

Face Masks in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Anti-Asian Racism in Germany

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Abstract This paper discusses anti-Asian racism in Germany before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While wearing masks for public health purposes is a widely-accepted practice among residents of many East Asian countries, those of most Western countries, including Germany, have been more hesitant to adopt it, with people of Asian descent wearing masks becoming subjects of ridicule and discrimination at the beginning of COVID-19. With the increasing number of cases and the demonstrated effectiveness of wearing masks in preventing the spread of the disease, an increasing number of people have begun to adhere to the practice in Germany. As a member of the South Korean minority in Germany, the author experienced this transition with fear and uncertainty. This paper is a reflection on and comparison of the experiences of people in various Asian communities in Germany, elucidating the everyday racism against the Asian population that is often ignored in society. While anti-Asian discrimination long preceded the pandemic, it has become even more prominent with the spread of the novel coronavirus. This paper argues that more media coverage is necessary to increase the awareness of such racism and decrease the number of fatal crimes resulting from it.

Keywords mask – COVID-19 – anti-Asian racism – Germany – South Korea

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic effected changes in various spheres. It created not only economic and political distress but also restrictions of everyday social interactions between even close friends, colleagues, and family members. Social distancing and handwashing were the first preventative measures announced to the public. These were and have generally been uncontroversial around the globe. However, the recommendation and in some cases the mandate to wear masks has provoked distinctive reactions. This paper will highlight the dissimilar and often contradictory responses toward mask wearing during the pandemic in 2020. Due to my background, I will mainly elaborate on and compare its development in South Korea and Germany. While mask wearing was one of the first reactions to the pandemic in many East Asian countries, the practice was met with reluctant acceptance in many Western societies. As a member of the Asian minority in Germany, I experienced this development with anxiety due to anti-Asian racism. Anti-Asian racism is a social problem that has often been ignored in many

Western countries, one which appeared extensively and incontrovertibly due to the pandemic.

Based on the experiences of the coronavirus as recorded in my diary between March 19 and April 27, 2020, which have been published online (BYUN 2020), I will explore my understanding of mask wearing and anti-Asian racism, with special consideration for the situations in South Korea and Germany. South Korea is the country where I was born and grew up and where most of my family members still reside. I regularly access South Korean media and follow the development of the discourse regarding the pandemic on social media. In addition, my friends and relatives in Korea inform my understanding of local sentiment and experiences. I have been living as an immigrant in Germany for over 15 years. As a resident of Berlin, I have been an active participant in various social spheres, in which I interacted with individuals of various backgrounds; these spheres included university, work, activism, and also simply my residential neighborhood. I have shared interests and concerns with other members of the Korean

diaspora in particular, which is also reflected in my diary. This paper does not follow the chronological order of the diary; I have cited fragments of my writing according to the context of the discussion.

In the following, I will first introduce mask wearing as practiced in South Korea and contextualize it with respect to the current pandemic. This section will focus on how high filtration masks became the standard recommendation from the beginning of the pandemic. Next, I will describe the new regulations in South Korea for dealing with the mask shortage and the attitude of Koreans toward mask wearing both in South Korea and abroad. I will then describe the German government's recommendations with regard to mask wearing and elaborate on these as compared with the case of South Korea. I will recount my experiences as a member of the Asian minority in Germany while wearing masks and discuss the anti-Asian discrimination and racism in Germany that became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How high filtration masks became the standard in South Korea before the COVID-19 pandemic

Face mask wearing was already a common practice in South Korea even before the 2020 pandemic. I remember from early in my childhood that mask wearing was commonplace, particularly in the winter, to protect the nose and mouth from cold air and guard against respiratory diseases. One would wear a mask out of courtesy when one was sick to protect others from getting infected. Thus, it was not uncommon to find some people wearing masks in public before COVID-19.¹ However, these were usually cloth or thin-layered surgical masks, not the masks with high filtering efficiency, such as FFP2, N95, KN95, and KF94.²

