were scared to admit that they had visited the same establishments as patient 66. As Yoona had mentioned, a large number of people did not answer the contact tracers when they tried to reach out to them, to no surprise for “Jay Kim”, a 38 year old gay man who lives in Seoul. In an interview with Yonhap, Kim explains how it is “...highly likely that many of the people who went to the same clubs will choose not to be tested for the virus for fear of being outed, especially working people who fear workplace discrimination. There is already

stigma against gays in Korean society and the person went clubbing at such a critical moment (for containing the spread of COVID-19) as a country. It's just obvious that (the media are focusing on) the worst combination (gays and clubbing) to make LGBT people even more of a target of hatred" (Ock 2020).

After my interview with Yoona, I reached out to Lily to see if she would also be able to do another interview with me as soon as possible, given the recent events. A little while later, a KakaoTalk message popped up on my phone. "I'm sure you've heard...I'm contemplating a test, because I was in Itaewon that same weekend". We both concluded that it would be best for her to go get tested, and then we could do another interview after. Due to the hectic circumstances, we postponed our interview until the end of the week. When we finally met over Zoom again and I asked how the week had been, Lily laughed a little and said:

"Basically it was like a rollercoaster ride. Let me tell you...we all went to Itaewon at the wrong time. We had such bad timing. That weekend, with the Itaewon cases, I was at a café near Itaewon with a couple of friends, and we had never gone out together before, so we decided to go to a bar in Itaewon and grab a drink. That was the first time we had ever done that together, and I think it was their first time going out drinking in general. Such bad luck. My friend who works at another school outside of Seoul also went to Itaewon that weekend, on the same night as us, and she told me that her school made her go get tested, so I thought 'oh shoot, should I get a test?', but then this week my school asked our staff who had been to Itaewon, and all the foreign teachers sort of looked at each other and slowly raised their hands. At first, they said that it wasn't mandatory to go get tested because we hadn't been at the affected clubs that the guy had been to, but we had to sign a pledge that said we were taking the necessary precautions like washing our hands and wearing our masks, basically refraining to go anywhere without doing that. And now we have to tell our school everywhere we go. Everything we do, everywhere we go, and how many people are involved, we have this tentative weekly plan that we have to fill out. And then we have another form we have to fill out every day, talking about what we actually *did* do the day before. And we have to do this for the next two weeks. But not even 12 hours after they announced that, the academy was like 'hey, we all need to go get tested, because there are concerns amongst the parents, and we just want to make sure that nobody is infected'. And so I got tested yesterday."

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 15th of May 2020)

Lily was the first person I had spoken to who had actually gotten tested for COVID-19, so naturally I was curious about how it all went down. When I asked her how it was, she

explained that though taking the test was indeed uncomfortable, the whole process of going to get tested was worse, as she had to wait at the hospital for five hours. She explained:

“They could only take 10 people per hour, so we split up and went to different locations. For me personally, I got there at 10 in the morning, and didn’t get tested until 3. The process was simple though, you just had to show up with your ID, get registered, and then get the test and pay after. I’m not completely sure, but I want to say the test costs around 100 000 WON (approximately 90 dollars), maybe 70 000 if you had been in the Itaewon area, and then it was free for people who had been at the affected clubs and bars. All in all, the process was easy, it was just the waiting that was hard, standing in line for hours with social distancing and all. Oh, I should probably mention that the waiting and testing was done outside the hospital, they had built an area specifically dedicated to that. I really liked that, because I felt like it wouldn’t be safe if we were all cooped up in the hospital together. So yeah...I never thought I would have to get tested, honestly, unless I got sick. This last week has been so stressful...I was getting really anxious about taking the test, even though I didn’t feel sick, I started overthinking every little thing, a muscle ache here and a sneeze there, I was like ‘oh I’ve got it, I’ve got the virus, the academy is gonna sue me’, I was freaking out to be honest.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 15th of May 2020)

Lily (and the rest of the hagwon staff) ended up testing negative, and she told me later that she definitely felt like people had gotten too comfortable, herself included, which was why so many people had been to Itaewon, and why the cluster infection took place. She had seen more people outside without masks than before, but after the Itaewon incident she could tell that people were being more cautious again. She could also tell that people’s perception of foreigners seemed to have changed for the worse. When news of the Itaewon incident started spreading, there was a lot of confusion surrounding the ethnicity of patient 66, and expats in Seoul started experiencing more workplace discrimination. Since Itaewon is known as the foreigner district in Seoul, some people assumed that patient 66 was a foreigner simply because it was in Itaewon that the cluster infection had started. I myself had not found any info about his nationality or ethnicity at the time, so I did not want to jump to any conclusions. Lily told me that she had been hearing different stories, and that she was confused as well. She continued:

“Was he Korean or foreign? If he was Korean, how did he get it? Why are people pointing fingers at foreigners? Are we talking about the same guy? I kept asking myself these questions when people around me were discussing the incident. When I was talking to my friends we would go ‘wait I



thought he was foreign?', 'no, he was Korean', and 'I thought he was a foreigner...'. We're just confused about the story in general. I've noticed that foreigners have been getting looks, and people seem cautious around them now. It's not happening to me, since I'm Asian, but it's happening to a lot of my other foreign friends here in Seoul. I have friends who work at other academies where *only* the foreign staff members were told to go get tested, and I can't help but ask why they are the only ones getting tested? The stigma of Itaewon is definitely affecting them. There have even been rumours that the government wants to put more restrictions on foreigners now."

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 15th of May 2020)

After the Itaewon outbreak, rumours had been going around and spreading fast regarding infected hagwons, and Lily told me that apparently there was a foreign teacher at another hagwon that had gotten infected and unfortunately spread it to his students, causing parents of the children at Lily's hagwon to worry. "It happened to *that* foreigner, so it might as well have happened to *these* foreigners". She explained that she found out it was the parents that had demanded that the staff needed to get tested, and since her hagwon was a private establishment, the parents were the customers and it was therefore important to please their needs. While she understood their worry, she also wished that people would refrain from generalizing foreigners and "putting them all in the same box". She did not want them to be afraid of her and her friends simply for being foreigners.

