

Writing against “Mask Culture” Orientalism and COVID-19 Responses in the West

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Article abstract

Since the first coronavirus outbreak hit China in January 2020, how different countries respond to the crisis has sparked interesting discussions regarding their respective history, political systems, and culture. In the West, many people attribute the acceptance of universal mask-wearing among Asian populations to a so-called “mask culture.” This paper argues that “mask culture” emerges during the pandemic as an Orientalist concept in Western public discourses to define the East and to freeze differences between “self” and “other.” Orientalism in its everyday manifestation has not only contributed to the initial underestimation of the pandemic in the West; but has also provided a culturalist foundation for essentialist representations of Asian cultures. Self-other binary has greatly shaped Western responses to and narratives of the pandemic in two prominent ways: first, mask-wearing has been considered as an “Asian” practice associated with other Asian cultural stereotypes such as submissiveness to state power; and second, the threat of the coronavirus was initially viewed as minimal because outbreaks in Asia were far and distanced, and thereafter, the suffering of the Other was not considered urgent in the West.

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Writing against “Mask Culture”

Orientalism and COVID-19 Responses in the West

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Abstract: Since the first coronavirus outbreak hit China in January 2020, how different countries respond to the crisis has sparked interesting discussions regarding their respective history, political systems, and culture. In the West, many people attribute the acceptance of universal mask-wearing among Asian populations to a so-called “mask culture.” This paper argues that “mask culture” emerges during the pandemic as an Orientalist concept in Western public discourses to define the East and to freeze differences between “self” and “other.” Orientalism in its everyday manifestation has not only contributed to the initial underestimation of the pandemic in the West; but has also provided a culturalist foundation for essentialist representations of Asian cultures. Self-other binary has greatly shaped Western responses to and narratives of the pandemic in two prominent ways: first, mask-wearing has been considered as an “Asian” practice associated with other Asian cultural stereotypes such as submissiveness to state power; and second, the threat of the coronavirus was initially viewed as minimal because outbreaks in Asia were far and distanced, and thereafter, the suffering of the Other was not considered urgent in the West.

Keywords: mask culture; Orientalism; COVID-19; China

Résumé: Depuis que la première vague de coronavirus a frappé la Chine en janvier 2020, la réaction des différents pays à la crise a donné lieu à des discussions intéressantes sur l’histoire, la culture et le système politique respectifs de ceux-ci. En Occident, beaucoup ont attribué l’acceptation du port généralisé du masque par les populations asiatiques à une soi-disant « culture du masque ». Cet article soutient que la « culture du masque » est apparue pendant la pandémie comme un concept orientaliste dans les discours publics occidentaux pour définir l’Orient et figer les différences entre « soi » et « l’autre ». L’orientalisme, dans ses manifestations quotidiennes, a non seulement contribué à la sous-estimation initiale de la pandémie en Occident, mais a également fourni un fondement culturaliste aux représentations essentialistes

des cultures asiatiques. L'opposition binaire entre le « soi et l'autre » a fortement influencé les réponses et les récits occidentaux face à la pandémie, et ce, de deux manières principales: premièrement, le port du masque a été considéré comme une pratique « asiatique » et associé à d'autres stéréotypes culturels tels que la soumission au pouvoir de l'État; deuxièmement, la menace du coronavirus a été minimisée sous prétexte que les flambées épidémiques en Asie étaient lointaines et distantes, et la souffrance de l'Autre n'a pas été perçue comme une urgence en Occident.

Mots-clés : culture du masque; orientalism; COVID-19; Chine

One World, Two Pandemics

For many people in North America, the ripple effects of the coronavirus epidemic in China only became palpable last March when a series of unprecedented lockdown measures were implemented in a state of emergency. The draconian measures taken by the Chinese government in a desperate attempt to prevent the virus from infecting larger populations stunned the world as they again validated China's authoritarian style of governance (Caduff 2020). With limited knowledge on the virus, many people living in North America originally observed the Chinese episode of the epidemic from afar, barely convinced that Western democratic countries would implement similar lockdown mandates. When I started talking to my friends in Canada about the necessity of wearing masks in early March, my lovely Canadian landlady, who purposely went to dine at a Wuhan Noodle restaurant in Toronto in solidarity with Chinese communities, also thought that I was overreacting.

