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## “To Learn to Think Conceptually”

### *Juliet Corbin in Conversation With Cesar A. Cisneros-Puebla\**

**Abstract:** Some brilliant images are projected from Juliet CORBIN’s memories around her first steps into the qualitative research world related to the symbolic interactionism tradition. She focuses on some remarkable issues about learning the processes of Grounded Theory based on her past experiences teaching in seminars or doing workshops worldwide. The differences between writing novels and the narrative perspective and writing social science from Grounded Theory methodology are discussed by her in order to distinguish the role of literature in the production of socially active knowledge.

About the Interview: I e-mailed Juliet CORBIN about interviewing prominent qualitative researchers for *FQS*. She agreed and granted permission for the interview. We met twice for the interview with the focus of the sessions being on her current projects and her personal experience of becoming a qualitative researcher. Our two meetings happened to take place at two large qualitative research conferences we were both attending as presenters, one conference in North America and the other conference being held in South America.

I met Juliet CORBIN for the first time when she was in Guadalajara, Mexico in the year 2000 conducting a Grounded Theory workshop. The workshop provided an opportunity for all in attendance to learn more about this research tradition and to have our questions about this particular method answered. The workshop was supported by the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, University of Alberta, and its international site located in Guadalajara, Mexico at the University of Guadalajara. In and around the work-

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shop sessions Juliet and I spent many marvelous moments together in discussion. The time we first met, however, there was no knowing that later I would be interviewing her.

The interview came much later when we were both in Canada for the Fifth International Interdisciplinary Conference Advances in Qualitative Methods, held in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada from January 29-31, 2004. Finding time to do an interview during a busy conference is difficult but we finally decided to meet one evening between activities. I was somewhat nervous even though CORBIN and I had met and talked several times. However, we had never talked in the situation of a formal interview mediated by tape recorders, a time schedule, and so on. For our first session I chose an analog recorder even though I prefer digital ones. We met in her hotel room because it had a formal sitting area and was quiet, a real advantage when one is meeting in the *sui generis* Fantasyland Hotel at the unfathomable West Edmonton Mall.

Two months later we met again to finish the second part of the interview. This time we met in the Center of Conventions “Amacio Mazzaropi” located in Taubate, Sao Paulo, Brazil. The meeting occurred in the context of the brilliant and successful First Brazilian International Conference on Qualitative Research, March 24-27, 2004. We met once more in her room because it was the only quiet place available. However, this time I was able to record our interview directly into my laptop. The Center of Conventions “Amacio Mazzaropi” is a place where this popular Brazilian actor used to live and make films in the 1950s. After his death some years ago “his farm” was turned into a conference center. The center is wonderful setting for thinking and learning because it is very private, rural, and accommodating to large numbers of people. There are many separate meetings rooms, a large cafeteria, lovely grounds for walking, and a small museum where one can learn more about early movie making in Brazil. The only problem with the center was the roosters that woke us up every morning before dawn.

Canada and Brazil two very impressive but dissimilar parts of the world, two different rooms for interviewing, two different ways of recording the interview, and two contrasting climates and cultural settings, all of which provided the backdrop for conducting this interview with one of the most prominent woman in qualitative research. For me it was a learning process, for her an opportunity to think about matters that she had not thought about for some time. I will present the interview in two parts: the first one as a synopsis of my notes and the second one in a conversation format.

## 1. The Beginnings

The worst nightmare for all qualitative researchers is to settle in to have an interview and then discover that the tape recorder is not working properly. That

is what happened to me. My challenge, then, was to take notes the old fashioned, tried and true way, with paper and pencil. This little incident gave us an opportunity to relax as we joked and told stories about how STRAUSS, BECKER and HUGHES must have used those very methods in their early days as researchers, that is in the days before there was technology that can go wrong. STRAUSS used to tell the story of going into the restroom to hastily jot down notes while doing fieldwork, then running back to the house after a hard day in the field to write up all his notes before the next day. After digressing upon this point for a while we began the interview in earnest, and talked for almost an hour about what factors influenced her to become a qualitative researcher and what motivates her to continue to be.