The Itaewon outbreak can easily be compared to the Shincheonji outbreak, as both incidents show how stigma can be a dangerous social force in a pandemic context, hindering people from getting tested in fear of being judged, halting crucial safety measures. During my fieldwork I saw many cases of people dividing the world into "us" and the "them" on a global basis. It appears that for some, it is easier to look for someone to blame, than to discard the notion of blame and work together as a community in times of emergency. In Korea, fingers of blame were pointed at religious groups, queer people, and foreigners. So, though one could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic presents us with a challenge where the "enemy" (the coronavirus) might very well be inside us, and not somewhere outside, the fact of the matter is that some groups of people have been more targeted, stigmatized and discriminated against than others. It is as Brewis, Wutich and Mahdavi (2020) write in "Stigma, pandemics, and human biology: Looking back, looking forward"; stigma often elevates when a disease becomes associated with disempowered, marginalized, or socially devalued group (Brewis,

Wutich & Mahdavi 2020: 2). Therefore, while Benvenuto (2020) argues that during this pandemic “The basic signifying oppositions of our Schmittian being political animals – us versus them, me versus the other – collapse and we’re all equally dangerous, the gipsy is no more dangerous than my own daughter, racist categorizations lose all their mobilising charm at a stroke”, I unfortunately disagree. From what I have found, I would rather argue that forces of stigmatization and discrimination that previously appeared more masked, have been *unmasked* by this pandemic.

Speaking of masking and unmasking, I want to mention the third and last context where I found the forces of stigmatization at work in Korea during my fieldwork. And that was the stigma of *not* wearing a mask. When I asked my interlocutors how they felt those rare times when they saw maskless people outside, the disdain was clear. The answers ranged from “they make me feel unsafe” to “they’re being egoistic and disrespectful”. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, Lily had also told me that she would not dare to go outside without a mask on. If she did that, people would perceive her not only as a possible danger, but also as a generally bad person. That was not a signal she wanted to put out into the world.



Figure 10: the sticker Yoona found in a restaurant

When I started my research, I told all my interlocutors that they were very welcome to send me photos of COVID-19 related things that caught their attention, and one day in October I got a text message from Yoona saying she found a sticker she wanted to share with me. On it you could see two hands holding a white mask with what appears to be a happy family of four in a flowerfield on the inside, where the father points up to the text which reads “노마스크, 턱마스크는 폭력입니다”. The text translates to “no-mask, chin-mask is violence”, or in other words “not wearing a mask and wearing a mask on your chin is violence”. The message is clear. If you are not wearing a mask, or if you are wearing it incorrectly, you are being violent towards the rest of society. You might even be a danger to the happy family depicted on the sticker, who knows? Yoona said the message on the sticker was one of the most aggressive-sounding ones she had ever seen in public, and that she found it placed inside a restaurant of a department store. Though most times not as “aggressive”, she explained that Seoul was full of reminders to keep her mask on. Signs that say “To prevent the spread of coronavirus in our shop, if you are not wearing a mask, your entrance may be limited, for a safe environment please cooperate” can be seen all around the city, and in busses and subway stations you can find similar posters. Be reasonable, be responsible, be cautious, wear a mask.

## 5. The Mask

*Masks protect*

*They conceal*

*They hold back*

*Then they reveal*

*They identify*

*They distinguish*

*They may terrify*

*But may also save you future anguish*

(Waula Bablis 2020: 25-27)

### Masks in Korea

You can always expect to see some people wearing masks when you are out and about in Seoul. Do you have a cold? You can put on a mask. Do you want a warm face during winter? You can put on a mask. Do you not want to draw attention to your face? You can put on a mask. As one of my interlocutors Junho put it: "...a lot of Koreans have already worn masks for no special reason even before this pandemic. So it is quite natural for me to wear it, since I used to wear masks when I didn't have time to put on makeup, or when I just felt insecure". After news of the novel coronavirus started spreading globally at the beginning of 2020, it did not take long before the streets of Seoul were full of people sporting masks. In fact, when I started my fieldwork at the end of April, I thought mask-wearing had been made mandatory in Korea many months in advance, given the fact that it seemed like practically everybody was wearing them, and *had* been wearing them since the start of the pandemic. You can imagine my surprise when I on May 6th did my daily news article readings, only to find that Daegu just *then* had decided to require masks for anyone on public transportation, starting from May 13th. Seoul followed suit and announced that from the same date, commuters on the Seoul subway system would be required to wear masks as well (Suh & Ock 2020). Additionally, the Korean government did not decide to require all passengers on buses, taxis, subways and flights to wear masks until the 25th of May (Park 2020). And it was not until the near *end* of my fieldwork, on October 13th, that they implemented mandatory maskuse

requirements nationwide for people on mass transportation and in public places (The Korea Times 2020c). I was baffled, having been so certain that mask-wearing had been mandatory from the beginning. The truth was that it had only been recommended, and that proved to be enough for most people to accept it as a preventative necessity. Citizens even wore masks *before* it was recommended. It turns out, I was not the only one who was surprised by this. When I asked my interlocutors about the new mask rules that had been put into action in May, they answered that they had no idea that it had not already *been* mandatory. To them, these new rules made no difference, as they had already been living their lives with masks on as a given.

