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### **In Order to Stay Connected to the World: As a Korean Diaspora Researcher**



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It has been seven years since I came to Japan from Korea. I lived in Kyoto until I got my Ph.D. last fall, then this spring I moved to Ibaraki City in Osaka, where OIC (Osaka Ibaraki Campus of Ritsumeikan University) is located. I was employed as a special researcher by the Japan Society for the Promotion

of Science and became a project researcher at Ritsumeikan University.

However, soon after the move, the situation caused by the new Coronavirus became serious, and in April, we were asked to not even go to university. I had just moved to a new place, so I was perplexed for a while. However, when I thought about it, I realized it was quite normal to be perplexed in a new place. I have been living in various places other than my own country, so wherever I am, I must feel a gap between my own identity and the environments surrounding me.

I am doing research on Korean diaspora communities scattered around the world. To be more specific, I have been engaged with a study of those who are usually called “Koryo Saram” in Kazakhstan, a Central Asian country. By the description “Korean diaspora researcher” in the title, I mean “a person who studies the Korean diasporas”. However, after I wrote it, I realized that it could also mean “a researcher who belongs to Korean diaspora”, because I myself have been living in Japan and I am planning to stay in Japan in the future.

It is natural for both diaspora persons and foreign students to wish to keep in touch with people who are like themselves. Perhaps, all people like to be in contact with people like themselves in the first place. I am also in contact on a daily basis with Koreans in Kazakhstan, the United States, and other countries. I often exchange information and opinions with them about the situation caused by the new Corona pandemic. I want to know how they are living under the present Corona crisis.

At the time of the temporary collapse of Korea's collective immune system, Koreans around the world felt their lives were in danger just because they were Korean. The members of the ethnic Korean community of Kazakhstan realized that when

walking down the street, passers-by would notice that they were Korean and would stare at them as they passed. American Koreans have stopped going out for fear of being targets of violence. A Korean in Chile, South America, told me that the psychological pressures were so tense, even when there was no actual damage, that occasional outings to buy groceries made them nervous, and they paid careful attention to the atmosphere around them. I heard that Koreans in Japan also became nervous about being noticed so they would hide the masks and tissues they bought on their way home. A Korean in Taiwan told me that the Taiwanese government's initial measures were very effective and allowed him to lead a normal life just like he used to, and yet he never can reveal that he is a Korean.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of problems for diaspora Koreans around the world. When news of the Corona outbreak spread in South Korea, after China, they all became very concerned, and they were finally able to feel relieved when the outbreak in South Korea had subsided to a great extent. It was the same for me.

However, all of my Korean diaspora friends are researchers and experts in their fields of specialties. That means, no matter where we live or what we do, we have to continue with our daily work. Our responsibility to our research was not changed by Coronavirus and will not change even after it ends. Whether we are Koreans or other diasporas, researchers, or other experts, we must continue to live our lives and fulfill our responsibilities.

In this Corona situation, my Korean Diaspora friends did their best in their own ways in each place to adapt to a completely different and unfamiliar situation. My friend in Kazakhstan has reported that he prepares online classes, unfamiliar to him until now, and continues to correct

assignments by e-mailing to students who cannot attend classes online because of poor online access (Kazakhstan doesn't have as good internet facilities as Japan). My friend in the United States said that a shift to telecommuting could effectively mean 24 hours of work, and while she suffered from fatigue, she was more engaged than anyone else in her assigned job. A friend of mine in Japan says this is a good opportunity for her to work on her thesis. My friend in Chile said that administrative processing, which is difficult to deal with because of cultural differences, is more efficient when conducted online because it allows people to prioritize work without cultural friction, although it takes more time than face to face dealings.

Their daily lives had changed so much, and yet they were doing their best in their place every day. Listening to them, I felt that their power to adapt to their new daily lives had empowered me before I knew it, and I suddenly realized that this power could be a source that helps me to stay connected with Koreans, Korean diasporas, and the world..

As a member of the Korean diaspora living in today's Japan, I want to establish myself as a Korean diaspora researcher who continues to be connected with you, my colleagues, and the world.

**Postscript** (Added November 19, 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began earlier this year, and the consequent changes in the living conditions of my fellow researchers and contacts in the field are already becoming prolonged. Now that November is passing, what changes will there be for them? I asked them again.

My Korean friend in Chile told me that the number of confirmed cases had dropped somewhat since June, and more people are now said to be moving around. Concerns about the re-proliferation still linger, but the overall atmosphere is said to be regaining vitality. Universities are gradually resuming face-to-face classes, focusing on departments that require practical skills, experiments, and practice. However, other classes are encouraged online, and sometimes large-scale events are held on Zoom. He stressed there were problems with remote teaching, ties between students and professors could weaken, students' concentration and participation in classes were poor, and they could suddenly be cut off due to network instability.

My contacts in the United States tell me that lectures have mostly returned face-to-face style. However, if there is a personal situation, for example, if the student is a corona patient or a contact person, the student is allowed to take the course online. Everyone must pass through a screening checkpoint and obtain permission before entering the campus. Also, the basic rules are to wear masks, disinfect hands, measure body temperature, and maintain social distancing. In addition, classrooms cannot be more than 40% occupied, and in principle, there is a one-way traffic rule on campus, and only the designated entrance and exit can be used. Also, it is a rule to strictly observe the hours of campus use. The administration of

universities is mainly based on home-based working, but optionally face-to-face meetings are also held. There have also been changes in the academic system, such as eliminating spring vacation, fearing that the number of confirmed students will increase if they meet again after being dispersed. Events such as graduation ceremonies are being conducted online.

In Kazakhstan, according to my Korean colleagues there, the main framework of online lectures has not changed, but methods and systems are becoming increasingly organized. It is also said that programs to evaluate the quality of the instructor's classes are evolving. However, the quality of classes is lower than face-to-face, and students' participation and understanding are also cited as problems. In particular, the foreign language department said that the system of allowing third-year students to go to the country of their major languages was completely suspended, putting a brake on the improvement of students' skills.

In Korea, their problems and demands for improvement were similar to those of other countries. In summary, the lack of communication between students and professors, the students' lack of concentration in classes, the inconvenience of sudden disconnection in the unstable network environment, and students' low satisfaction and learning problems were not much different from anywhere else.

As the COVID-19 has been prolonged and social contact reduced, all my Korean friends remarked that problems such as Asian discrimination, which have been heard everywhere, are no longer special or increasing. However, they said in unison that they seem to have become more conscious of working together to overcome the situation they are in right now rather than the challenges of nationality or ethnicity. Now that this is

not just a matter of one place, there seems to be a sense of solidarity to overcome it together by thoroughly abiding by personal rules.

In my case of living in Japan, I am freer to go to university than before, but most of my activities still have to be done online. Until now, it has been most important to be fully familiar with the online environment when “no one” knows when face-to-face contact will be possible again. It is also important to study ways to compensate for the shortcomings that arise in the online environment. From next year I will start teaching at the university. In a situation when I’m not sure whether I’ll be able to face the students directly or online I think the best approach is to be fully prepared in any given environment. Also, I think continuous interaction with other Koreans in the world who are doing their best in their respective positions and are working hard every day is one way to connect with the world as a Korean diaspora researcher.

### Author's Profile

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