



Image 1 “The world of a wild child who chases his dream” Top prize 2015 National Geographic Photo Contest (Youth group) By Kelvin Yuen, Hong Kong

Exploration of Masks

During a time when political and health challenges have taken hold of Hong Kong

Emma Ting Wong, PhD

Hong Kong

In 2020, wearing a mask is not unusual for most people in the world. In particular, surgical masks have become a daily necessity when having face-to-face contact with other people.

This article invites you join me in a journey of reflection and exploration of the symbolic meanings of masks as experienced by a Hong Konger living under the powerful impact of current political and health challenges. I hope this brings to mind your own experiences by eliciting memories, associations, ideas and images about “Mask” as a symbol in personal, collective and socio-cultural contexts. There are many underlying archetypal meanings about the mask which are quite varied depending on which group of people you consider. I would like to start this reflective journey with a brief description of Hong Kong. Hong Kong originated as a Chinese fishing village. Eventually, it came under the colonial rule of Great Britain from 1841 to 30th June 1997. China resumed exercising sovereignty over Hong Kong beginning 1st July 1997. Since then, Hong Kong has become a special administrative region of The Republic of China. Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated metropolitan areas in the world. It is well-known as a city “in-between”, characterised by its multiple languages and cultures. Hong Kong is in-between the “Eastern” and the “Western” world in many different ways. Most of the people are Chinese in race and speak Cantonese, although both English and Cantonese are the official languages and a large proportion of people in Hong Kong are bilingual. We have created our own highly specific and unique Hong Kong English expressions. One of the most popular is 加油(Add Oil) which means encouragement or support to a person, originating with a literal Cantonese two word phrase that refers to injecting fuel into a tank. We tend to call people by their English rather than their Chinese name. We often use chopsticks, forks and spoons interchangeably. We celebrate both Eastern and Western festivals. We enjoy public holidays from both cultures and that

includes Christmas, Easter, Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn festivals. We have adopted traditional Chinese family values such as filial piety, hierarchy by age and face-saving practises. But we also value the most “westernized” values such as freedom, democracy and respect for individual autonomy.

But, the key focus of this paper is on the role that the surgical mask has played in Hong Kong’s recent history. It is no surprise that the surgical mask had played a major concrete and symbolic role in the COVID-19 pandemic. But, more surprisingly, the surgical mask has also played a key symbolic role in recent major political events in Hong Kong that have involved questions of national security. There is a complex history to the meaning of the mask in Hong Kong

In 2003, there was a SARS outbreak (Severe Adverse Respiratory Syndrome, a severe coronavirus), which resulted in the deaths of 299 people among 1755 cases. The outbreak lasted 3 months in Hong Kong which had the second highest number of cases apart from Mainland China. This experience of viral contagion was a collective trauma for the people of Hong Kong. The earliest SARS cases were found in the Guangdong province of Mainland China and then spread to other parts of the world. There were serious concerns about the lack of openness about the epidemic which in turn raised questions about the effectiveness of controlling the epidemic. Public health strategies seemed to reflect not only health-related measures but also government policies. The discrepancy between how information is managed in Hong Kong vs. Mainland China seriously affects how people view and trust the highest political and government authorities in the community.



Image 2 SARS outbreak. Hunghom railway station, Hong Kong, April 2003.

Source: REUTERS/Kin Cheung



Image 3 SARS outbreak. Students wearing surgical masks in class, Hong Kong, Apr 2003

Source: REUTERS/Bobby Yip



Image 4 A Mourner. During the funeral of Dr. Tse Yuen—a medical doctor who died of SARS in HK, May 2003. Source: REUTERS/Bobby Yip

Since the SARS outbreak of 2003, the mask-wearing practice has become a deeply ingrained ritual in the people of Hong Kong who face both infectious disease and political threats to their well-being and survival. It has become normal for people in Hong Kong to wear a surgical mask even when they are only suffering from a mild common cold.

Apart from health protection, people also wear surgical masks in their political protests.

Does wearing a surgical mask have any other symbolic meaning in Hong Kong?

In 2003, the Hong Kong government tabled its previous National Security Bill (Legislative Provisions) to implement Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23. Basic Law is the constitution of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region which went into effect when Hong Kong was returned to Chinese sovereignty on 1st July 1997 under

the principle of “One Country, Two Systems”. Article 23 states that “The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit treason, secession, sedition, and subversion against the Central Peoples government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies” (1). The proposed legislation gave more power to the police and led to widespread protests. After controversies and a massive demonstration on 1st July 2003, the Hong Kong Government shelved the bill indefinitely in Sept 2003. But, the seeds of later tension were planted between the citizens of Hong Kong and the ruling government authorities who were most responsive to China. This tension was reflected in protests, the most notable of which was the 2014 Umbrella movement or Occupy Movement.