I am hardly the first anthropology student that has found masks highly intriguing. The various uses and meanings of masks is something anthropologists have studied for quite some time now (see for instance Lévi-Strauss 1982; Tonkin 1979; Pollock 1995; Massanari 2000; and Lynteris 2018). People all over the globe have worn masks for thousands of years, for various reasons like ceremonies, rituals, performances, entertainment, war, and medical protection. The latter is the mask-use that steals the spotlight nowadays due to the ongoing pandemic. Masks come in different shapes, sizes, colours and materials, some are big, some are small, some are meant to cover a whole face, while others are meant to cover only half. In many cultures around the world, masks have traditionally been imbued with symbolic meanings, and I would argue that in some ways, that goes for the face masks people are wearing now during this pandemic as well. They are more than mere apparatuses of disease prevention. Because a mask is rarely *just* a mask. They can both symbolize and signal something, and that “something” varies from culture to culture, depending on the context. Sometimes masks signal something negative (for instance warfare, bad air quality, or disease), other times they signal something positive (like celebrations or theatrical performances), and most times they are a signal of liminality. The ways in which people view and use masks can also change over time, and as Qiaoan (2020) fittingly words it: “The symbolic meaning of masks is neither historically and culturally fixed, nor simply restricted by the material means” (Qiaoan 2020: 337).

Now, compared to the masks typically studied by anthropologists previously, the sanitary masks that people in Korea are wearing at the moment are neither anthropomorphic,

theriomorphic, nor zoomorphic (Lynteris 2018: 448). Which means that they do not assume, configure or mirror the features of an entity or other being, something traditionally found in masked rituals. When I say “masked rituals” I am referring to rituals where the mask itself plays an integral part of a performance or ceremony. Masked ritual performances have a long history in Korean culture as well, and the origin story of the traditional Korean Hahoe mask known as tal (탈) dates back to the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). These kinds of masks were used for masked theatrical plays (talnori 탈놀이), masked dance performances (talchum 탈춤), and religious ceremonies. Similar to what has been reflected in ethnographic studies from other places in the world, the masks used in talnori and talchum gave the performers an opportunity to anonymously express their opinions and critiques of the people in power. The performers would use satire to criticize members of the yangban (the aristocracy) and the Buddhist monastic hierarchy, as well as mock stereotypes in the lower classes for pure fun and entertainment (Szczepanski 2020). The traditional Korean masks also tie back to shamanist practices that were meant to drive out illness, bad fortune and- or evil spirits out of a village or individual. Here, the shaman would put on the mask and dance to scare the demons causing the negative energies out and away.

To summarize, masks and masked rituals have been present in Korean culture for a long time, and have traditionally been used for satirical plays, dance performances, religious ceremonies, and shamanist practices. But then how do the current protective masks fit into all of this? It might be easy to assume that Koreans are just “natural mask-wearers”, and brush it off as something that has always been. But it has in fact not always been. So when *did* people in Korea start using those kinds of masks, and why? To understand that, we need to go back in time to when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule. In *The material lives of masks in Japan and South Korea* (2020), Korean historian Jaehwan Hyun and Japanese historian Tomohisa Sumida engage in an interesting conversation that highlights both the similarities and differences in the two countries’ history of masks. And as they focus on the kind of protective masks that I am curious about, their article serves as a good reference point. Sumida explains how masks did not start to become normalized in Japan until after the 1918-1919 flu pandemic, and at that time the Korean peninsula was under Japanese occupation (this colonial period lasted from 1910-1945). Hyun goes on to explain that Koreans were made to wear sanitary masks both during and following the pandemic, as part of the Japanese Empire’s quarantine regime. According to Hyun, this was the first time

Koreans had been advised to wear masks to protect against infectious diseases. After the pandemic and throughout the rest of the colonial period, both Korean and Japanese citizens started wearing masks against things like the seasonal flu and industrial dust. After Korea had become independent again in 1945, mask-wearing kept being promoted by both medical authorities and the government due to rising concerns around environmental issues, and in 1970 citizens of Seoul were given “pollution masks” by the city government to shield themselves against air pollution. However, Hyun stresses that even though that was the case, masks did *not* become a big part of everyday life in Korea at this point in time. It would in fact take several decades more.

In the 1990s, the government and medical professionals teamed up once again to encourage Koreans to wear masks for protection against pollen and toxic “yellow dust” (hwangsa 황사) that typically appears more heavily during Spring with heavy winds from China (Hyun & Sumida 2020). Fast forward to 2008, and the KFDA (Korea Food and Drug Administration) issues a guideline to quality-proof the masks that are being manufactured, and sets the new standard for “healthcare masks.” To assure the quality of the masks, manufacturers now have to go through strict testing, and only those that pass the criterias can go ahead and attach the official KF94 or KF80 label onto their masks (the KF stands for “Korea Filter”, and the number means that the mask filters out at least that percentage of micro dust). Domestic mask production gradually increased after the introduction of this new certification system, and resulted in masks becoming an “everyday artifact” that could easily be found and bought at local convenience stores, drugstores and supermarkets (Kim & Choi 2021: 44). So, Jaehwan Hyun maintains that even though it might seem like disposable masks have been a big part of everyday-life in Korea for a long time, it was in point of fact not until the late 2000s that Korean citizens *really* began wearing masks like these on a regular basis due to these rising concerns surrounding the risks of inhaling micro dust particles. Another phenomenon that took place in Korea in the late 2000s was the exploding popularization and globalization of K-pop and Korean entertainment through what has been named “The Korean Wave” or Hallyu (한류). The reason I bring this up is because I believe it has had an impact on mask-use in both Korea and other countries Hallyu has left a significant mark on, especially amongst the younger generations. Both Yoona, Lily, and Sara mentioned K-pop fashion trends as something that had made wearing masks more popular amongst K-pop fans

especially in East- and South-East Asia, and when I asked Yoona if she could elaborate, she explained:

“When K-pop culture started spreading, Korean idols would often wear masks to cover their faces at the airports when they would travel to have concerts in other countries and things like that. I think that’s when masks became a popular thing to use as a fashion statement, and people started buying masks simply because they thought they looked cool. The black masks celebrities wore, those became really popular. And as you probably already know since you’ve lived here, masks are also just popular in general because you can cover your face when you feel insecure. If you’re not wearing makeup, or if you’re really tired, or other things like that. That’s totally normal and acceptable here. When I lived abroad in China, I also saw that they sold and marketed “K-pop masks” at ARTBOX (a popular stationery shop), specifically black masks. So, all in all, I think masks have found their place in our culture due to both bad air quality and K-pop fashion trends. Those two things kind of merged, and then masks ended up becoming normalized. And now you can find masks everywhere in Korea.