In the last few years before the 2020 pandemic, mask wearing became even more common due to increasing air pollution and the fear of fine dust in the larger cities of Korea. The masks with mechanical filters, mainly used in industry, appeared on the market in the early 2010s. The concentration of industry in Seoul and near the metropolitan area has made it the center of air pollution in South Korea. In addition, the country's location also subjects it to seasonal sand dust as well as pol-

luted air blowing in from the neighboring countries of China and Mongolia.³ Related respiratory diseases and the fear of becoming a victim of air pollution raised the necessity of filter masks in recent years. Thus, the awareness of airborne particles and the effective prevention of such pollution led to the emergence of KF94 masks in Korea.⁴ The KF (Korea Filter) standard was introduced in 2009 following the air pollution problem. Accordingly, mass production of high filtration masks was expanded to meet increasing market demand since 2016 (KIM & CHOI 2020).

The daily news in Korea announces the air quality every morning and advises how safe it would be to engage in outdoor activities and whether it is necessary to wear a filter mask. Air purifiers have become an everyday home appliance for cleansing the air indoors. Many Koreans, my parents included, have been in the habit of stockpiling filter masks at home as an everyday item, like bottles of water and sacks of rice. As some reporters have noted, mask wearing in East Asia is also the legacy of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak of 2003 (JENNINGS 2020; WONG 2020). For South Koreans, the MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in 2015 also led to the fear of airborne particles and an awareness of the need for masks. This outbreak caused 185 infection cases and 38 death in South Korea (WHO), much greater than the impact of SARS in 2003. I was in South Korea at the time and observed locals' anger and criticism toward the government's misleading measures of the epidemic.⁵ Hospitals were shut down and the subways were empty. Therefore, South Koreans had relatively recent memories of the effects of a major health crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic first began. Even though the regulations for MERS in 2015 were not comparable with those enacted for the COVID-19 pandemic, Koreans were better prepared to face the new outbreak as a result of their experience with MERS. Consequently, when people heard of the news about COVID-19 and its potential for being transmitted through the air, Koreans ran into the pharmacies and supermarkets to stock up on masks.

Government intervention in the face mask supply chain

At the end of February 2020, because of increased demand for masks in South Korea, the price of masks also increased. Korean mask producers had sold masks to Chinese retailers when the situation in South Korea was not severe. However, the sudden rise in cases from mid-February coincided with a relative lack of filter masks in the local market (KIM W. 2020). As the demand for filter masks skyrocketed, the South Korean government banned the export of masks.⁶ Furthermore, it also decided to intervene in the mask supply chain, announcing that the local pharmacies, post offices, and co-ops would start selling filter masks for 1,500 KRW (a bit more than 1 USD) starting March 9, 2020 (MINISTRY OF FOOD AND DRUG SAFETY 2020b). An individual could purchase a maximum of two masks per week. To avoid long lines and disorder, the qualification for picking up masks each weekday was assigned based on the final number of a person's birth year.⁷ People would already be in line outside pharmacies long before they were set to open. As information was recorded in a centralized system, one could not buy more than two masks in the same week. Some tried—unsuccessfully—to purchase more than two in different pharmacies. Mapping apps were developed and made available through various app stores so that people could check for real-time information as to where they could still get masks in their neighborhood. Pharmacists often encountered trouble with customers who tried to get masks on the wrong day and those who failed to get theirs due to the shortage (KIM E. 2020). The pharmacists did not earn additional wages despite working seven days a week. However, they were expected by the government to provide services to overcome the pandemic. In this way, the government managed to keep the price low and distribute masks somewhat equally.⁸ As the demand for them increased, demonstrations of the correct use of filter masks were also broadcasted, instructing citizens not to touch the filters when taking the masks off and to fold and wind them up using the strings when disposing of them. Following the World Health Organization's (WHO) advice, the South Korean government did not encourage healthy people to wear masks (HOWARD 2020). However, not wear-

ing mask was widely considered dangerous and disrespectful among the people. Wearing masks was acknowledged as an essential strategy for surviving the COVID-19 pandemic, and Koreans were preoccupied with it from the beginning. It is thus not surprising that my family and relatives were severely worried about me not wearing a mask in Germany at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, as Germany also experienced mask shortages and struggled to control the supply of masks in the country.