Image 5 A massive demonstration against the attempt to implement Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23 on 1st July 2003. Source: Agent Rouge / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)



*Image 6 Protest on 12th Nov. 2019. Source: Hong Kong Free Press, Studio Incendo
<https://hongkongfp.com/2019/12/08/november-12-clashes-chinese-university-hong-kong-eyewitness-view/>*

In 2019 there was another series of protests triggered by the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill (2) by the Hong Kong government. It was also known as the extradition bill. The bill was to establish a mechanism for transfers of fugitives from Taiwan, Mainland China and Macau, which was excluded in the existing laws. Strong opposition to the bill in Hong Kong erupted in the fear of the further erosion of Hong Kong's legal system and its built-in safeguards. The bill strengthened Mainland China's ability to arrest voices of political dissent in Hong Kong. Again, the bill triggered the concerns about national security. In a series of large-scale protests, the protestors wore all black with masks covering their faces. The masks were easily obtained and provided anonymity to the protestors. As a result, the Hong Kong authorities passed an Anti-mask Law on 4th October 2019. The law was created in response to the ongoing protests and banned protestors from covering their faces. Even after the enactment of this law, protestors continued to wear masks.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, mask-wearing became a necessary health

precaution, preventing people from getting or spreading virus. The Hong Kong Government implemented a Wearing Mask Regulation effective 23rd July 2020. Mask-wearing in all public places became mandatory in view of the public health concern. However, even before the enforcement of a mandatory mask-wearing law, Hong Kong had an exceptionally high rate of mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic with almost 99% of the population participating.



Image 7 People queue up to buy masks in Hong Kong, Feb 2020. Photo: Felix Wong



Image 8 Newly married couple in Hong Kong, Feb. 2020. Photo: Reuters

Ways of thinking about the various functions and meanings of wearing a mask:

Expression of Personality

Persona is the word we use to refer to the Social Face people present to the outer world, the face we want to show others in the world. It is a psychological expression.

What are we unconsciously showing or not showing the world by putting on a surgical mask?

Filtration

A mask is the physical partition between the individual and the outer world. It serves as an extra partition for the purpose of separation. A mask is a semi-permeable membrane, allowing limited dynamic flow in and out but blocking out particles above a certain size.

What is being separated by this partition, symbolically?

What can be passed through the partition?

What can be blocked through the partition?

Masks serve both the functions of expression of personality and separation from the outer world, from which one needs protection.

Wearing a surgical mask serves the obvious function of protecting the individual from the threat of contracting virus. It is designed to protect the body from the threat of being invaded by external harmful “substances” to the body such as harmful gases and particles as well as viruses. Masks of different design afford

varying levels of protection depending on filtration efficiency. It is common for people in Hong Kong to purchase the highest level of protection for masks, choosing higher than 99% VFE (viral filtration efficiency, which can filter particles from 0.1 to 5 microns upwards), PFE (particulate filtration efficiency which can filter particles from 0.1 microns upwards and BFE (bacterial filtration efficiency which can filter particles from 3 microns upwards).

What do we want to prevent from entering the body with a surgical mask?

What are the emotions associated with wearing a surgical mask? Unease? Security? Protection?

Personal and collective dynamics

When the whole community is mandated to wear surgical masks, following the mask-wearing rule is a way of complying with the social norm by participating in the joint effort of protecting public health. Those who comply have a sense of increased security by participating in the community effort of mass protection. However, some feel it sacrifices the expression of personal identity. Those individuals who do not conform to mandatory mask wearing may regard their personal choice as more important than the collective well-being and its rules. Such defiance can easily become the target of attack because it compromises the collective benefit. On the other hand, refusing to wear a mask can become a proud non banner of the freedom of the individual or a symbol of not believing in the reality or severity of the viral threat. There is a tension between the rights of the individual and the well-being of the collective in which public health issues can get easily mixed up with political power struggles. In Hong Kong, wearing a mask in 2019 was a symbol of protest against the government whereas in 2020, wearing a mask became a symbol of

fighting the virus and protecting the common good.

What is being expressed by wearing a surgical mask when it became a collective action?

What needs to be filtered and prevented from entering in a collective sense?

What are the possible conflicts between the individual well-being vs public health?

What are the possible conflicts between individual freedom vs national security?

Masks cover major personal facial recognition signs and display a collective identity. With the individual face covered, the fact that every individual is a member of the collective group becomes evident in a dramatic way as individual features and identities become much less identifiable.