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona the 15h of October 2020)

So, while I do believe Jaehwan Hyun’s argument that masks became normalized due to rising concerns about the health risks of breathing in fine dust rings true, I also believe it might be enlightening to take other factors into consideration. It appears there have been other forces at play as well, such as K-pop fashion trends, which may have resulted in masks becoming such a widely accepted “everyday artifact”. But let us return to the micro dust particles Hyun named the main reason for masks becoming normalized in Korean society. The fine dust particles (called misemonji 미세먼지 in Korean) was something that often came up during conversations when I lived in Seoul, and it was also the cause that spurred my first experience wearing a protective mask myself. Relatively soon after my arrival in Seoul in 2018 I was recommended by fellow students to download an app that shows the current air quality, and so I did.

The different air qualities had different color codes, green was good, yellow was moderate, orange was unhealthy for sensitive groups, red was unhealthy, purple was very unhealthy, and maroon was hazardous. Typically, you would see an increase of people wearing masks when the air pollution level was orange, but even more so when the level was red. I always knew the level was red when I could feel a dry itch at the back of my throat, and when walking up all the campus hills and staircases suddenly became more tiring. We were recommended to avoid going outside when the level was purple (and of course if it was maroon, as that meant



it was extremely dangerous to inhale), but if you *had* to go outside, you most definitely should be wearing a mask, and it should preferably be a KF94 one. That was the reasonable thing to do, if you wanted to protect yourself. Just like how wearing a mask during this pandemic has been the reasonable thing to do in Korea, if you want to protect others (in addition to yourself). And it is here I want to make a connection between the old traditional masks and the newer protective masks. Because even if these disposable protective masks may be “non-representational” as mentioned earlier, they are still, as medical anthropologist Christos Lynteris puts it: “...implicated, like masks studied by anthropologists, in the invocation, embodiment, and manipulation of a force: in this case, *reason*.” (Lynteris 2018: 448). In other words, the mask is not a passive piece of cloth. It is not a neutral material object. It is a statement piece. It “speaks” a voice of reason, so to say.

In “Plague Masks: The Visual Emergence of AntiEpidemic Personal Protection Equipment” (2018), Lynteris explains how the first “anti-plague” masks that emerged in the context of the Manchurian plague epidemic in 1910–1911 became an image of reason. The mask: “...was an apparatus that did not simply protect its wearers from infection. It also immersed them and their immediate social environment into a performance of medical reason and hygienic modernity” (Lynteris 2018: 449). I argue that the masks currently worn in Korea serve a similar symbolic purpose. The original anti-plague masks were designed to bring about change, a transformation if you will, not only in the individual wearing them, but additionally in the society accepting them and the principles of the masks as a whole. Looking at it this way, the masks that may look like mere apparatuses of disease prevention at first sight, are very much masks in the traditional anthropological sense, as they do not only block germs but also catalyze “a passage from one mode of being into another, from unreason to reason.” (Lynteris 2018: 451). Because although all my research participants agreed that wearing masks for long periods of time could be both frustrating and uncomfortable, especially in the summer heat, they also all agreed that it was the right thing to do. The reasonable thing to do. The safe thing to do, both for themselves and society as a whole. It was worth the possible discomfort. As Yoona herself told me:

“Since the start of this pandemic, masks have become more of a thing that protects others, more so than yourself, which differs from wearing a mask when the air quality is bad, or wearing a mask when you're feeling sick so that your throat feels better, which were some of the reasons why we

wore them before. It's not just a matter of you any more, it's also a matter of not infecting other people that could potentially die.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on the 15th of September)

Masks had quickly gone from being something that you wore primarily for yourself, to something you also wore for the sake of your surrounding community. Wearing a mask signaled that you cared, and that you were being careful. Because while masks carried stigma in many Western countries at the beginning of the pandemic, it was the exact opposite in Korea. I argue that instead of carrying stigma, masks in Korea carried a sort of social credit (or capital, as Bourdieu might have called it). One of the first things Yoona told me during our first interview on the 26th of April 2020, was that practically everybody wore masks in Seoul now, and that it was rare to see someone outside not wearing one. If you did not wear a mask, people would stare at you with judgement. Because not wearing a mask signaled that you were being unreasonable, selfish, and unsafe. At the time of my first conversation with Yoona, the Korean government had implemented a system for when citizens were allowed to buy masks at pharmacies, and how many they could buy per week. The mask price was set at 1,500 won (\$1.24), and at first the weekly limit was two masks per person, but over time the limit was raised to 10 masks per person. This mask rationing system was made due to worry over a possibly serious mask shortage, seeing as people had bought masks in bulk when the pandemic started. It was also put in place because mask prices had skyrocketed following the high demand in the early months of the pandemic. The way it worked was that based on your birth year, you had designated days to buy your masks on. Yoona further explained:

“I’ll bring my ID to the pharmacy when I go to buy my masks, and right now you can get up to two masks at a time. People were queuing up at first when this system started, but I haven’t seen any queues in a while. Also, you can check which pharmacies have masks on Naver Maps. Luckily we already had quite a lot of masks at home from before, because of pollution. I think that’s one of the reasons why we’re doing good in Korea when it comes to masks. There were already so many companies making masks because of pollution from before, so masks are very accessible. And while wearing masks is normal here, in other countries, masks are maybe associated with negative things like terrorism for instance. I’ve noticed how in the West, instead of being cautious and wearing masks, people are being cautious *of* people wearing masks. But here it’s just a means of prevention. When the pandemic started, I even saw that there were free masks in the buses for people to use if they didn’t have their own.”