Nevertheless, the scientific evidence presented by public health experts in North America has persuaded many that strict and prompt quarantine measures were needed to “flatten the curve,” regardless of authoritarian or democratic political regimes. As a result, the pandemic has disrupted people's taken-for-granted “normal” lives insofar as quotidian tasks, such as grocery shopping, have become stressful. By mid-March 2020, many major universities in Ontario had officially announced their switch to remote learning and non-essential businesses had been ordered to close. However, for many expatriate Chinese in North America, these lockdown measures still seemed to have come into effect too late. Echoing what Henry (2020) observed in the Chinese communities in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I have also noticed that many Chinese in

Toronto, especially those who follow Chinese social media, have been fearful for a looming global public health crisis since early January when the first outbreak hit Wuhan, a city in central China now widely acknowledged as the first epicentre of the pandemic. For them, there have been two pandemics: one in China that they have been painfully witnessing from overseas, and the other in North America which they are experiencing themselves. As the epidemic unfolded in China in early 2020 and gradually made its way to the West, Chinese communities in North America have not only been concerned with the revival of anti-Asian racism, but have also been frustrated by the initial underestimation of the crisis and the persistent politicization of mask-wearing in the West. For scholars who study the history of human responses to acute epidemic diseases, the early mismanagement of the outbreaks in both China and many Western countries comes as no surprise. Research has found that at the start of most epidemics in human history such as yellow fever, cholera, and typhus, many people, from physicians to politicians, underestimated the severity of the problem. However, fear and anxiety would develop as the epidemics started to gain strength, together with reactions such as fleeing, denying or scapegoating outsiders (Fox 1989, cited in Hewlett and Hewlett 2008, 133).

This article sheds light on the reasons behind the shared frustration among many members of the Chinese communities in North America surrounding the issue of mask-wearing. I argue that Orientalism in its everyday manifestation¹ has not only contributed to the initial underestimation of the pandemic in the West; but has also provided a culturalist foundation for essentialist representations of the so-called “mask culture” in China. Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said in his influential work, refers to the style of thought and the mode of discourse based upon “an ontological and epistemological distinction” made between the East and the West (Said 1978, 2). More specifically, it is a Western style for dominating and restructuring the Orient by authorizing views of it (Said 1978, 3). In doing so, the West “gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and...underground self,” (Said 1978, 3) or in Trouillot’s words, “an alter ego” (1991, 28). The West as a cultural and ideological project is inconceivable without the construction of the Other as “absence and negation” (Trouillot 1991, 32), or as metaphors defined through a series of lacks (Ferguson 2006, 2; see also Mbembe 2001). Evidently, Western narratives of the Other often reinforce and perpetuate the symbolic order of Orientalism based on “the assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other” (Abu-Lughod 1991, 137). As Abu-Lughod convincingly argues, “culture,” a concept

“shadowed by coherence, timelessness and discreteness,” (1991, 147) is a language of power often used to create generalizations and boundaries, and to further legitimize self-other binary. During the pandemic, the Orientalist ideology behind “mask culture” is reflected in various forms of race-based aggression where mask-wearing Asians experience social actions of Othering in public such as eyeballing, avoidance, and verbal or physical harassment (Abidin and Zeng 2020). As this paper will further demonstrate, self-other binary has greatly shaped the Western responses to and narratives of the coronavirus pandemic in two prominent ways: first, mask-wearing has been considered as an “Asian” practice associated with other Asian cultural stereotypes such as submissiveness to state power; and second, the threat of the coronavirus was initially viewed as minimal because outbreaks in Asia were far and distanced, and thereafter, the suffering of the Other was not considered urgent in the West.