Shortage of face masks and ridicule of mask wearers in Germany

In January 2020, Dilek KALAYCI, the Health Senator of Berlin, announced that the city was well prepared for the novel coronavirus (SENATSVVERWALTUNG FÜR GESUNDHEIT, PFLEGE UND GLEICHSTELLUNG 2020). At the time, most people did not expect the outbreak to transform into a pandemic that would cause almost three million deaths worldwide (as of March 2021). Hardly anyone anticipated it would change the lifestyle of entire populations in the coming months. The first mass infection of the novel coronavirus in Germany was detected in Heinsberg, a municipality of North Rhine-Westphalia, at the end of February 2020. As a result, Heinsberg became the first city in Germany to enter a lockdown. A few weeks later, the number of cases dramatically increased nationwide, with most of these concentrated in southern Germany. On March 4, Germany banned the export of personal protective equipment (PPE)—such as masks, gloves, and gowns—with “extraordinary urgency” (RND 2020). I remember my visit to Berlin Tegel Airport on March 5, 2020, before the severe and rapid increase of infections in Germany. On that day, I saw some people wearing filter masks; however, mask wearing was still considered an overreaction at that point. The majority of people were not wearing masks. This was also before the official announcement of COVID-19 as a pandemic by the WHO.⁹ Only a few days later, Germany would start a partial shutdown lasting several months. On March 13, schools were closed and events involving large gatherings were canceled. On March 16, Chancellor Angela Merkel officially announced and emphasized the importance of social distancing for reducing the spread

of the virus (RZEPKA 2020). However, the government was reluctant to declare a total shutdown; supermarkets, gas stations, drug stores, banks, and pharmacies continued to provide their services. Following the closure of Germany's borders with neighboring countries the next day (PLADSON 2020), people began to realize the gravity of the situation. Social distancing, sneezing into the elbow, and washing hands with soap for a minimum of 20 seconds were the measures that people quickly implemented in their everyday life. Nevertheless, mask wearing was still far from common.

Germany's demand for toilet paper rolls rose by 700% from February to March of 2020 (B.Z. 2020). Unlike people in Korea, people in Germany were buying toilet paper rolls instead of filter masks. This was in part influenced by an announcement by the European Union (EU), in which the WHO's position that healthy people did not need to wear masks was recapitulated. The reasons given were that the masks should be reserved for health care workers and that wearing masks would not protect people from the infection anyway (RIEGERT 2020). As German hospitals and medical caregivers were suffering from a PPE shortage in early 2020 (BETSCHKA & HEINE 2020), it is possible that the government made a strategic decision not to encourage people to wear masks so that more of it would be available to healthcare workers. At the same time, footage of Chinese people making masks out of orange peels and bras in response to the mask shortage went viral on social media. Many observers in Western countries viewed these images negatively; some interpreted these actions as disorderly and uncivilized and thus became even more reluctant to wear masks. With the ever-increasing number of those infected and growing interest in the cause of the outbreak, German broadcasters swiftly began covering the wildlife markets in China and their insufficient hygienic standard (DW NEWS 2020; HANIKA 2020). It indicated that the virus is from wild animals, and it would be possible that the virus was transmitted to the human on such markets in China. With this narrative, Germans who subscribe to this narrative of the virus's origin have used it to justify the notion that Chinese culture is inferior to and less civilized than German culture (LEE 2020, 45). This sentiment was also well reflected in one of the covers of the weekly German magazine *Der Spiegel*,

which depicts an Asian person wearing full protective gear with the title "Made in China",¹⁰ offending not only Chinese people but people of many other Asian ethnicities as well. In the West, people of East Asian descent are often mistakenly referred to as "Chinese", regardless of their ethnicity, country of birth, or nationality. This sort of mislabeling has associated all East Asians with a particular country and cultural background, neglecting the cultural and ethnic diversity of the area.

In February and March 2020, the number of new cases in South Korea had risen to 850 per day, at which point they leveled off. I observed that the situation there was becoming more manageable thanks to strict governmental intervention and the widespread practice of wearing masks. I expected that the same would occur in Germany in the coming weeks, but the situation did not improve as it had in South Korea. Up to 7000 new cases per day were reported in March and April 2020. It had already been months since people of Asian origin had become uncomfortable with going outside in Germany due to their stigmatization as "virus carriers".