(Interview with Yoona on April 26th)

That being said, Yoona emphasized that even though Koreans were generally “good at wearing masks”, and even though the country had managed considerably well without a comprehensive lockdown per se, that did not mean that Korean people are “robots” who just collectively follow the rules perfectly. She followed by explaining:

“I read comments online that said Koreans tackled corona without a lockdown *because* they are Korean and therefore know how to follow the rules...it’s really not as simple as that. People do weird stuff everywhere, also in Korea, like the people from Shincheonji that tried to hide their roots and connections to the cult for example, and in general people that are hiding stuff from the government to avoid being tracked. Like in every country, there is diversity, and of course there are flaws in the system. But generally speaking, I feel like Korean people want their freedom. We want to be able to live our lives as normally as possible. So if that means wearing masks all the time, then we’ll do that.”

(Interview with Yoona on April 26th)

Speaking of freedom, this proves to be a perfect opportunity to take a little detour to “the land of the free”. During my interviews with Lily, who is Asian-American, she often ended up comparing the situation in Korea with the situation in the US. One of the topics we often discussed was precisely the issue of mask-wearing. When the pandemic started, Lily found it only natural to wear a mask when she was out and about in Seattle, as this was something she had gotten used to since she had previously studied abroad in Korea. It was no big deal, she had worn masks many times before. But even though wearing a mask felt like the safest choice for her, she soon noticed that others perceived her mask-wearing as quite the opposite of safe. In the US, masks did not carry positive social credit the way they did in Korea. On her, it became a signifier for something dangerous, and not a means of protection and prevention. This became clear when Lily visited a library in Seattle to copy some documents before moving back to Korea. She was the only one she could see that wore a mask there, and she noticed that people were staring at her. When she was done using the copy machine, a lady approached her and exclaimed: “Are you sick?”. Even though Lily assured her that she was not, the lady still seemed scared to use the copy machine after her. When I asked Lily why she thought that was, she said: “I don’t think it helped that I’m Asian...you know? I wanted to tell her that if there’s anyone you’re safe with in here, it’s me! I’m the only one wearing a mask, after all!”.

Lily was genuinely worried about possibly facing racism towards herself and her family when she eventually moves back to the States at some point. “We can recover from this pandemic, we can get out of it, but we can't escape being racially stigmatized. People will always associate corona with Asian people, and I'm afraid of the consequences of that”. She also stressed that she wished people would “get on the same page” about the virus, and realize that masks obviously help. Looking at the situation in the US, she saw the need for masks to be normalized. Since the start of the pandemic there had been protests against mask mandates in several American cities, and Lily could feel the anti-mask sentiment brewing in more ways than one before she moved to Korea at the end of March 2020. Another example of this was when she had an appointment at a hospital in Seattle, and she arrived there wearing a mask, only to be told to take it off, and that “they don't even do anything anyway”. The fact that it was hospital staff that told her that, left Lily both surprised and disappointed. She told me:

“You would think that people working at a hospital would be more informed, you know? It was really frustrating. In addition to being told that masks don't do anything, I was also told that the only ones who were allowed to wear masks at the hospital I went to were sick patients. Not even the healthcare workers got to wear them. But there's a lot of misinformation about masks going around, and it's also different from state to state. I have a friend in Iowa who told me that everybody has to wear a mask at hospitals there. So, it seems like it is up to each state to decide. And things have probably changed in Washington state now as well, but that was at least my experience going to a US hospital in early March. Comparing that to the situation in Korea at the time, I really feel like the US's response was too delayed, and I think it comes from a place of privilege. Like ‘oh, it's only happening to *them* over *there*, it won't happen to *us*'. And then when the pandemic really started hitting hard, the sort of ‘land of the free’ mentality, the ‘I can do what I want’ kind of mindset really didn't help, and is still not helping.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 28th of April 2020)

It is interesting to consider the different connections people are making between masks and freedom when comparing the stories Yoon and Lily told me. In the US, Lily saw how people viewed mask-wearing as something that took their freedom *away*, while Yoon's experiences in Korea told a different story. A story where wearing masks was something that gave you *more* freedom, or at least did not take any freedom away from you. Rather, people would wear masks so they could be *more* free to move around as they wanted to.

In societies where masks are normalized, they can simply be seen as a risk-regulating tool. But in societies where masks are *not* normalized, masks can also be seen as carriers of risk and threat, especially in times of emergency and confusion. Attached to humans, masks can carry stigma of potential sickness, as this pandemic certainly has made obvious. Lily shared with me that when the pandemic started, she honestly expected that many people in the US were going to look at her weird for wearing a mask at first, but that they *too* were going to wear masks before they even knew it. And for a lot of people, it was in fact just a matter of time. I will return to this point in the upcoming section called The Changing of Habit(u)s.

## **Masked Daily Life**

Masks were always a topic that popped up when talking with my interlocutors, and they seemed more and more horrified each time I had to tell them that “no, masks are still not recommended here in Norway yet...”. Masks did not become recommended by the Norwegian government for public use until the 14th of August 2020, and even then it was just recommended for use on public transport when the traveler could not maintain a one meter distance, and only in the capital city and surrounding areas. At that point in time Norway had registered approximately ~10 000 cases of COVID-19, and Korea had registered about ~14 900 (Worldometer 2021). This is quite a small difference, given the large difference in our populations. In Norway, there are some 5.3 million people. In Korea, there are about 51.7 million. Fast forward to November 13th 2020, and Korea has 28,133 confirmed cases of COVID-19, while Norway has 27,485. Looking at it this way, Korea was clearly doing something that worked in terms of containing contagion.

My largely maskless life in Norway was such a different reality from the one my interlocutors were living in, a reality where you are reminded to wear a mask everywhere you look (for instance on bus stops, busses, commercials, TV, posters, shops, and in text alerts from the government). “The mask is pretty much sewed to my face”, Lily told me one day in July. “Masks are so normal in Korea right now that when you see people *without* a mask that’s more shocking.” Seeing how masks had become such a significant part of my interlocutors’

and research participants' daily lives, I could not help but wonder about the specificities. What did their daily mask routines (or rituals, if you will) look like? How did they feel about the masks, and what did wearing a mask entail for them, both in terms of the negative and the positive?

