

Hanging Tough in the Age of the COVID-19 Virus

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It was just about twenty years ago that I settled down in South Korea. It's been a great ride with many ups and downs. For a while there, the threat of an invasion from the dear brothers in the north was the biggest existential threat we faced. When tensions were at their height, lots of folks, both Koreans and outlanders, asked me what my plans were. Will you go back to your country if war erupts? I always answered absolutely not. I'll live and die with the Korean people. I had some half joking fantasy of going up into the nearby mountains and fighting a vicious rear guard action.

Nowadays expats are again discussing the pros and cons of bugging out. It's not an invasion from the north this time, it's from the invasion of the COVID-19 virus. Last Monday folks were taking bets on when the infection rate would top 1,000. I figured the land mark would be reached by this weekend. Today, Friday morning, it was announced that South Korea has hit the 2,000 infected folks mark.

I was here during both the SARS and MERES outbreaks and don't recall almost anything about the fight against those diseases. Not possible today. I get four or five updates a day on my smartphone accompanied by a jarring tone and the words EMERGENCY ALERT. The number of new patients nation wide, in Seoul, and even in neighborhoods is announced. In addition there are specific locations where suspected carriers have been and touched things like elevator buttons. Every news cast leads with and follows up with details on the only real story in Korea. I wake up with it, follow it all day long, and go to sleep with it.

Is it too much? Sometimes I think so. If you or a loved one were to contract this virus it would be a catastrophe. But let's be honest, you probably aren't going to die from it. So far, the few unfortunate folks who have died were mostly elderly and those with pre-existing conditions. This is not the plague. This is not going to de-populate Korea or the world. That being said, governments are obligated to take every reasonable measure to slow down the spread of this thing. The current administration here has come under fire from opponents for dropping the ball. Probably this is just a convenient excuse to take a wack at a political enemy. Seems to me the government is doing the best it can in a complicated and quickly changing situation.

The economic impact of past plagues have altered the course of history more than once. It is my worry that the economic and social impact of this virus will be greater than the disease itself. It's hard to say how great the impact will be but I've never seen a grimmer outlook for South Korea than I see today. Schools, private institutes, shops, restaurants, coffee shops, bath houses, libraries factories, even some hospitals are either closed or empty. It's noon time now and this normally bustling coffee shop has me and two other

customers. The tourist and airline industries are in for a major downturn.

As for myself, I'm on an unavoidable corona vacation. All my work as an English teacher has come to a screeching halt. The impact on my bottom line is real and potentially devastating. I'm not sure how I'm going to survive. I imagine other folks who are freelancers or run a small business are in similar dire straits. Big companies and whole industries can delay but not entirely sidestep this. The health care folks are under the biggest strain. If the spread continues at this break neck speed, the over worked care givers will be overwhelmed.

They tell me to "just stay home." How do I just stay home? It's not in me. For most of a month I tried to stay home. There is three of us; my wife, a cat, and me. I put the cat on mandatory lock down because she won't wear a mask. I go to the gym and the ladies there scolded me because I wasn't wearing a mask while working out.

As an Honorary Ambassador of Hanam City the mayor requested that we make a video to cheer up the health care workers here. Here is my message to them;

Hello everybody, are you wearing your masks and washing your hands often? Good!

When I first heard of the corona virus I Couldn't help thinking of the popular beer from Mexico called Corona. I asked a doctor friend of mine why they named the virus after a beer. He told me that corona in Latin means crown. The virus under a microscope appears like a crown. Bottom line is that its still ok to drink Corona beer with a wedge of lime.

The front line of this public health crisis are the health care workers who are working overtime to help citizens maintain their health. All the while, these workers are under lots of stress because of the increased chance they might contract the virus while treating others.

Times are tough as patients and their families, our citizens, and shop owners work to overcome this crisis.

A great man once said in the middle of the 1930's Great Depression;

"We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The un-sung heroes of these times are our health care workers. We owe them a debt of gratitude and our support.

Keep you chin up! This too shall pass.

I refuse to be driven out of South Korea by a virus. The future is not ours to know but I'm still hanging tough in the age of COVID-19.