Everyday anti-Asian racism in Germany

2020/03/22 Sunday

Why do people in Europe rarely wear masks to protect themselves from the virus? I thought it was partially the central government's decision to prevent a potential shortage of supply. The masks should be prioritized for the healthcare workers at the moment. The central media suggested people just to keep their distance, to stay home, and to wash their hands, instead of wearing a mask. In particular, ARD (German public broadcasters) published a precise video on Twitter about why it is not necessary to wear a mask (As of July 2020, I couldn't find this video anymore on Twitter.). But wearing masks in public helps to prevent potential infection from the people in the incubation stage. Asymptomatic carriers can spread the coronavirus. Therefore, the whole population was requested to stay at home to curb the further spread of the epidemic. Then why should people not wear a mask for the same reason? My friends and families in Korea are concerned that I am not wearing a mask in Germany. Even though I have a mask, wearing it in public would make other people con-

sider me as a virus carrier. A Chinese friend of mine told me a story yesterday. A Chinese person was wearing a mask in a German shop. A German then asked him: “Why are you wearing a mask? Because you are infected by corona?” Then the Chinese answered: “Do you wear a condom because you are HIV infected? I wear a mask to protect myself from getting infected by corona.”

Until late March of 2020, it was the widespread perception in Germany, as in many other Western countries, that wearing masks did not help protect oneself from the coronavirus. The dominant public narrative was that healthy people did not need to wear masks and that masks should be preserved for healthcare workers and sick people (LEUNG 2020). Despite my desire to wear a mask, I had difficulty doing so in public. Wearing a face mask in public silently indicated that I may be a carrier of the virus due to the public perception that healthy people do not need to wear a mask. Moreover, the stigma that the virus originated in China and my Asian appearance would provide even greater grounds for speculation about my exposure to the virus. I was not the only one who encountered such difficulties. With the rise of the pandemic, people in Asian communities worldwide reported being victims of racism. Scholars reported on the discrimination of Asian-looking people increased severely in the 2020 pandemic (HE *et al.* 2020; RUIZ *et al.* 2020; YANG *et al.* 2020). HE *et al.* found that discrimination was more likely to happen in countries with high income and more often to women and children than men. I believe that this is rooted in the prevailing perception in Western countries that the West is more advanced in various cultural, economic, and political aspects than the other countries, including those in Asia. The outbreak of coronavirus allowed this perception to manifest publicly, to the great detriment of people of Asian heritage.

The perceived superiority of the West is also well reflected in media reports. When German media reported on the success of Asian countries in preventing the 2020 pandemic, they made sure to indicate that this was only possible through “less democratic measures, such as data collection and online surveillance” (REICHART 2020). Such reports implied that German pandemic measures were more democratic and protective of the freedom of people. While most Asian countries are

portrayed negatively in the German media, Japan has been illustrated positively in its fight against the coronavirus. Even though the Japanese government has faced severe internal criticism for not reacting to the crisis in a timely manner and failing to manage the spread of the virus (KINGSTON 2020; MARK 2020), German media reported that the Japanese have COVID-19 under control (FRITZ 2020). Some articles on ZDF¹¹ even claimed that Germans should learn from the example of Japan to combat the spread of COVID-19 (BECKER 2020; NICOLAYSEN 2020). This reflects a somewhat polarized perception of Asians in German discourse. When people were finally encouraged to wear masks in Germany, the German media often cited the example of mask wearing practices specifically in Japan. Even though other Asian countries, such as Singapore and Taiwan, had managed the pandemic more effectively than Japan through mask wearing as well as other measures, the German media seldom reported on these successes. Regardless of the polarized perception of Asians in the West, anyone who looks Asian can still be the subject of anti-Asian racism.

2020/03/24 Tuesday

Being Asian in the time of COVID-19 in a western country is tough. Recently, I was waiting for the train at the station alone. A group of people called me repeatedly “corona”. I generally react to such outbursts of bigotry in public, but at that time, I did not say anything. The young men and women seemed to be aggressive, perhaps being drunk. I felt that had I reacted, the situation could have escalated and could have turned violent. When my friends complained about their experience being called corona by strangers these days, I thought those people were not worth caring about. I believed that I could simply ignore them because the majority of people in society were still tolerant. But as I experienced anti-Asian racism myself, I started feeling unsafe to go outside. I might be considered as a potential virus bomb and mocked for my Asian appearance.