Against “Mask Culture”

The spread of COVID-19 to almost all countries and territories has again proven the interconnectedness of the world we are living in. National boundaries are porous, and people are always on the move despite travel restriction and border closure measures. How government officials and the general public in different countries respond to the crisis has sparked interesting discussions referencing their respective history, politics, and culture. One question that has surfaced frequently in this discussion is the comparison of attitudes towards mask-wearing in the East and West, as journalist Tessa Wong asks in a BBC report: “Why do people in some countries wear face masks but those in other countries don’t?” (Wong 2020) Many in the West have observed that the general public in Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Korea seem to have complied with universal mask-wearing mandates with little controversy. Asians in North America also appear to have started wearing masks early on, some even before extensive lockdown measures were taken, which led to incidents of Asians being harassed. For instance, an iconic lion statue in Vancouver’s historic Chinatown quickly became a target of racist graffiti during the pandemic (Little 2020). By early October 2020, figures compiled by the Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC) showed that more than 600 incidents of anti-East Asian racism had been reported across Canada, a third of which involved a form of assault such as coughing, spitting, or physical violence (CBC News 2020). These incidents in Canada are only a few examples of a much stronger resurgence of the “yellow peril” sentiment against Asians in North America. Derogative racial slurs such as “China Virus” and

“Kung Flu” not only circulate in anonymous or private settings, but are also used by politicians like US President Donald Trump in various public speeches, further inciting racialized prejudice and hatred in the society. Just three days before I received the proof copy of this article, a shooter, partly motivated by anti-Asian racist sentiment, killed eight people at three massage spas in and around Atlanta, among which six were of East Asian descent.

In addition to the frustrating amount of blatant racist incidents, many forms of “soft racism” that posit racial differences as “cultural,” and therefore, immutable or insurmountable, have become more visible. As Abu-Lughod (1991) cogently argues in her influential essay “Writing Against Culture,” the problem of generalization and essentialized representation of a particular culture derives from the “the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness” they tend to produce (Abu-Lughod 1991, 152). The incautious use of “culture” is often part of the Orientalist institution and functions as an essential tool for distinguishing Self and Other. In the current pandemic, the concept of “mask culture” adds to the pool of examples of contemporary Orientalism: it is created and perpetuated by the West to describe a certain behaviour of the Other that is considered fundamentally different from the West because their “culture” is fundamentally different. More specifically, many people in the West attribute the difference in attitudes towards mask-wearing as a “cultural” one and consider “mask culture” quintessentially “Asian.” Such essentialized representation of “Asian culture” is flawed if we take the following two aspects into consideration.

First, although not without resistance, mask-wearing was encouraged and accepted in both the East and the West to prevent the spread of contagious diseases in the early 20th century. The promotion of mask-wearing during the influenza pandemic in Japan and the pneumonic plague epidemic in China in the 1910s has been used to justify the “Asian” origin of the practice. In an article called “A quick history of why Asians wear surgical masks in public” written in 2014, the author traced the “obsession” of mask-wearing to an influenza pandemic in the early 20th century in Japan, but also considered air pollution of post-World War II industrialization and concepts in traditional Chinese medicine as factors contributing to the acceptance of mask-wearing (Yang 2014). In an article by Huang Wei, the author argues that experiences of a series of contagious diseases such as cholera, smallpox, diphtheria, and malaria during the first half of the 20th century pushed Chinese health authorities to promote mask-wearing as the cheapest means of prevention (Wei 2020) regardless of its effectiveness. Anthropologist Christos Lynteris (2018) found widespread use of

masks was indeed encouraged by health officials in Manchuria around 1910 but left no special impression on the region afterwards (Sand 2020) until massive adoption of face masks became prominent again during the SARS epidemic in 2002 (Lynteris 2020). It is also worth mentioning that mask-wearing became almost ubiquitous among urban dwellers during Beijing's "airpocalypse" in the period 2009 to 2014. The conscious choice of ordinary urban residents in Beijing to wear masks to protect against air pollution and to demonstrate their artistic or political statements has further enhanced images of mask-wearing Asians in Western media (see, for example, Wainwright 2014).

