

# LETTER FROM JAPAN

## The Rodney Dangerfield Of the Global Order

*Why Japan deserves more respect.*

BY PAUL BLUSTEIN

One evening in late February, when fear of coronavirus was in the nascent stage, I was on a commuter train heading to my home in Kamakura, Japan, and observed that practically everyone besides me was wearing a face mask—the only other exception being a forty-something fellow sitting across from me in a dark suit typical of Japanese “salarymen.” Next to him was a woman wearing one of those black, firm masks that completely cover the mouth and nose, and I couldn’t help but imagine the smugness she felt in comparing her protective gear with the flimsy dime-store masks worn by most other passengers.

At one point, the mask-less man coughed—just a couple of brief throat spasms, suggestive of nothing more than a dry throat. Although he covered his mouth with his hand, the lady shot him a sideways dirty look. About a minute later, he coughed a couple of more times—again, barely a throat-clearing, definitely not a violent hack indicative of

illness—and this time she looked downright alarmed. When he did it again a short while later, she got up, grimaced as if she had just been exposed to Typhoid Mary, and moved to the nearest vacant seat. Everyone else remained impassive, in accord with custom on Japanese public transportation, although the man shifted to a slightly more relaxed posture given the extra space he could occupy.

Pretty funny, I thought, and upon arriving home I wrote a snarky Facebook post about it, musing that Mr. Salaryman must have been inwardly rejoicing at having devised a clever scheme for manspreading. But looking back at the episode, I wonder whether my maskless-ness should have been the proper object of deprecation, and my fellow passengers lauded as unsung heroes of their nation’s triumph over the virus. For Japan is an indisputable success story in minimizing the pandemic’s impact, with only about 900 deaths at this writing compared with America’s 100,000-plus—an outcome attributed by many experts



in large part to the fact that mask-wearing, already common among Japanese in past years, became even more ubiquitous in the crowded public spaces of the nation’s cities in early 2020.

So unexpected was Japan’s favorable result that for a long while, the country got no credit in the world’s media. After all, the authorities conducted relatively few tests (on the grounds that sick people would spread infection more readily if they rushed to clinics for testing), and aside from closing schools in early March, the government resisted taking stronger measures for several weeks, finally imposing a “state of emergency” in April that

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did not involve a compulsory lockdown. On the surface, Japan appeared exceptionally vulnerable, given its high proportion of elderly and density of its urban centers, and the media was full of speculation that the nation must be hurtling toward a New York/

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Italy-style disaster, perhaps eschewing tests to keep infection figures low in a desperate effort to preserve the Tokyo Olympics. But such bleak cynicism faded for lack of supporting evidence; the hospitals simply weren't being overrun with elderly patients dying of pneumonia.

An important upshot is that Japan shows little if any inclination to join the Trump administration in blaming China for the pandemic. Needing no foreign scapegoat for a public health debacle in his own country, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has carefully sought to continue mending strains in Sino-Japanese relations while ensuring that Tokyo maintains its crucial alliance with the United States. To be sure, Abe endorsed calls for an independent investigation into the World Health Organization's initial response, but he and other leading Japanese politicians have refrained from the accusations leveled in Washington, London, and a few other world capitals that Beijing should be held accountable for hiding crucial information and allowing the virus to spread. Abe is planning to welcome Chinese President Xi Jinping for a historic state visit, perhaps later this year—the visit was postponed amid the pandemic—and the prime minister's strategy of minimizing friction

with China was on clear display recently when news emerged that Japan had opted out of joining the United States, Britain, and other nations in a statement condemning Beijing for its national security law on Hong Kong.

Now the dominant media narrative is one of perplexity: how has Japan emerged so little scathed? Debate is raging among adherents of various explanations. With the caveat that I can't even claim amateur expertise in epidemiology (I'm a journalist and author specializing in economics, not science), here's how I glommed onto one intriguing theory.

In late March, a month after my aforementioned train ride, I was home staring slack-jawed at a map of the world I had found on a reputable website, and asked my wife, Yoshie, "Say, did you ever get a vaccine called 'BCG?'" Her reply: "Yes, of course. Everyone in Japan gets that."

Therein lies a possible answer—and let me reiterate, using capital letters for emphasis, a POSSIBLE answer—to the Japanese mystery, namely the country's long history of administering BCG, a hundred-year-old vaccine for tuberculosis, to infants. The map I was looking at showed that countries with similar BCG vaccination practices included many in East Asia, South Asia, and Eastern Europe—most of which were faring reasonably well in the pandemic, whereas countries where BCG had almost never been used included the United States and Italy. Further internet searches turned up a few experts in the medical establishment who were starting to exhort their colleagues to consider BCG as a potential weapon in the fight against Covid-19. Their arguments were based on the fact that BCG has been shown in clinical trials to boost the immune system in ways that help reduce viral infections, including respiratory ones. The reasons for this are unclear; BCG isn't even designed

to combat viruses (TB is a bacterial disease), but it inexplicably affords "off-target" benefits.

At that moment, it dawned on me that I—and my U.S.-born, half-Japanese sons—might be among our town's few residents who were uniquely susceptible to Covid-19, so I promptly went to my doctor's office and asked whether we could get vaccinated. The doctor was willing—BCG is perfectly safe—as long as I understood that evidence for its efficacy against Covid-19 was sketchy at best. I assured him that I wouldn't view the vaccine as conferring anything remotely resembling immunity. (All this, I hasten to add, took place before the World Health Organization, responding to media coverage about BCG, admonished people to refrain from seeking the vaccine so that available supplies could be reserved for TB immunization and clinical trials underway on front-line health workers.)

In ensuing weeks, the BCG theory has gained some support from experts, but contrary evidence has also mounted as infections have spiked in countries where the vaccine was widely administered, notably Brazil and Russia. That doesn't mean the theory is inapplicable to Japan; to complicate matters further, the bacte-

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rial strain used in the Japanese version of the vaccine is stronger than ones used elsewhere, which may heighten its immunity-boosting properties. But other explanatory factors are now looking more plausible, in particular Japan's contact-tracing strategy

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whereby local health authorities methodically tracked down every person and business establishment that infected individuals interacted with, telling all the potentially infected people to self-isolate for fourteen days. The contact tracers may be the nation's real unsung heroes, and it's comforting to know that they remain vigilant against the dreaded "second wave."

As for masks, I've long been mystified by their popularity among Japanese. When first-time visitors ask, I shrug and explain that although health reasons surely apply in some cases—a person with cold symptoms is expected to wear a mask, for example—I can't help but conclude that modesty of some ineffable sort is at play, plus a propensity to go along with the hyper-hygienic crowd. Yoshie wears one on high-pollen days, as do other hay fever sufferers, but she is also at a loss to account for

why so many of her compatriots wear masks year-round. We saw no need to wear them during February and March, when most news articles said masks are "better than nothing" against Covid-19—and shops were sold out anyway. But we've come around, having seen some reasonably persuasive reports that masks help minimize the spread of infection from asymptomatic carriers.

One small saving grace of the pandemic is that the prevalence of masks will no longer bemuse foreign visitors to Japan. But what about another Japanese custom—bowing instead of shaking hands—that has also been credited with reducing infections? Although that may be a tougher sell in the West, it's looking a lot less dorky than it used to. So remember, fellow *gaijin*: Bow from the waist! Eyes down! Deeper and longer to show more respect to superiors! ◆