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COVID Mask Wearing: Identity and Materiality

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Slick data visualizations and authoritative daily tallies of infection and death statistics allow us to know the COVID-19 pandemic as a global phenomenon, but the local variabilities remain confounding. In the United States and Europe one of the fundamental questions asked throughout the COVID-19 pandemic—immediately after the question “How did things get so bad?”—is the question “How did countries in Asia manage it so well?” Some generalizations seem obvious. While Americans waited anxiously for guidance from the federal government in mid-March of 2020, news reports from abroad showed the empty Wuhan highways, South Koreans lined up for nasal swab tests, and Singaporeans downloading contact tracing apps on their phones (Goggin 2020; Lee and Lee 2020; Taylor 2020). The most universal image was that of people wearing face masks to slow the spread of infection. East Asian countries were taking aggressive countermeasures while Donald Trump was promising that the “China Plague” would simply go away, “like a miracle.”¹ By 31 December 2020, a year after the first case of COVID-19 was reported by the World Health Organization, the United States reported 352,998 COVID deaths and Italy counted 74,159 dead, while South Korea reported 900 deaths, 29 in Singapore, and 7 deaths were reported in Taiwan.

To what do we owe these differences? Are these variabilities tied to the competency of elected officials, or to investments in national health systems? Perhaps the differences have more to do with hard-to-measure historical trajectories, qualitative data points that evade crisp delineation on a COVID-tracking digital dashboard. Grasping for explanations, some Western journalists and politicians dug up and

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¹ “40 Times Trump Said the Coronavirus Will Go Away,” *Washington Post*, 3 November 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/40-times-trump-said-the-coronavirus-would-go-away/2020/04/30/d2593312-9593-4ec2-aff7-72c1438fca0e_video.html

repeated longstanding tropes of Asian collectivism, submissiveness to government mandates, and techno-enthusiasm. In these tellings “Asia” became a single place, “Asians” became a race, and the face mask (among other infection interventions) stood in as the symbol of anti-COVID success. As S. Nathan Park wrote in *Foreign Policy* during the height of the first wave in the USA: “This is a long-standing pattern of Orientalism. Whenever a social policy seems to work well in an Asian country . . . Westerners—Americans in particular—are quick to claim that such policy was possible only because of Asia’s supposedly homogenous populations and harmonious societies. Such harmony, however, exists only in a racist fantasy that imagines a society made up of meek, compliant Asians” (Park 2020).

Historians and STS scholars who specialize in contextualizing medical and public health practices wanted to go further. Jaehwan Hyun, Noa Hegesh, and Lisa Onaga convened a workshop at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science on “The Socio-Material History of Masked Societies in East Asia” as a means to engage with the popular discourse that “treats Asia as a single entity sharing a homogenous culture and uniform history. Diverse (un)entangled histories of the artifact and science, culture, politics, and society at a local level—that have made and unmade mask-wearing prevalent by region and country—become invisible in the common account.”² The workshop formed the basis of the essays collected in this special EASTS volume, a rich collection of historical narratives that in their organization and temporality make it very hard to draw flat conclusions about “Asian mask wearing” as a simplistic, durable tradition ascribable to national identity.

This crucial discussion of mask wearing across East Asian countries mirrors similar discussions happening in the United States. In a #COVIDCalls episode—“Face Coverings and the Politics of Protection”—on 15 May 2020 we (Knowles, Pearl, and Ray) came together to discuss mask wearing, with special attention to the tensions and contradictions around the practice in the United States (COVIDCalls 2020). Issues of politicization, religion, gender, race, history, identity, and materiality each surfaced in sometimes surprising ways. We discussed how it is that for some, masks could obscure identity; for others, particularly Black men in America, racial prejudice and discrimination based on skin color superseded the mask. Well into the pandemic, Black men in the US were being asked to remove their masks on public transportation and places of business. To allay the discriminatory fears of criminality that only Black men in masks faced, as well as to safely mask as a public health measure, some Black families adopted strategies that further connected identity to masking. They chose masks that were brightly colored, with smiling faces and soothing images, in order to counteract the ways that dangerous discrimination has always been forced upon Black people in public (Ray 2020). We were thrilled, therefore, to contribute to this special EASTS forum, a volume that we hope lays the groundwork for future fora that could take an even broader comparative scope.

1 Masks and Identity

There is something homogenizing about masks. This is true on a literal level: masked faces obscure facial features, hide distinguishing characteristics, and create

² Jaehwan Hyun in this volume.

a common visual image that can, as in the pandemic, stretch across populations. This is true on a metaphorical level: mass masking can create or perpetuate the notion of an undistinguished mass, eliding not just personal differences between geographic ones, political ones, economic ones, historical ones. This volume pushes back—hard, and fairly—on the racist homogenizing category of “Asia,” asking key questions about difference while showing that masks, and masking practice, and masking culture, and masking history, is deeply, deeply heterogeneous. Even in some Asian countries, Black people, primarily African migrants, faced harsher sanctions about mask wearing and other COVID-19 protocols (Vincent 2020). As Asians were being blamed for COVID-19 in America, Black people were being blamed for spikes in some Asian countries. Consequently, the pandemic has illuminated existing inequalities, particularly dealing with racism and xenophobia.