Since February 2020, local Berlin newspapers have covered several incidents of anti-Asian racism in Germany (KU 2020; LE 2020; LEBER 2020; MOULIN 2020). Unfortunately, anti-Asian sentiment has proven to be a global problem. Asian Americans have been insulted and assaulted in public for wearing masks and Asian students in

the UK have been accused of carrying the virus in the London tube, while the Asian community in France has started the #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (“I am not a virus”) movement in reaction to anti-Asian racism there (BBC 2020; COSTE & AMIEL 2020; KAMBHAMPATY 2020). This hashtag was also translated as #IchBinKeinVirus in German and went viral as well.¹² This movement attracted many people in the Asian community rather than just those from Chinese backgrounds, as all East Asian-looking people have equally been subjects of this kind of discrimination. For example, a star chef in Düsseldorf posted a message stating “No Chinese wanted” on his Facebook page (VANOPDROP 2020). Even though he claimed the message had been formulated thoughtlessly, he insisted that his post was in protest of the dictatorial measures against the COVID-19 pandemic in China. However, his explanation did not hold up to criticism. A colleague of mine in Berlin visited a house doctor in February 2020, as she had some mild cold symptoms. The doctor asked her whether she had met Chinese people recently, explaining that doctors in Berlin had been asked to report Asian patients in their central registry, if they showed symptoms related to the novel coronavirus. She felt offended to be judged just based on her appearance. German patients could also have visited China recently or have had friends, who had direct contact with the people, who have been to the region lately. However, by addressing merely the Asian population in their registry, they identified the disease as being particularly race related. In this way, many regarded the virus to be inextricably linked to Asians at the beginning of the pandemic, neglecting the fact, that locals represented the greatest potential for its spread.

Unfortunately, Asian looking people were targeted based on the accusation, that they were carriers of the virus on many other everyday occasions; some were even threatened to leave the residential area. A friend told me one such story: A neighbor had threatened her not to come out from her flat because she was Asian. The neighbor also told her not to use her balcony, as his balcony was facing hers. Even though the neighbor knew that she was not infected with the virus, he even told her, that he would call the municipality, if she did not stay indoors. She seriously thought about moving out because of this, but she realized

that searching for a new flat and moving out in the middle of the pandemic would bring her even more complications. In 2020 in Berlin, I also increasingly felt uncomfortable using public transportation. I noticed multiple times that locals avoided the door where I was standing, or they switched seats, if I sat down anywhere near them.

Next, I will share my diary entries about how discrimination is experienced in public life in Germany as an Asian minority during the pandemic.

2020/03/19 Thursday

This morning, I went to the pharmacy to get a thermometer. I have never needed one so far. But as the situation worsened, my partner suggested me to buy one. In the pharmacy, the pharmacist asked me to keep my distance in front of the counter; I was subconsciously walking toward the counter. Then the pharmacist freaked out and shouted: “Please stay there, don’t come close. Stay there, there!” I asked her whether she did it to everyone these days. She said yes. Because I look Asian, I thought she might have overreacted. In my eyes, she behaved like she was dealing with a dirty person with her disgusted facial expression and distanced behavior. Moreover, there were no special announcements or indications in the pharmacy (yet) to keep a distance in front of the counter. But I cheered myself up that the pharmacists are particularly careful as they face many patients and are at risk. There were ample thermometers at the counter. Apparently, many people are buying thermometers. The pharmacist told me that I could pay only with a card to avoid any contact with her. But the thermometer was only 2.95 euros. I told her I could give her a five euro note. She luckily accepted it and picked the bill with the tip of her fingers. She threw the change on the table, and I collected them carefully to avoid potential contact. I noticed that I recently try not to be close to any person in public because I do not want to agitate the local people. I am aware that people are especially careful towards Asians these days, even though the virus in Germany spread among Germans and was transmitted from other European countries at most.