Through the interviews, and videos made by my research participants on the topic of their “masked” daily lives, I got some valuable answers to those questions. In June 2020, Kyuho and Sarah shared that they usually wore thick KF94 masks when they knew they would be in close proximity to other people, for instance on the subway. When that was not the case, they would opt for a KF80 mask, which filters a bit less, but is easier to breathe through. During the warm summer months, they had noticed that more and more people started using surgical masks. Sarah stressed that though the surgical masks are nowhere near as effective as the KF80 and KF94 masks in terms of filtering what you breathe *in*, they still work to protect others if the person wearing the mask happens to be infected, as it blocks droplets from spreading *out*. Kyuho and Sarah also both agreed that going outside without a mask on felt “unacceptable”, and that they would feel “naked” and “vulnerable”, like something was missing. Agreeing with Yoona and Lily, they also said people would give you looks of judgement if you were not wearing a mask.

In July 2020, Sara shared that the only places she saw people without masks in Seoul were in quiet suburbs, and in cafés and restaurants where people were eating. She also explained that her favorite mask to wear was a reusable one, the kind where you can change the filters inside instead of throwing the whole mask away. The only downfall was that during the summer months, a mask like that quickly became “stuffy”. Another favorite was a KF94 mask with a one-way valve attached, making it more “breathable” than the reusable mask. For the warmer summer months, she opted for a thinner version of a KF94 mask for a more comfortable fit.

When it came to the issue of comfort, Junho shared that he personally had no problems wearing a mask, and that he thought it was completely fine since he was very used to wearing them from pre-pandemic. Taemin also told me that while he had initially thought that extensive mask-wearing would prove to be a big challenge, he ended up getting used to it faster than he thought he would. It was not as uncomfortable as he had first imagined. He explained: “We can get used to new situations easier than we expected”. During my last interview with Yoona, she told me that if you go to the subway stations in Seoul now, there

are pandemic related accessories everywhere. One of these accessories that have become widely popular is the “mask-necklace”. Simply put, the “necklace” is a string you can attach to your mask, so that when you are not wearing the mask on your face, it hangs around your neck. The strings can be found in any color, and are often bejeweled, making them more fashionable. Yoona told me that she appreciates how Korea tries to make wearing masks more fun, and that the mask-necklaces might help people feel more excited about wearing them. She also found the necklace really practical for when she was eating, and expressed how she wished it would have been invented earlier in the pandemic. However, comfort-wise, she had now noticed that people were getting headaches because of excessive mask-wearing, and she admitted that she herself had started to view masks as an obstacle.

“Before, I didn’t hate masks, but now...I just don’t want to wear them. It’s a pilsutem (필수템, a combination of the Korean word “pilsu” which means “essential” and the English word “item”, slang for must-have), of course, but at the same time it’s suffocating. ‘Maskne’ (mask acne, acne outbreaks caused by wearing a mask) has also become a big problem. I would say that before, masks weren’t viewed as a suffocating thing here in Korea, but now they are. We are at level 1.0 now, which is a big deal, but cases have started going up a bit, so I think we’ll go back to level 2 again soon.

People are still wearing masks as much as always, of course. And I would feel shameful and stigmatized if I went outside without one, not to mention that I would be limited from so many places.

But yeah...the general feeling right now is that everybody is just so sick of corona.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on the 15th of October 2020)



Figure 11: Yoona’s KF94 mask necklace

Because of the mask rationing system that had lasted from early March to early July, both Yoona and Lily told me that from what they could tell, people wore their masks for 2 to 3 days so as to not waste them, washing them in between uses. As for Lily, a big part of her daily life with masks revolved around her experiences working as a teacher at a hagwon, where she had to have a mask on throughout the whole workday. Her hagwon had implemented safety measures already in early January 2020, and everyone (both teachers and children) has to wear a mask from the moment they arrive until the end of the day (excluding during lunch), and are also asked to bring extra masks just in case. When we first started our interviews, her hagwon was one of the few in Seoul that had not “gone online”, so all the education happened in the classrooms like before, but with certain safety measures implemented. All the kids’ desks were further apart from each other and on opposite sides of the room, and during lunch they would put up protective plastic screens on the desks to separate the children. Every day when Lily arrived at work, she had to get her temperature taken and log her symptoms, if she had any. During the school day, teachers would also enter the classrooms to take both the kids’ temperature and their own temperature once again. In addition to this, they washed their hands often, and used hand sanitizer regularly.

From mid-August until September 2020, Korea saw a huge surge in COVID-19 cases in the greater Seoul area, many of them connected to a massive anti-government rally in downtown Seoul held on August 15th, where conservative religious groups protested against President Moon, and the Seoul city government’s decision to ban large gatherings (Choe 2020, The Korea Herald 2020c). On August 30th, the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters (CDSCHQ) increased the social distancing level to 2.5, which according to Yoona was a “stricter lockdown than in the beginning” and “the most ‘quarantine’ Seoul had been” since the start of the pandemic. Consequently, Lily’s hagwon ended up “going online” for two weeks. She told me: “When I heard we were going online I had mixed feelings, because I was afraid it would be difficult for the kids to adapt to that...but then again most of the kids went the whole semester without seeing my face, so I was excited to finally let them see me properly, you know?”. But to her surprise, she still had to wear a mask. During the two online weeks, she taught all her classes in the hagwon classroom like before, with a mask on, except through a computer. She concluded that even though it was a bit discouraging, her hagwon had probably decided that teachers needed to keep their masks on to make the situation more familiar, given the fact that the students were used to seeing them like that. They were also aware that the childrens’ parents would most likely be watching and paying



newfound attention to the digital classes. Interestingly enough, mask-wearing was in this case suddenly not about germs and possibly contaminating droplets any longer. As a teacher, Lily had an image to uphold. A couple months earlier, Lily had expressed:

“I just realized that my kids don’t know me without a mask. And I don’t know them without a mask either! I don’t think any of them would recognize me if I walk past them on the street without a mask on, and I honestly don’t think I’d recognize any of them either. Sometimes when I see a student’s face during lunch I get surprised and I think to myself ‘that’s what you look like?!’. It’s crazy to think about how the pandemic has changed things like that.”