These theories using cultural and historical evidence to explain why Asian populations easily accept masks are interesting. However, they have selectively overlooked how masks were also used in the West as disease prevention tools in the history of epidemics and environmental crises. For instance, mask-wearing was also widely accepted in the West to prevent the spread of influenza. According to Cohn (2020), in October 1918, "the *Ogden Standard* reported that 'masks are the vogue,' while the *Washington Times* told of how they were becoming 'general' in Detroit" (Cohn 2020). Despite debates over the effectiveness of masks, California in the US, Alberta in Canada, and New South Wales in Australia made mask-wearing mandatory in 1918. Pictures from historical archives showing American Red Cross volunteers and police officers wearing masks in 1918 are available on major media platforms. So are pictures of people in Los Angeles wearing masks to filter airborne particles in a city besieged by smog in the 20th century or during the more recent incidents of wildfire. However, none of such images has been labelled as examples from a "mask culture." As Sand (2020) perceptively observes, there is nothing peculiarly "Asian" about wearing surgical masks. Or in French's words, "it hasn't always been the case that mask-wearing is an Asian proclivity" (French 2020). In short, the indiscriminate use of the concept of "mask culture" to essentialize Asian populations and the broader Orientalist discourses it tends to legitimate have mistakenly led people in the West to believe that mask-wearing has a long history in the East, but is a "new" practice to the West in 2020.

Second, Asians, more specifically, the Chinese population in this case, are not as "submissive" to mask-wearing mandates as Western media have portrayed. Although it might seem ubiquitous for Chinese to wear masks, Chinese health officials spent the first two months of the epidemic educating people to put their masks on, sometimes using invasive methods such as putting loudspeakers on a drone (Henry 2020) to loop recorded messages to residents living in

lockdown—measures described by many Chinese netizens as “hardcore disease prevention (*yinghe fangyi*).” Similar observations were made by many; as Wei noted, convincing the public to wear masks has been an ongoing struggle and millennials frequently complain about the difficulty of persuading elderly people to put on masks (Wei 2020). The sweeping mobilization of the Chinese society to emphasize individual responsibilities in the fight against the pandemic has taken many forms, including banners and posters in public spaces, ubiquitous usage of contact-tracing phone apps, and strict quarantine requirements (see Figure 1). Some Western commentators tend to associate “mask culture” with a strong sense of “collective fate” shared among Asian populations by conjuring the West-East dichotomy trope of “individualism versus collectivism.” However, for many Chinese people, collective fate is secondary compared to their individual safety in the pandemic. The universal adoption of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic comes from individual and collective acknowledgment of the danger of the virus and the severity of the disease. In simpler language, certainly people hope that their society overcomes the pandemic collectively, but meanwhile, no individual wants to get sick from catching the virus.

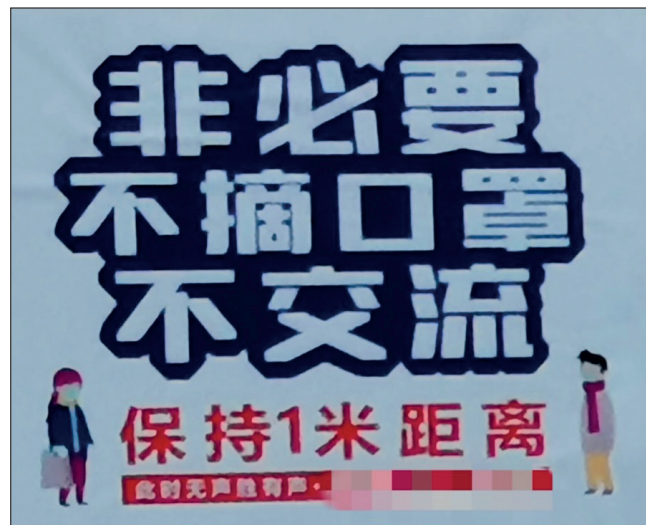


Figure 1: A Poster reminding the public to keep their masks on, 2021. An English translation of the content: “Do not take off your mask or communicate with each other unless necessary. Keep one-metre distance. Silence speaks louder than words.” Photo and translation by author.