2020/04/12 Sunday

Going outside in general made me anxious due to the potential of facing racist behavior. Today, I was walking in my neighborhood and was enjoying the sun talking to my mom on the phone until a boy (around 13–15 years old) called me coro-

na. I reacted immediately and asked him why he called me corona. He looked surprised but soon said he did not say such a word to me: "Why would I have said such a word?" But there was no one else around except him. Moreover, my mom on the phone also heard that word. I looked around and noticed that this boy was playing table tennis with a male adult (his father?) in the garden. I asked the boy again that I heard someone called me corona. The boy insisted again that he did not say that. I told him then it is fine. But I immediately regretted that I did not say that calling an Asian person corona is racist behavior, and you were aware of it. I hope he learned at least a lesson that it was not appropriate and could hurt someone, in particular, people of Asian origin. To be honest, I was more hurt by the adult who was next to the boy. Even though the boy's reaction was not ethically correct, he simply stood idle. This kind of incident intensified my disappointment in this society.

The diary entries above describe merely a part of my experiences as a member of the Asian minority in Germany during the pandemic in 2020. The subtle discrimination does not seem harmful at first. However, it has an innate potential to develop into serious violence, as already reported multiple times in the media, which I will elaborate more on in the section "Continuing anti-Asian racism in Germany". Posts on social media have exacerbated the controversy of anti-Asian racism in Germany. While some people recognize intentionally avoiding Asians in public as racism, others insist, that it is not discrimination, but rather a natural reaction for avoiding danger. However, this argument does not explain people's refusal to apply the same approach to people with high infection risks from non-Asian countries, such as some European countries with higher infection rates than Germany. It misses out on the essential fact, that it is racism to judge someone based on their appearance. The German government's declaration that only sick people needed to wear masks made the issue even worse, causing discrimination and ridicule of Asians, who were already used to wearing masks for public health purposes whether they were sick or not.

Start of mask wearing in Germany

2020/03/30 Monday

More and more people are wearing a mask in Germany. It is interesting to observe how people around me changed their opinion about wearing masks. For instance, my neighbor, a German grandma, was against wearing masks. A few days ago, however, she told me that her son gave her a few highly protective masks, and she was then willing to wear them. That day, she told me that she saw more and more people wearing a mask in the city. She also showed me a newspaper article describing how to make a mask with simple kitchen towels and rubber bands. Is a mask crisis underway in Germany? Another friend of mine sent me a link describing how to make a fabric mask from old clothes (<https://maskeauf.de>). The medical masks are reserved for healthcare workers, whereas others are expected to make with whatever is available. Mask wearing seems to be one of the critical topics in the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early April 2020, the German government started recommending that everyone wear masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In April, Jena became the first German city to mandate mask wearing in public, such as in supermarkets and on public transportation (DOMRADIO 2020). In the following days, the RKI¹³ also began to recommend wearing masks in public whether one was sick or not (TAGESSCHAU 2020). As medical masks were in low supply, covering the mouth and nose with a scarf would be acceptable. Soon, supermarkets in Berlin started requiring customers to cover their nose and mouth with a cloth mask or scarf when entering stores. Moreover, each person was requested to use a shopping cart to keep distance from each other in the store. Because of the official announcement to wear masks, the public perception slowly changed. I noticed how people around me changed their attitude toward mask wearing. In March, I had asked some of my neighbors, whether they would like to have some of the masks that my family had sent me from Korea. At that point, they had refused, saying they did not need to wear masks. However, only a few days later, they told me that they would also like to wear masks and expressed appreciation toward me for sharing the masks with them.¹⁴

Within a few weeks, the public perception of mask wearing dramatically changed. Starting in early April, I no longer felt awkward wearing a face mask in public places. Moreover, increasing numbers of studies and cases proved the efficiency of wearing masks for preventing the spread of the virus (BETSCH *et al.* 2020; CHENG *et al.* 2020). In June 2020, fines of 50 Euros were issued to people who did not wear masks on Berlin's public transportation (WEHNER 2020). Since then, it has been common to see people being approached by police officers for not wearing masks. The normalization of wearing masks in Germany was one of the most significant changes, that I experienced during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. However, this did not necessarily lead to a lower rate of anti-Asian racism, showing that the reason for anti-Asian discrimination was not based in the practice of mask wearing. Rather, it seems that there are more fundamental motives for such discrimination.