Our conversation began with CORBIN's very first research project in the early 1970s as a master's degree student at San Jose State University in San Jose, California. Though she did a very quantitative Master's thesis, it was at Jose California State University (SJSU) that Juliet was introduced to qualitative research and the work of SCHATZMAN and STRAUSS in their book on field research (SCHATZMAN & STRAUSS 1973). Qualitative research had instant appeal to her because of the access that it gave to research participants and early on CORBIN vowed that after finishing her master's degree she would return to school to study with SCHATZMAN and STRAUSS at University of California San Francisco (UCSF) in a doctoral program. After doing the requisite teaching in nursing for a few years at SJSU, CORBIN entered the Doctoral program in Nursing at UCSF in 1976. Though she entered the doctoral program as a nursing student and not a sociologist, and though her mentor was Ramona MERCER, because of MERCER's maternal child background, it didn't take CORBIN long to find her way to the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at UCSF, where SCHATZMAN and STRAUSS were teaching. At the time, the department of Social and Behavioral Sciences was located in an old house on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue about a five-minute walk from the building in which the School of Nursing was housed.

Though Barney GLASER had taught the qualitative analysis courses at UCSF in previous years, during the time CORBIN attended the University, GLASER had retired from formal teaching at UCSF and Anselm STRAUSS had taken over the courses. The courses in fieldwork meanwhile were taught by Leonard SCHATZMAN and Virginia OLESON. CORBIN could not have been happier with this arrangement and felt that her dreams became true. She was with the people that she most wanted to study with and was studying the method of research that had intrigued her from the time she first heard about it. Among her classmates in that early class were Katherine MAY and Fred BOZETT (now deceased), who both went on to do qualitative work. Kathy CHARMAZ, another qualitative researcher had been in an earlier course. CORBIN remembers those early classes in which she and Katherine MAY, and Fred BOZETT sat in awe as they watched STRAUSS work with data. Juliet

often remarked to her fellow students that “wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to work with STRAUSS some day,” never thinking at the time that some day she would. Though the classes were remarkable in many ways – it was so exciting to see what STRAUSS could do with data – CORBIN recalls that much of what was said went over her head.

Among the students that worked in a collaborative way with STRAUSS at the time were FAGERHAUGH, SUCZEK, and WIENER (STRAUSS, FAGERHAUGH, SUCZEK & WIENER 1985). FAGERHAUGH and STRAUSS were working on the pain study (FAGERHAUGH & STRAUSS 1977) and sometimes FAGERHAUGH would come to class and she and STRAUSS would demonstrate how they worked with data. According to CORBIN this had much influence on her because it put so much of the philosophy she had learned into perspective, showing interactionism in actual practice. Listening to CORBIN reflect back on those days brings us back into direct contact with one of the key figures in contemporary symbolic interactionism.

For me it was the “ultimate experience” speaking face to face with CORBIN about STRAUSS, similar to CORBIN as she described watching STRAUSS analyzing data with people like FAGERHAUGH during his qualitative analysis class. Though her contacts with Howard BECKER were limited to occasional evening discussions at Elihu GERSON’s Tremont Institute here too CORBIN felt the interactionist influence and the excitement of doing qualitative research. How fortunate for her and other students such as Adele CLARKE, Susan LEIGH STAR, and Joan FUJIMORA to have had that experience. It is totally impressive listening to her – she often mentions it, given STRAUSS’ emphasis on the process – talk about how important is to learn to think conceptually to do qualitative analysis.

At the time CORBIN was finishing her dissertation, Anselm STRAUSS was working with FAGERHAUGH on the pain study and beginning another study with FAGERHAUGH, WIENER, and SUCZEK on the use of technology in hospitals. In the 1970s STRAUSS had published, in collaboration with Berenice FISHER (a distant cousin of his), several papers on George Herbert MEAD and the Chicago Tradition (FISHER & STRAUSS 1978, 1979), which gave CORBIN a very good grounding in the philosophical tradition she had chosen as her own.