(Excerpt from an interview with Lily on the 3rd of June 2020)

Lily’s masked daily life had also presented her with a challenge of dehydration. She shared that when she is at work, she often forgets to drink water throughout the day because she always has her mask on. In addition to this, she is also scared that if she *does* take off her mask for a moment to drink, her students (being children aged 6 to 7) might go home and tell their parents that “our teacher took off her mask!”. Apparently that had happened with other teachers at the hagwon, so Lily was hesitant to even adjust her mask in front of the children. As a cause of this, she told me that she is usually super dehydrated, and that she often cannot drink properly until she is back home in her apartment in the evening. Even though Lily was all for wearing masks as a precaution, she still recognized that it did present some challenges and discomforts. Wearing a mask was not *just* positive or *just* negative, it was a mixture of the two. It was a “necessary evil” that she agreed with and had gotten used to.

On the 15th of August (coincidentally on the same date as the conservative anti-government rally mentioned earlier) Yoona happened to be invited to a wedding where she was going to sing. She had been part of an acapella group for several years, and was used to singing in front of people, but she had never imagined that she one day would be performing for a completely masked crowd, or that she would witness a ‘masked wedding’. She wanted to tell me about it, because she felt like it had given her some insight into what a big life event like a wedding could look like in the middle of a pandemic. She explained:

“When I was up on the stage getting ready to sing, I turned around and noticed how the crowd was just a big mass of masked people. Everyone was wearing a mask, and I couldn’t help but feel that

it looked like an apocalypse. I mean...just picture a big crowd of masked people staring at you. It really felt like a movie, and it was almost intimidating? I couldn't even see their faces, you know? Usually when you perform for an audience you can look at their faces to see if they're enjoying it, but you can't do that when they're wearing a mask. When I was standing there singing, I thought to myself 'wow, the world has changed a lot' ...".

(Excerpt from an interview with Yoona on the 15th of October)

And the world *has* changed a lot. There have been a multitude of big changes, and a multitude of small changes. Both Yoona and Lily messaged me when they noticed a change in the buses in Seoul. When you enter a bus in Seoul, most people register their entrance by scanning their transportation card (it is rare to pay by cash, though it does happen at times, of course). You can buy a separate transportation card (called a T-Money card), but usually Korean debit- and credit cards come with the transportation card feature already in them (something that made contact tracing easier for the Korean government, as they could clearly trace which vehicles infected citizens had been on). Normally, when you tap your card to the scanner in the bus, a voice says that your entrance has been registered, and the display shows you how much money you have left on your card. What Yoona and Lily told me, was that now when they scanned their card, there was a message saying "please wear a mask!". When I asked them if they had any other pandemic related experiences on public transport, Lily told me that when she was taking the bus one day, she witnessed a bus driver personally telling a woman who was wearing a "jawsk" (a mask worn down on your jaw/chin) to please put it on properly, and he would not drive until she did. "He was sort of yelling at her 'Agassi! Agassi!' (Miss! Miss!), until she put her mask on. So some bus drivers will directly ask you



Figure 12: poster that tells bus travellers to wear their masks and follow the rules accordingly

to wear a mask, and I also saw a bus driver give a man a mask to wear when he said he didn't have one".

What happens then, if you refuse to wear a mask on public transport in Korea? Well, at the end of August, Yoona shared that there had been a serious physical fight on a busy subway line in Seoul. What had happened was that a maskless man in his 50s ended up attacking two other passengers who had asked him to put on a mask, hitting one of them in the face with his slipper and trying to strangle the other one. At the end of July 2020, it was announced that Seoul's official subway app would add a feature that allowed people to report unmasked passengers, as similar clashes (both verbal and physical) had happened previously as well, not only on the subway but also on city busses (Song 2020). From May 26 until the 28th of August 2020, a total of 349 people had been arrested due to mask-related conflicts (The Korea Times 2020b). So, as Yoona had earlier established, simply being Korean does not equal "following the rules perfectly". Koreans, like all other human beings, are different and will act differently. That goes without saying, but here I am saying it anyway. Quoting Yoona once again; "People do weird stuff everywhere, also in Korea."

In the context of COVID-19, Runya Qiaoan argues that while hand-washing signals "business as usual", face masks signal a liminal stage of social life, something that is more out of the ordinary, and something that more explicitly reflects a state of emergency (Qiaoan 2020: 336). But maybe this distinction does not feel as "extraordinary" in Korea, simply because they were used to wearing masks from before? There, for most people, masks *are* "business as usual". Because even if it was a significant change for people in Korea to go from wearing masks every now and then to wearing them nearly all the time, the concept of wearing masks itself was not unfamiliar. It was not something out of the ordinary, per se, making it easier to adapt to. Still, it presents challenges, as my interlocutors have expressed. But no challenges they are not willing to go through, for the sake of everyone's safety. For the sake of reason.

## Mask Discourse

Throughout my research, I noticed a stark difference in the way Korean and Norwegian government officials talked about masks, and I could not help but think to myself; the language we use matters. Words matter. “It is *very* difficult to wear a mask properly”. On the 7th of August 2020, those were the exact words of Bent Høie spoken on national television. Høie is the Norwegian Minister of Health and Care Services, and for most Norwegian citizens, he has been the “face” of this pandemic, providing us with news and updates regarding the virus and the rules and measures relevant for Norway. This was not the first time I had heard Norwegian public figures, officials and politicians say something of that nature, but it surprised me nonetheless. I could not even imagine a Korean government health official saying anything like that, and when I told my interlocutors about it, their jaws quite literally dropped. While I do not believe that Høie meant any harm with that statement, that does not mean that it did not *do* any harm. After all, words do matter. Especially spoken from powerful public figures, as Trump had proved in the US with his statements about “the China virus”.