Continuing anti-Asian racism in Germany

2020/04/20 Monday

I was in the supermarket today and felt that people were noticeably more relaxed. There were fewer people in the market, and the shelves were not empty. However, the toilet paper rolls were still not available. I still feared to come across some rude people on the street who would call me corona. I needed to be prepared to react to them if an incident happened again. But today I did not meet any person like that. Daily racism existed already before the corona outbreak in Germany. On the street, I sometimes met school kids or young students who called me "chiang chang chong", "ni hao", and showing slit eyes to me. I tended to ignore such incidents and thought they were only children. But after the incident last Sunday (diary above on the 12. of April), I realized that I had overlooked a critical possibility. Racist sentiments might have been transferred to children; from adults. I think that not many Germans are aware of and sensitive enough to recognize daily racism towards ethnic minorities. Adults do not correct their children for making racist jokes. This was confirmed by parents of Asian origin who have children in kindergarten and schools. A colleague of mine has two children in kindergarten. One day her son sang a song called "Drei Chinesen mit

Kontrabass (three Chinese people with contrabass)," which he learned in kindergarten. My colleague was shocked when her son made slit eyes with the lyric "Chinesen (Chinese)". She soon contacted the teacher to ask about it, but the teacher did not understand why this song and making slit eyes were racist. This indicated that the general population was not much aware of daily racism towards ethnic minorities. Moreover, anti-Asian racist incidents were hardly ever reported in the media, which disappointed many Asian communities in Germany.

2020/04/27 Monday

I heard about a racist incident in Berlin on the Korean broadcast. I quickly contacted my acquaintances in Berlin, who work in an anti-discrimination organization, and they told me that they were working on it already. This incident happened last Saturday night, or early in the morning on Sunday, in Berlin's subway. Five German people (three men and two women) cursed two Koreans, a married couple, with sexually abusive words. They also called the couple corona, corona party, happy corona day, etc. When the couple told them not to speak such racist terms, the German people answered: "No, this is not racist." The situation was recorded by the Korean couple with their smartphone and already spread on social media. After the insults, the situation escalated into physical violence. The German men spat on the Korean man and hurt him physically when they noticed that the Koreans were recording the situation with their smartphone. The couple quickly called the police officers, but the officers' reaction was not understandable: they said this was not a racist crime. They said: "Do not call it racist." Moreover, they tried to educate the Korean couple that calling Asians corona was not a racist incident. Then what is a racist crime? The Korean community was shocked by this incident. In particular, this happened in Berlin, Germany. Germany has had a positive image among many Koreans, and the racist attack was not expected. However, hardly any German media reported about this incident. I think German society is not sensitive enough about this type of discrimination and often ignores it in public discourse. I hope that this sentiment improves.

Starting in April of 2020, mask wearing became common practice in Germany. In January 2021, Bavaria became the first federal state to in-

troduce the obligation to wear a filter mask with FFP2 qualification in public spaces (ERDTRACHT & JARDE 2021). In this way, face masks transitioned from being an identifier of the Asian population as virus carriers to an everyday item for protecting oneself from the disease and preventing the virus spread. Wearing a mask has also been promoted as a symbol of solidarity in the fight against the disease in Germany, as reflected in the AHA formula.¹⁵ Despite the normalization of wearing masks in Germany, discrimination against the Asian population only became worse. After the incident involving the Korean couple mentioned above (diary entry 2020/04/27), a Korean woman was attacked in a Berlin supermarket for allegedly carrying the virus in July 2020 (GUTENTAG KOREA 2020). Similar acts of discrimination were perpetrated against members of the Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Chinese communities in Germany (GOPALAKRISHNAN & IMRAN 2021). Incidents of anti-Asian racism have also been reported in other western countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (ZHAO 2020; HAYNES 2021).