The Politics of Masking and Unmasking

In the context of North America, another stereotype commonly associated with mask-wearing is the imagined submissiveness and docility to government power among Asian populations. Different forms of face-covering are often

stereotypically considered as submission to certain forms of domination. For example, As Abu-Lughod (2013) argues, the veiling of Muslim women is seen in the West as the ultimate sign of gender oppression. To challenge this assumption, she cites the work of Hanna Papanek (1982), who argues that for many Pakistani women, the burqa is used as “portable seclusion” that increases woman’s mobility by enabling them to move out of segregated spaces while still fulfilling the basic moral requirements of Islamic tradition (Abu-Lughod 2013, 36). Interestingly, masking as a strategy of face-covering in East Asia can serve similar empowering purposes. For instance, Yang (2014) pointed out that among many young Japanese, masks along with headphones have evolved into “social firewalls” to signal a lack of desire to communicate with people around them, especially for young women seeking to avoid harassment in public space.

In the West, the contention of mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic is focused on the seeming incommensurability between individual freedom and collective responsibility. Universal mask-wearing in Asia is an action often interpreted as a form of collective solidarity. For example, Baehr (2008) argued that during the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong in 2003, the social ritual of mask-wearing disguised individuals’ faces, which in turn made collective identity more salient. For some in the West, mask-wearing has become a symbol of violation of individual liberty and submission to state power. As a result, it has become increasingly irrelevant that mounting scientific evidence suggests appropriate and universal usage of face masks can effectively prevent the airborne transmission of the virus. As such, face masks are not merely considered personal protection equipment; instead, they have become manifestations of ideologies that distinguish the “leftists” from the “right-wingers” politically and the “responsible” from the “irresponsible” ethically. To an extent, Donald Trump’s mask removal ritual after being released from the hospital while still contagious exemplifies dangerous and absurd behaviors of using masks as political signifiers. In this sense, there might exist more similarities between the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the plague epidemics a century ago in Manchuria, China. In both pandemics, the mask is more than an apparatus that functions as personal protection equipment. Mask becomes *mask* charged with political significance. The difference is that in Manchuria a century ago, mask-wearing became “a performance of medical reason and hygienic modernity” (Lynteris 2018, 449); while today mask-wearing in North America has become a demonstration of political alignments with specific Americanized understandings of “individual freedom.”

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that the belief that *unmasking* is an individual action against excess state power is itself Western-centric. Assuming this belief as universal and applying it to Asian populations during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces Orientalist narratives of the Other. In Asia, instead of considering *unmasking* as part of the tradition of protest and disobedience, *masking* that protects anonymity symbolizes the power of collective protests and resistance movements, echoing the symbolic power of the Guy Fawkes mask in the movie *V for Vendetta*. For instance, in response to the Hong Kong protest, ongoing since 2019, Hong Kong authorities imposed a law banning face masks in public gatherings to curb mass protests, which in turn triggered more protests. In this case, fighting for the individual right to *mask* became the central battleground between government power and individual freedom. For Hong Kong protesters, masks were intentionally worn to protect against teargas and to avoid facial recognition technology. *Masking*, instead of *unmasking*, symbolizes disobedience in this context. As such, the rationale of many anti-maskers in the West during the COVID-19 pandemic that equates unmasking to personal liberty against excess government power is untenable in the contexts of Hong Kong protests. In fact, *unmasking* has gradually become a popular tool to suppress mass protests widely used by authorities equipped with facial recognition technologies in both the East and the West. As such, political meanings associated with *masking* and *unmasking* vary in different historical and social contexts. The glorification of the “timeless and universal” and often “American-exceptionalism” concept of freedom in the name of *unmasking*, reflects the essential characteristic of the West in a struggle for global dominance. (Foner 2003, cited in Lepselter 2016, 7) By associating *masking* in the East with a symbol of their lack of freedom, Orientalist representations once again brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and the Western empire (Said 1978, 203).