One would think that being at UCSF and working with STRAUSS would mean that doing the dissertation would be an easy task but it wasn’t. Phyllis STERN who was also a qualitative researcher and on CORBIN’s doctoral thesis committee took a teaching position out of state. Anselm STRAUSS went on sabbatical out of the country and when he returned he was ill and unavailable. CORBIN was left to work long distance with STERN, and with MERCER, who though sympathetic and supportive, was primarily a quantitative researcher. Somehow CORBIN managed to finish her dissertation. But still she

was unsatisfied about what she knew about Grounded Theory methodology. Though she could have returned to teaching at San Jose State, instead she chose to do a post-doctorate with STRAUSS. This time she vowed to really learn how to do Grounded Theory. Among her fellow post-docs were Janice SWANSON and Carole CHENITZ. The method classes were held in Anselm STRAUSS' home because he was continuing to recover from his illness and it was in these classes that CORBIN met Gerhard RIEMANN, Wolfram FISHER fellow students from Germany, and visitors such as Richard GRATHOFF, Hans Georg SOEFFNER, and Fritz SCHÜTZE, along with his student Ralf BOHNSACK, all from Germany, and Herman COENEN from The Netherlands. Later she met Bruno HILDENBRAND, Johann BEHRENS, and Doris SCHAEFFER all with qualitative interests. Though HILDENBRAND is more from the phenomenological tradition he too shares a love of qualitative research and together with CORBIN has written an article on Grounded Theory (CORBIN & HILDENBRAND 2000). These were wonderful days CORBIN recalls because of the stream of visitors both from within the U.S. and from abroad. The conversations were stimulating and it felt good to be a part of a cadre of fellow researchers devoted exclusively to doing qualitative research. The School of Nursing at UCSF and other major universities in those days leaned heavily towards quantitative research and it was difficult to find the stimulation and support for doing qualitative work.

It was while doing the post doctorate that CORBIN began her 15 year collaboration with STRAUSS. CORBIN was doing a study of couples, with one individual from the couple having a chronic illness (CORBIN & STRAUSS 1988). STRAUSS was recovering from his illness and not able to get out and do much research. As CORBIN brought her interviews to STRAUSS for discussion she noticed that he was very interested in the topic as it was something that he and his wife were undergoing at a very personal level. CORBIN asked STRAUSS if he was interested in working with her on the study and it was the beginning of their years of work together on that and on subsequent studies. They just kind of "hit it off" and worked well together because they were not competitive with each other.

There is no doubt that qualitative research and Grounded Theory have changed since those early days. There is the one-sided falling out with Barney GLASER, one sided because it was never STRAUSS' intention to create conflict. It is simply that after the two men stopped working together, both seemed to go their own way methodologically. Key figures in the current debate about the nature of Grounded Theory are Adele CLARKE (2005) and Kathy CHARMAZ (2006). Both have their visions and versions of the method, just as Phyllis STERN and Rita SCHREIBER do (2001). Even though this part of our interview could not be recorded, several times the mood and social atmosphere of different people who used to work around technology and Grounded Theory infused it. So we very often talked about the work Elihu M. GERSON did, and

Susan LEIGH STAR and Adele CLARKE are still doing. Grounded Theory, methodology and technology are good images with which to close my unrecorded conversation with CORBIN.

## 2. The Future of Grounded Theory

Remark: This second part of the interview was recorded with my computer, so I decided to transcribe it. Note the difference in the writing's style. Rather than a synopsis of our discussion it is much more of a conversation format.

CISNEROS: What are your ideas on the future of Grounded Theory approach?

CORBIN: I don't know what the future of Grounded Theory is. There are now many versions of the method and other than the fact they all share a desire to build theory from data, I don't know exactly what they have in common. I also find that researchers are combining methods, which are parts of Grounded Theory with some other method, using aspects of it, such as comparative analysis and theoretical sampling, but not for the purpose of actually building theory. So I would say that Grounded Theory has taken a path of its own. But then I think that we must expect that with methods. They evolve. But what Grounded Theory becomes doesn't concern me as much as what qualitative research has become. There is more emphasis on alternative methods and little interest in theory development. Students don't want to put in the long hard work that goes into theory building. Yet I don't understand how we can continue to develop the various professions without a knowledge base to build on theory, theory grounded in data. There are many researchers who are doing excellent work. I admire them very much. However there are those who seem to want fast solutions to doing data analysis. They are satisfied to pull out a few good themes without having to put the effort into doing an in-depth analysis that will lead to theme or concept development. The result is superficial work; which in turn gives qualitative research a bad name. Then there is this whole trend towards dramatizing findings and writing novels instead of research reports. I keep thinking that it's time for me to retire; some of this stuff is just too far out for me. But there is another point, perhaps some of the problem lies in the lack of good mentorship. Many teachers of research and committee members are not trained as qualitative researchers, and therefore cannot give proper guidance to their students.