In Korea, I had not read or heard a single negative word uttered by government officials on the topic of wearing a mask properly. It was not a challenge, it was not “*very* difficult”, it was just necessary. It was a given. And these sentiments were reflected in the Korean public as well. Not once did I witness anyone saying that wearing a mask properly was hard. What I *did* hear, as mentioned earlier, was that wearing masks for an extensive period of time could be challenging in terms of comfort. It could be unpleasantly hot and stuffy, and it could in worst case scenarios give people headaches and acne breakouts. But nonetheless, despite those negatives, people were generally on the same page about masks. They were necessary, they were reasonable, and they were helpful. The positive words easily outweighed the negative ones. Although somewhat annoying, masks were, as Yoona maintained; a pilsutem (필수템). An essential item. A must-have.

## The Changing of Habit(u)s

The way we move in the world, the way we dress, and the way we view and use our bodies can change. Ways of living can change. Habits can change. And habits *have* changed since the beginning of this pandemic. When the pandemic started, I found myself envious of how mask-use was normalized in Korea, often wishing that was the case here in Norway as well. And after about 6 months, things started changing. From mid August 2020 and forward, after the Norwegian government announced that they recommended using masks on public transport, I saw a gradual increase in mask-wearers here in Oslo where I live. I remember feeling a sense of relief. Finally, I could tell my interlocutors that yes, masks are recommended here now, and people have started wearing them. I remember Lily saying “that’s good... but isn’t that a bit late?”. I could only laugh and answer that yes, it was a bit late, considering that the pandemic had been announced 6 months prior, and especially compared to how early Korean citizens started wearing them. But better late than never.

On September 21st, stricter measures were implemented following a surge in cases, and the following day I noticed how practically everybody on the tram next to my house were wearing masks. I wrote it down on my phone, as I had never seen that many people wearing masks on public transport in Norway before. My notes said something along the lines of: “the changing of habitus”, “we just had to get used to the thought of wearing masks?”, “the stigma disappears with time?”, and last but not least “so we *can* wear masks!”. On October 5th 2020, I sat on a train outside Oslo where as far as I could tell, everybody had a mask on. Once again, I wrote a note on my phone. It read: “it seems like people have really started getting used to this new daily life”, a daily life where protective masks were visibly present.

As far as I can tell, we had little to no culture here in Norway for wearing masks previously. But because of the pandemic, protective masks have now become normalized. Not to the extent that it is normalized in Korea, but enough for me to be able to wear one without getting judgemental or questioning looks. From an anthropological perspective, this pandemic can help us rethink not only the practical functions of face masks, but also how masks and the ideas associated with them can, and will, change overtime (Eli 2020: 749). I saw this happen here in Norway, and in part, I saw how masks went from being something that primarily protected yourself to something that mostly protected others in Korea.

Who knows how the mask will be present in Norway after the end of this pandemic. Maybe Norwegian citizens will start using them when they are sick, or when they travel. Maybe it will be normal to see people in masks during the annual flu season, because they have figured that it is indeed quite nice to avoid getting infected. Or, maybe they will stop using masks altogether, wanting to forget about this uncertain and anxiety-inducing time of liminality. For Korea, it took nearly a hundred years before the protective mask became the everyday-artifact that it is today. The gradual normalization of wearing medical protective masks in East Asia started with a pandemic before. Maybe a similar process of normalization has started with a pandemic again, but this time in the West.

## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored how the Korean government and public dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and how it has been for a selection of young adults in Seoul and Daegu to live through this historic moment. I have looked at the strategies Korea has used (and are still using) to contain the coronavirus contagion, and how these tactics have had an impact on the relationship between citizen and state within the country in terms of trust. I have found that the Korean government's transparency has made a majority of citizens trust the state more, which in turn makes testing and tracing an easier task because citizens are more than willing to be tested and traced. However, it also became clear that for already stigmatized social groups and communities within the country, the government's transparency proved a frightening challenge due to the risks of getting their personal info leaked. Speaking of the leaking of info and potential privacy breaches, I have also looked at the reasons behind the international critiques of the Korean government and the Korean people's way of dealing with the virus. I did this by focusing on strategies of containing contagion, and the debate on contact tracing versus surveillance. I discovered that tracing seems less like surveillance when you trust the ones that are watching.

Additionally, I have explored how the forces of stigmatization and blame have been present and have shaped the pandemic experience, looking at the Shincheonji outbreak, the Itaewon outbreak, and the stigma of *not* wearing masks. I conclude that stigma and processes of "othering" pose serious health hazards during states of emergency and exception, and that discriminatory forces of the like do nothing but make the challenge of a pandemic even worse. Through my research, I have seen how forces of stigmatization and discrimination that previously appeared somewhat more "masked", have now been *unmasked*. Lastly, I have dived into the how's and why's of mask-use in Korea, looking at their mask-culture and history of masks. I have put ethnographic focus on my interlocutors' "masked" daily lives, looking at how they use and think about masks. I have concluded that in Korea, the face mask is more than a mere apparatus of disease prevention. It is imbued with social credit, and serves as both a symbol of medical modernity and a force of *reason*. In Korea, masks are not silent and neutral pieces of cloth. Masks carry politics, and they are loud statement pieces that

signal several messages about the wearer to the surrounding community. They signal that the wearer is reasonable, that they care, and that they are being careful. The mask wearer reflects the image of an "ideal Korean subject". Which means that during this pandemic, a maskless person in Korea is prone to harsh criticism. Lastly, as I have witnessed my own country go through a huge transformation in terms of mask use, I have compared the mask discourse here in Norway with the mask discourse in Korea. Looking at how face masks went from being stigmatized to normalized in Norway, I end this thesis by concluding that the symbolic meanings of masks are neither culturally nor historically fixed, and that they can always be subject to change.



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