Irrelevant Suffering

Washington Post journalist Emily Rauhala wrote on Twitter on 24 March 2020:

One of the most painful lessons of this crisis is the extent to which America cannot or will not identify with Chinese pain. Every horror that is happening here happened first in Wuhan. We covered it. Many people did not care.

The tweet resonated strongly with members of the Chinese communities in North America, as there were plentiful reports by Chinese media early in the

coronavirus outbreak, revealing the severity of the crisis despite the censorship of information. Crucial knowledge about the new coronavirus and how to contain its transmission circulated by Chinese frontline doctors on Chinese media in early 2020 was rarely recognized or reported in Western media until much later.

As vaccines are gradually becoming available, people living through this unprecedented pandemic are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel. However, the question that people in the West should really reflect on is how implicated we are in the lives of the Other—those strangers suffering in a country faraway. The problem of an “American-exceptionalism” concept of freedom lies in the denial of the “reciprocal and material modes of sharing” that “describe a crucial dimension of our vulnerability, intertwinements and interdependence of our embodied social life” (Yancy 2020). The most difficult and important thing we must do remains to be “fully embracing the humanity of others and letting their suffering fracture our own existence” (Kim 2001, cited in Butt 2002, 4). Similarly, Butler identifies the relatedness of our social life and argues that in times of collective sufferings, “learning to mourn mass death means marking the loss of someone whose name we do not know, whose language we may not speak, who lives at an unbridgeable distance from where we live” (Butler 2020). How should people living in the West relate to the sufferings of others without reducing them to what Veena Das (1997) called “ornamental,” and how should we render the sufferings of the Other meaningful by learning from both their mistakes and their successes? More specifically, how should we understand the coronavirus outbreaks in China with balanced attention given both to the early mismanagement by the Chinese government, as well as to the later successful containment of the virus?

Some of the readers of this article might feel slight unease about the claims I am making about the West, especially considering that I have not explicitly distinguished either between American and Canadian contexts or among the diverse multicultural groups within each context. This can be explained by my own biased Orientalist understandings towards the West, or my “Occidentalism,” a concept defined by Xiaomei Chen as “a discursive practice that the Orientals adopt to construct its Western Other” (1995, 4). Like their Orientalist counterpart, the Orient sometimes “seeks to construe its [Western] Other by asserting a distorted and ultimately anxious image of its own uniqueness” (1995, 7). However, the goal of this article is neither to further dissect my own inevitable bias towards the West, nor to analyze the limitation of my positionality as a “halfie” anthropologist in generalizing the Chinese communities in North

America. In writing this article, I intend to critically analyze “mask culture” from a “native anthropologist” perspective and to use the concept as a timely example to highlight the flaws of contemporary Orientalist discourses. I mean to encourage meaningful reflections on the creation, circulation, and perpetuation of “mask culture” as an essentialized element of “Chineseness” or “Asian-ness” in Western public discourse. The kind of unease that some readers in the West might have captured is exactly what the Orient experiences when they are incorporated in the “sort of consensus” created by Orientalism — “certain things, certain types of statement, certain types of work [that] have seemed for the Orientalist correct” (Said 1978, 202), as well as when they are spoken on their behalf. To conclude, in order to understand the social acceptance of mask-wearing in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, anthropological lessons learned from Said’s Orientalism can provide useful approaches in analyzing the phenomenon. Journalists, scholars, and observers in the West should focus on the combined effects of individual and collective ethics embedded in broader social and political processes, instead of simply reducing the phenomenon of mask-wearing to yet another essentialized cultural tag called “mask culture.”

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Notes

¹ For more discussion of this concept and its everyday manifestation, see also the “Everyday Orientalism” blog: <https://everydayorientalism.wordpress.com/>

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