CISNEROS: But even beyond a specific discipline, there are people doing Grounded Theory from the humanities, organizational studies, and even in computational studies. So it is not all lost, if you can imagine what the future is.

CORBIN: It is true that there are still persons and places that are interested in theory building and doing solid qualitative work. I tend to find these people in professions that are more science oriented, certainly people outside sociology.

For example, while here in Brazil I was asked to do a lecture at Mackenzie University in the School of Business. They are more traditional and want methods with some system and rigor. The department was well represented by both qualitative and quantitative researchers. They showed a great deal of interest and asked excellent questions mainly about how qualitative differs from quantitative and when one would use one form of research over the other. I think that we need more discussions like that. It really enhances understanding between methods and researchers and opens options. They were also very interested in the theory building aspects of qualitative methods. I enjoyed very much working with this group of people, as you can well understand.

### 3. The Third Edition of “Basics of Qualitative Research”

CISNEROS: In our last informal conversation you told me you are now preparing the third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research*. In this edition you want to add a section on the philosophical notions or underpinnings of STRAUSS’ approach to Grounded Theory. Can you say a little more about that?

CORBIN: I think that it is very important to state the philosophical traditions that underlie a method. Understanding these foundations is important because they influence the logic and methodological strategies that are used. In the previous editions of *Basics* the section on philosophical underpinnings was removed by the editor because of what he stated was a lack of space. This time I will refuse to remove it. It is especially important to have this section now because we know that our perspectives and belief systems influence how we view and work with data. We want our readers to understand why it is important to look at experiences, feelings, action/interaction, to denote the structure or context in which these are located, and why it is important to study process. We come from an interactionist, DEWEYian, and philosophical tradition, with a little constructionism and post-modernism thrown in.

It is funny looking back because when I was trained, as a field researcher in the mid-1970s, the emphasis was on objectivity, a distancing between the researcher and the research. Now we certainly know better and I think that the recognition of what we as persons bring to the research and our involvement in the data collection and analysis processes are some of the better ideas to have come about in qualitative research in recent years. But a lot of the stuff that came out, some of the postmodern stuff, some of the feminist stuff, some of the constructionist stuff I think has shaped me and will shape the way I will present the new version of *Basics*.

Now that the new edition of *Basics* is almost finished, I can say that I am quite happy with it. I did something different not certain about how it would come out. What I did was do a study (not a very extensive one) through all the



steps from concept identification to theorizing in front of the eyes of the reader. I just picked up some field notes and started analyzing them in the form of memos. The study covers several chapters. I wanted to demystify the process of analysis. I also wanted to show students how a researcher can use different types of materials. I hope my example of a research projects works as intended.

CISNEROS: It seems to me like in the third version of *Basics of Qualitative Research* you will try to correct some misunderstandings.

CORBIN: I think I will try to correct some misunderstandings, I think I will try to open up the method and make it more flexible and useful to a variety of researchers. Of course one is never satisfied with what one has written in the past, and there is no way one can satisfy all of one's critics but I think I am a different person today than who I was when the first and second editions were written. The book has to be different today because I have evolved as a researcher, mostly through the interaction with other people.

CISNEROS: Is it a kind of process of maturation?<sup>1</sup>

CORBIN: Yes! I think it is a process of maturation but also of knowledge acquisition. I will never accept the notion that we don't need theory, though I don't believe that every research project must lead to theory development. There is room for everything. Even theatrical productions (disseminating research findings through a play) have their place, as long as there remains the recognition that these are alternative methods and that concepts and theory are still necessary for knowledge development. Insights and understandings are valuable and can be gained in multiple ways, but so are sound, well-developed concepts and theory. The latter will never be outdated.