Asian communities are upset by the recent increase rate of racist incidents because of COVID-19, but they had experienced similar discrimination even before the pandemic. Another obstacle to the prevention of such discrimination in Germany is the lack of media coverage of such incidents and the resulting insufficient public awareness of its gravity. For many German citizens, the associated racist phrases and wordings are considered nothing more than a harmless joke. The German radio station Bayern 3, for instance, compared the K-pop band BTS to the coronavirus, provoking a considerable outcry on social media in early 2021 (CONNOR 2021). The host of the show apologized to BTS and their fans, with an additional explanation, that he was merely upset, that the band had covered his favorite song and he did not like it, reflecting a serious lack of understanding about how daily racism is integrated into popular perception.

Anti-Asian racism has attracted mainstream media attention in America with a shooting in Atlanta in March 2021. The Atlanta shooting, which took the lives of eight people, led to movements such as the Stop Asian Hate movement among the Asian population in the US (HAYNES 2021). Mean-

while, more and more people raised their voices about how they were discriminated against even before the pandemic in an effort to bring about change with the increased awareness. Asian hate crimes are not adequately identified as racist incidents in Germany due to this lack of awareness. Compared to the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020, the Stop Asian Hate campaign has received very little coverage in Germany. In June 2020, many members of the German public went to the streets to demonstrate for the Black population and discussed changing some of Berlin's districts' street names as they carried connotations of anti-Black racism. However, there have been no such demonstrations against anti-Asian racism so far. Still, many Asian communities are fighting against anti-Asian racism in Germany and raising public awareness.¹⁶ The Asian population in Germany has experienced broad and undeniable discrimination, hindering the integrity and solidarity of German society in general. Sadly, anti-Asian racism is often ignored, with little recognition in German society. If we ignore it further, serious consequences like the Atlanta shooting can and will follow.

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Notes

1 I later learned that this is also common in other East Asian countries such as Japan and China. Some claim that wearing masks has been commonplace in Japan and China for decades (JENNINGS 2020; WONG 2020).

2 The listed masks share the equivalent filtration standard of at least 94% of airborne particles.

3 The source of the industrial fine dust is a point of political contention between China and South Korea (BICKER 2019).

4 Aside from their utility in offering protection from dangerous airborne particles, masks have also become something of a fashion item (YANG 2014). Masks have even come to have a political meaning after being worn by those participating in the Hong Kong protests that have been ongoing since 2019 (MAHTANI & MCLAUGHLIN 2019).

5 People's confidence in the government declined due to its insufficient measures (CHO 2019). As the only coun-

try in East Asia with a high rate of infection, many South Koreans have viewed the spread of MERS as a source of national shame (CHOI & LEE 2015).

6 This regulation was announced on February 25, 2020, and was in effect from February 26 to October 23, 2020 (DONGA 2020; MINISTRY OF FOOD AND DRUG SAFETY 2020a).

7 For instance, those whose final number was 1 or 6 could purchase two masks on Mondays, those for whom it was 2 or 7 could do so on Tuesdays, 3 or 8 on Wednesdays, 4 or 9 on Thursdays, and 5 or 0 on Fridays. People who had not been able to purchase masks during their assigned weekday were able to do so over the weekend. This five-day rotation system ended on July 11, 2020 (KIM M. 2020).

8 Mask wearing became mandatory in South Korea only after November of 2020. The shortage of filter masks was not a result of the government's actions.

9 The WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic only on March 11, 2020 (WHO 2020).

10 DER SPIEGEL 06/2020. This title page was criticized for evoking racist sentiment (RENNER 2020).

11 ZWEITES DEUTSCHES FERNSEHEN (ZDF) is a German public broadcaster.

12 Further information is available on the following website: <https://www.ichbinkeinvirus.org>.

13 THE ROBERT KOCH INSTITUTE (RKI), subordinate to the MINISTRY OF HEALTH, is a German research institute and governmental agency for disease control.

14 On the same day, my neighbor showed me a newspaper article that explains how to make a mask from simple kitchen towels and rubber bands (STAMM 2020).

15 The AHA formula is the abbreviation of the following measures published by the German MINISTRY OF HEALTH: *Abstand* (distance), *Hygiene* (hygiene), *Alltagsmasken* (everyday masks).

16 To name only a few such initiatives: *IchBinKeinVirus*, *korientation*, and *Korea Verband*.

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