Masking is not an identity. Willingness to mask is not a homogeneous identity (Stanley-Becker 2020). But, as these deeply thoughtful papers show, masking makes us work a little harder to make sense of the public face; of people’s faces in public; of the relationship of the face to the individual self and the communal self, and, especially, to distinguish between the identity sign of “mask wearing” and the individual identities of people who wear masks.³ In the context of this pandemic, mask wearing in the Global North became politically weaponized. Just wearing a mask was itself an identity marker in certain contexts: wearing a mask indicated affiliation with those who took the pandemic seriously; who were concerned about caring not just for themselves but others; who were willing to listen to a particular set of robust medical and epidemiological suggestions; who tried to social distance and isolate both in their daily practice and in the way that they appeared in public, and even at times what a person’s political ideology was and probably still is.

Around the time of the George Floyd protests in the US in late May 2020, the mask became, for some, an even more explicit expression of identity. People began to use not just the fact of masking but its surface as a space of messaging, wearing masks with political slogans and other forms of expression.⁴ While some people had been doing this all along either strategically, as in the case of Black families who broadcast safety on their masks, or as a means of fashion or whimsy, the Floyd protests and the political weaponization of the mask took the identity potential of masking and made it (even more) explicit.⁵

Mask cultures are highly variable and embedded, within cultures, within countries and geopolitical entities, within class structures, within professional and educational contexts. All of these contexts are also features of identity, and it is deeply valuable to explore how masking practice, masking laws, and masking history both reflect and engage with these other forms of identity expression and construction. That’s a lot of buzzwords. To put it another way: there is no such thing as a “masked society,” and certainly no such thing as “Asian masking practice.” There are, as these papers show, diverse and rich practices of masking that differ greatly around the material culture and production technologies of the

³ For more on the cultural context of the face as symbol, see Pearl (2010, 2017) and Helfand (2019).

⁴ “Masked not Muzzled: The Art of the Political Mask.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/jul/15/masked-not-muzzled-the-art-of-the-political-mask>

⁵ “In Pictures: The Seven Masks of Naomi Osaka.” *Al Jazeera*, 13 September 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2020/9/13/in-pictures-the-seven-masks-of-naomi-osaka>

masks themselves; the modes of distribution of masks and how they can reflect the interplay between various countries and scholarly traditions; and temporal urgencies and medical discourses around when and how masks are needed. And why? Sometimes it is because of the weather: masks might help keep someone warm. Sometimes it is because of illness. Sometimes it is to protect oneself against others, and sometimes, to protect others against oneself. Masking practice is in fact highly localized, deeply culturally embedded, and, through just a little bit of historical attention and research, reveal as much about how countries and cultures differ as how much they may have in common.

Tomohisa Sumida traces the German-Japanese mask discussions at the end of the nineteenth century, highlighting how translation practices can themselves frame how masking is understood. Masking could be indexed to professional status, both in terms of who knew to mask and whose work—during illness outbreaks, medical professionals paid particular attention to masking—made it an imperative. Mask wearing in these contexts could be tied to both professional identity and educational and scholarly networks, creating a more elite culture of masking that was later fostered as a public health and collective responsibility practice. Meng Zhang takes an imperial perspective, exploring the way that both colonial networks and elite structures engaged with masks as a form of discipline and, in some ways, stigmatization. There are powerful resonances with this work and the ways that mask wearing is racially mediated in the US. This historical analysis connects Chinese nationalism, notions of elite civilization and educating imperatives, and foreignness with masking networks and practices. Here, the mask is not just a marker of elitism on the individual level, but on a geopolitical and national level that is strategically deployed and rhetoricized alongside practical interventions. Heewon Kim and Hyungsub Choi turn our attention to South Korea, pointing out the ways that current masking practice has deep resonance with historical events and structures. In this way, pandemic masking was a performance of Korean-ness embedded in both history and the physical environment of the land itself. This form of identity performance is thus intimately tied with both ideas of Korea and the physical reality of Korea, creating an important connection between self, place, and other that was both a response to, and a creation of, the Korean self.

In all cases, masking cultures are both individual and collective, with their own histories and narratives that showcase the links between masking as an identity, and masking because of identity. And, importantly, these are different from one another, and equally different to masking as an obstruction of personal identity. It is certainly the case that masking can do precisely this: we do not see individual faces when we see masks. But if we look, and if we listen, and if we learn, we can see how masks are an instantiation of a whole set of identities, histories, and experiences.