Jane GILGUN, my well respected colleague and friend, and I go back and forth about all these recent trends in qualitative research. She has written an article that she says has been accepted by Norman DENZIN for *Qualitative Inquiry* (see GILGUN 2004). She thinks of the article as a literary work rather than a research report. I am curious to see it because I think novel writing is a genre of its own and though there are novels such as those of DICKENS and BALZAC that did bring about social change, they were written by trained

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<sup>1</sup> Doing the interview and afterwards I realized the question about the misunderstandings around the first two editions of *Basics of Qualitative Research* could not possibly be discussed at the moment, not only because it is a very sensitive topic but also needs a deep and wide answer not appropriate for an interview format report. So, I did ask CORBIN later, when I was editing the interview if I could refer readers to the four points of the debate with RENNIE (1998) that can be summarized as: 1) using experience as a data; 2) meaning of hypothesis "testing"; 3) what are referred to as "macro" conditions and from where these are derived in Grounded Theory analysis; and 4) concept of process. As she wrote in those days (CORBIN 1998, p.121) about the debate generated by the first edition that "... though debate is important because it stimulates the discussion that moves a field forward, that was nor our intent when we wrote the text ..." she recognizes later that the very hard part was "... to put into words what is a very difficult process to convey: Anselm STRAUSS' way of thinking and working with data ..."

novelists and not sociologists. Jane claims that there is social science in her “novel” I want to see where the science fits in and where the novel comes in.

CISNEROS: Can you say a little more about this?

CORBIN: Well, as I’ve stated I think that doing science is the purpose of doing research. Not science in the quantitative sense but science in the sense of discovering concepts and concept development. If I am going to write a novel, I will write a nice juicy novel with lots of sex and action. I suppose I could base it on people I’ve known. Perhaps it is because I come from a practice discipline. I can’t see making a change in the way nurses practice based on some novel that I might write, even if I gathered the information for the novel from interviews. The difference, as I see it, is the degree of creative license that one can take. If one is going to change the way a profession practices, the change better be based on sound and grounded data and not on some creative whim that a researcher might have. It is good to dramatize things because drama can make a point. But if we get too far away from the notion of science in qualitative research, then what happens to knowledge development in fields like nursing? These fields will have to resort entirely to quantitative studies and will miss the richness and contributions of qualitative research. We need some balance in qualitative research. People can experiment, innovate, but we still need some grounding. Perhaps after the third edition of *Basics* is finished I should write that juicy novel.

CISNEROS: I know that you really like some Latin-Americans writers, like Jorge AMADO, Gabriel GARCIA-MARQUEZ; in some ways they represent your way to know something about our Latin-American social realities, so what they represent for you is the way to get knowledge about our realities.

CORBIN: I think that for example, when I read Jorge AMADO I developed a wonderful feeling for the people of Bahia: who they are, their heritage, their beliefs, their experiences, their outlook at life, and also about place, I mean their spirituality, their emotions, something about what it is like to live in that part of the world. Reading gives me great ability to feel, to think about things, but I do not see reading these novels as providing the scientific background needed to make change. I went to Bahia on this trip to Brazil and I saw that beneath the surface of what is a beautiful place there are problems that remain unresolved. The Blacks still hold the less well-paying jobs, and have problems getting a good education. It was such a wonderful place to visit, so colorful and warm, I think it would be a good place to go and do some qualitative research that would hopefully lead to change.

CISNEROS: In your view ...

CORBIN: I guess I see the goal of social sciences as more than creating understanding but in being able to shape events that constrain people. The idea is not to do for people as much as give them the tools to do it for themselves, that is the knowledge. The early Chicago interactionists went out into the field to see

the problems first hand and report back on them. They were change agents. But they were also credible scientists and not novelists or dramatists. Anselm was a change agent, especially in the area of chronic illness. But he never would have had the impact that he did, or trained as many students, or influenced so much thought if he had not maintained his identity as a social SCIENTIST! He never lost that amidst all this change. I guess it all goes back to the whole Chicago tradition.

#### 4. Grounded Theory as an Activism

CISNEROS: It seems to me that behind symbolic interactionism there is a kind of social engagement, like an activism.

CORBIN: Yes, exactly! You want to make differences in people's lives and in order to make the differences you have to be like an active participant, a stirrer upper of ideas. That is what the early school of Chicago sociologists did – PARK, THOMAS, HUGHES. They went into the field to gather information, and based on that information brought about change. I see activism as an important part of doing research, but who will listen to you if you don't present your findings in a credible scientific manner – not quantitative scientific but qualitative scientific.