Wearing masks covers some identifying features of the face, i.e., the nose and mouth are still covered but the eyes and ears remain exposed. In the context of the mask serving the goal of health precaution, covering the nose and mouth prevent the passing of droplets. Wearing surgical masks largely filters the exchange of tiny particulates carried by water but still permits a limited level of air passing in and out. This partially blocks the major functions of the nose and mouth, i.e., breathing, smelling, eating and speaking. Although these functions are essential for life, partial blocking is done in the name of protecting collective public health as well as individual benefits. Mask-wearing in the public health context places the collective well-being as the highest priority and individual life functioning is partially compromised.

Despite the loss of some individual functioning, most feel a higher sense of security with this kind of protection.

Leaving the eyes and ears uncovered by a mask, one can still see fully and be seen partially; can hear fully and can be heard partially. The individual's receptive functioning can be kept intact while the expression of individuality may be compromised.

What are the meanings of mask-wearing in mediating the dynamics between the personal and collective?



Image 9 Photo: Erin Scott / Reuters. Oct 5 2020

Protection from threat in the context of political power dynamics?

We have explored the symbolic meanings of mask-wearing as a public health precaution in the context of coronavirus pandemic. What about the symbolic meanings of surgical mask-wearing in a political context? Symbolically, what are the individuals and the group wanting to filter and protect in such a context? Virus-like political energy can be contagious, spreading through human-to-human in-person contact. If there's no in-person contact, there is less fear of getting caught by the

political infection, although the transmission of political infections is also rampant through the media. One can certainly lose a sense of political well-being and even political integrity through the spread of contagious political energy.

Survival threat? Existential threat in the context of “political infection”?

When the Hong Kong community finds itself wearing “political masks” in the form of surgical masks, what is happening within the group’s collective psyche? In fact, apart from surgical masks, there was a variation of masks being used during the protests in Hong Kong 2019, including the Guy Fawkes Mask from the movie “V for Vendetta” and even respirator mask with higher level protection. It is worthwhile to explore the symbolic meaning of mask wearing in political events.

Cultural complex

Individual needs and values overlap collective needs and values, but also need to be separated from them. These include issues of autonomy vs conformity, freedom vs restriction, equality vs hierarchy, stability vs flexibility and conformity vs deviance.

Individual and collective values in Hong Kong are influenced by cultural tensions and differences between the East and the West. In Asia, it is a default position to identify with the safer, more collective side of how to present oneself in society, to be considerate and to show solidarity with the community values and not to interrupt others. Collective values are given a higher priority than individual needs. At the same time, western values have taken hold in Hong Kong under the influence of the previous British sovereignty.

Power dynamics in this space and time

The power dynamics among countries and cultures have become more

complex in the era of the 2020 pandemic. For the sake of our individual and collective health, we want to avoid getting caught by the COVID-19 virus. And, we also hope to avoid getting caught by the collective and personal unconscious as we fight off the virus of the corrupting influence of power politics.



Image 10 "A Night in a dream" Kelvin Yuen, Hong Kong, 2015

With the unique multicultural backgrounds of Hong Kong, there seems to be no hiding from or being free of any “virus” transmission, whether it is biological or socio-political. Hong Kong is a place and space where different materials, energies, cultures and people are flowing with a constant movement both from outside to inside Hong Kong and from inside to outside the area. In that regard, it should come as no surprise that Hong Kong is an arena that displays the power struggles among different and opposing forces. At times when existence and preservation of a group is more important than individuals, it is easy for people to lose their own individual stance and fall into the collective unconsciously. It is also important not to get too

caught in the collective but to notice and distinguish individual from collective issues as well. We need to cultivate awareness, with compassion...

Let me end this reflection process with my dream:

“I had a session with my client who had issues with boundary setting. She did not wear a mask. I showed my concern about the risk of contracting the virus but she had no intention to put on a mask. There was a surgical mask on the desk between us.”

Emma Ting Wong (Hong Kong) is currently in the IAAP router training program to become a Jungian analyst. Emma is a clinical psychologist and she is also a mindfulness teacher. Her interests include transference/countertransference; *anima* & *animus*; cultural and political issues in psychological work. Publications: Wong, E. T. (2016). “My Journey Connecting to Jungian Analytical Psychology in Parallel with My City’s Search for Identity”. In M. Tibaldi, T. Chan, M. Chiu, M. Lee, B. Tam & E. T. Wong, *Stories of Transcultural Identities: Jungians in Hong Kong*. Roma: Artemide Edizioni.

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