2 The Materiality of the Mask

It is necessary to interrogate masks as forms of identity-making, cultural othering, and even as instruments of state control. It is equally crucial to consider the materiality of the mask itself. The wild diversity of materials and designs for masks, not to mention the myriad “misuses” and modifications among wearers

show us the vitality of the mask as a materialized venue for public health politics. Among STS scholars it is an essential methodology of practice to interrogate the social and the material not as separate, or merely intertwined, but as co-constructive. Bruno Latour's observation comes back to us here: material objects become perhaps most clear in "the engineer's design department . . . the marketer's trial panels, the user's home, and the many socio-technical controversies. In these sites objects live a clearly complex and multiple life" (Latour 2005: 80). Face masks most certainly lead complex and multiple lives. In her recent edited volume *New Materials*, Amy Slaton problematizes the recurrent invocation of novelty and innovation as desirable features in material objects. The "new" means much more than merely keeping up with fashion—fierce struggles are always underway over material newness. "In the simplest sense," Slaton writes, "any perception of material novelty involves demarcating some matter or object as distinct from and perhaps preferable to some other . . . that demarcation must also be foregrounded while attendant continuities in economic structures, political authority, or cultural influence are relegated to the background" (Slaton 2020: 5). A simple piece of material covering the mouth and nose can do all that? Here again the face mask does not fail us—as we learn in these essays, even in widely different times and places, techniques of face mask manufacture and wear offer insights into fierce cultural battles over tradition v. modernity, indigeneity v. foreignness, progress v. savagery.

Tomohisa Sumida's article flips the script on the idea that Westerners learn their face masking from Asians. Sumida documents in detail how a period of episodic outbreaks, including plague and influenza, led Japanese doctors to search out Western techniques, including "Jeffreys' Respirator" (users of which appreciated its fashionable properties) from England, and various mask models from Germany including cloth and sponge varieties.⁶ Meng Zhang describes masks in "semi-colonial China" as part of a public "sanitary performance" during the first half of the 20th century, we learn that mask "wearers were either Western-trained physicians or educated elites, making wearing a mask a taste of bourgeoisie, a token of self-protectiveness and even a strong political gesture that could be incompatible with the new ideology in the post-1949 era."⁷ The material properties of masks, as such, were less relevant to infection control than they were to anti-modernism control. In South Korea, Hyungsub Choi and Heewon Kim carefully point out that mask-wearing was not initially an infectious disease public health intervention, masks were instead introduced as the government and citizens grew more concerned about "hwangsa"—the fine particulate dust that blows across the Korean Peninsula from China annually. We learn that these masks became readily available in the early 2000s, an industry grew up, with attendant concerns about the performance and quality of the masks. Advertising was crucial, consumer feedback multiplied. A scientific materials performance standards system emerged. When COVID arrived on the peninsula, the public was already prepared to think critically not only about the practice of mask wearing, but also about quite specific technical details as to the quality and design of masks. Their essay usefully extends the STS literature on technical practices of materials standard setting and modification: questions around who decides

⁶ Tomohisa Sumida, in this volume.

⁷ Meng Zheng, in this volume.

a standard and by what measures are perennial ones as we continually find ourselves in a world remade by new materials (Knowles 2017). “The case of facial masks during the COVID-19 pandemic,” the authors explain, “shows that interpretations of performance standards can be malleable. Between January and April 2020, there were scorching debates, both within expert communities and among the public, over the appropriate grade of masks to wear to protect oneself and the broader community against the virus.”⁸ From the perspective of the mask in South Korea, an environmental health problem was recast instantaneously as an infectious disease problem. Bringing those two processes into one frame is an important analytical move, useful for scholars studying the COVID pandemic in environmental justice communities around the world. The debate goes beyond South Korea, too. In 2020, the “KF94” mask became an international export, highly desired in places like the United States where N95 masks remain difficult to obtain today. Overall, the manufacture of masks has not received enough attention—where are they made, who makes them, what are the international standards regimes, the supply chains—does the industrialized making of masks reiterate certain divides in society, does it add to the air pollution load? And what about the mask waste stream—a material of safety can become a material of waste very, very quickly, just scan the sidewalk in nearly any city around the world today, you are likely to find discarded masks. The opposite is also worthy of consideration—how do people connect with masks at a personal level? People grow attached to them, they share favored brands with friends and family. People wear them in places after infection levels subside, sometimes because of lingering concerns over infection, or the desire to avoid seasonal colds and allergies. We should be aware, too, that like any material object, subcultures of style and performance will present us with all manner of modifications and “extra” data about the role of the face mask in the pandemic and beyond. Can a face mask be cool, can it become a family heirloom, will it be a standard object in COVID museums of the future? Surely so, and when they do they will require patient interpretation, explanation that goes beyond a misleading statement like “this is what Asians wore in those days.”

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⁸ Hyungsub Choi and Heewon Kim, in this volume.

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