CISNEROS: Do you feel all this kind of responsibility in the Grounded Theory approach?

CORBIN: Oh yes! I think I owe that to Anselm STRAUSS. He saw theory development as a way of knowing and improving the world. I owe it to him to keep that vision alive. When he first started doing research on chronic illness, people were still focused on acute illness. They saw having heart disease as an acute problem, not a chronic one that had implications for how you lived your life. It was Anselm and the work of his students and associates that brought to light: the whole issue of "living with chronic illness." Now of course that thought has become so much a part of mainstream thinking that no one reflects back on where it all came from.

CISNEROS: The role of the novel's writer in social transformation is different from the grounded theoretician?

CORBIN: Theory is different than a novel. Novels can provide insight and understanding. They can also be written to entertain and lift the mind. But the purpose of theory is to provide a theoretical base for action, not to entertain. The theoretical base is built on concepts derived from data, data gathered from persons who are living with and experiencing the situations under study. The other day when we were talking Michael PATTON related how he had a group of children present a play about his findings. I am sure that was a very effective

technique for putting across a point, but I am willing to bet that the school board that hired him also wanted a detailed research report, because you can't hold a theatrical production in your hands and go back to it over and over again to see what needs to be done. Boards and agencies that fund research want findings that they can hold in their hands, show what knowledge they have gained for their money. A combination of the two isn't bad, report and production. Maybe after I write my steamy novel I'll write a play.

## 5. Grounded Theory Around the World

CISNEROS: Now I am just curious to hear from you what your opinion is about the different experiences of doing Grounded Theory in different countries around the world.

CORBIN: I have done workshops in Japan, in Norway, in Sweden, in England, in Korea, Germany, Canada, Brazil and Mexico. It is very interesting working with these different groups because the topics they study are different and their approaches to doing research are different. In countries such as Japan Grounded Theory is appealing because it has some structure to it. Japan is a structured society. I have difficulty loosening them up and getting them to think more freely and openly.

CISNEROS: What do you think about the relationship between the "Asian mind" and Grounded Theory?

CORBIN: As I said, Japan is a structured society and so they like some structure to their methods. It is difficult to put across the idea of flexibility of procedures and creativity in their use. I know the Grounded Theory books have been translated into Japanese. However, since I don't read Japanese I don't know how accurate the translations are or if they bring out the fluid and dynamic nature of this method.

CISNEROS: I am quite surprised because I have read a lot of articles in different international journals where people report doing Grounded Theory in Thailand, Taiwan, China, Korea, and Japan.

CORBIN: Yes, a lot of people claim to be doing Grounded Theory studies. But whether or not they are building theory is quite another matter. People do the work according to their understanding of the method and there is a broad range of that understanding. Much of the reports I read are very good. There is also a lot of work being done all over the world, not only in Asia, that claims to be theory that bears no resemblance to theory, Grounded Theory or otherwise. In fact, some research is quite superficial. It depends upon how much training the individual has, where he or she received the research training, and how flexible they are. I had Shigeo Saiki-CRAIGHILL, a Japanese woman who came and

spent some time with me. First she had studied with Anselm in his analysis class. Then she attended a seminar that Anselm and I taught for students working on their dissertations. But still she felt the need for more training, so we spent three weeks together working on her data. She has published quite extensively in Japan and is very well respected. It is interesting because though she is doing qualitative work, even the physicians are impressed with her findings about the cancer experience of children and their parents. Her research is very insightful and very well done. Setsuo MIZUNO is another Japanese researcher, who does impressive work (see for example MIZUNO 2003). He translated the *Discovery of Grounded Theory Book* and has run seminars and classes on Grounded Theory even though he has his own methods of analysis. Along with Shigeiko and others, MIZUNO has had a great impact on Japanese understanding of Grounded Theory. One of the problems that I've run into when working with students from Asian countries is their kind of insecurity in naming concepts. This is probably a cultural thing, shyness. They tend to want to stick to traditional concepts like coping to explain things. But with coaching and training they do quite well. What is more interesting to me when dealing with international students are the concepts that cannot be translated into another language because there is no translation. I found this especially so when working in Japan and Korea.

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