



Politically Correct Masks

Navigating the China–Hong Kong Border During COVID-19

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In Hong Kong and Wuhan, recent facemask-wearing policies have forced people to wear their political allegiance on their faces. In Hong Kong in 2019, wearing a mask was interpreted within the context of ongoing protests against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In Wuhan in 2020, the same action became a signal of the efficiency of the government in handling a public health crisis. Located between Hong Kong and Wuhan, Shenzhen has become an important site for the physical mediation between these opposing interpretative contexts. Indeed, the China–Hong Kong border is both an imaginary and a physical arrangement that takes material form when individuals cross from Shenzhen to

Hong Kong and back again. In this essay, I track how Chinese and Hong Kong nationalisms have materialised at the border, focusing on increasing efforts to make political allegiances visible. As we will see, the location of bodies—on the Hong Kong or the mainland side of the border—critically shapes the meaning and consequences of ‘not wearing a mask’.

To Mask or Not to Mask?

The 2014 ‘Occupy’ protests in Hong Kong were grouped around symbolic locations that were associated with specific demands. Occupy

Central, for example, aimed to pressure the government for electoral reform by occupying the city's economic centre. Similarly, Occupy Central expressed broad-based discontent with the hardline attitude of the Hong Kong authorities and police by surrounding Hong Kong Government buildings (Xiang 2015). Five years later, in 2019, the slogans 'Flowers Blooming Everywhere' (遍地开花) and 'Be Water' reflected a comprehensive social conflict that had not only spread throughout the city, but also permeated everyday interactions (Sala 2019; Yu 2019).

Protests against Hong Kong's Extradition Bill, for example, began peacefully on 9 June 2019. However, by 1 October 2019, violence and civil disruption had escalated in the Special Administrative Region. Many protestors wore facemasks to hide their identity while participating in unpermitted protests. In response, the Chief Executive in Council passed the Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation, aiming 'to facilitate police investigation and to serve as a deterrent against the violent and illegal acts of masked perpetrators' (HCAL 2945 2019). The regulation was passed on 4 October 2019, taking effect on 5 October at midnight.

On the afternoon of 5 October 2019, angry students gathered near the atrium of the Festival Walk mall, yelling the slogan 'Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times' (光复香港, 时代革命). The students were protesting the imminent promulgation of the Face Covering Regulation by distributing free facemasks. The form of the protest forced pedestrians to wear their politics on their face with no neutrality possible; those who took a mask were assumed to be acting in solidarity with the students, while those who did not were assumed to be showing support for the government. I encountered the protest in the corridor that connects the campus of the City University of Hong Kong to the Kowloon Tong metro station via the mall. I was suddenly even more aware of my mainland status because masks had become a symbol, an attitude, and a political preference. In a profound sense, my decision

about whether to take a mask would reveal me to have a political stance, even if I wanted to remain neutral.

Unmasked in Wuhan

Roughly three months after that encounter, I prepared to leave Hong Kong to celebrate the Spring Festival with my family in Wuhan. At the time, I was not worried about the COVID-19 outbreak. Although Hong Kong had reported some cases imported from Wuhan, Wuhan's experts in disease control and government leaders had publicly said that the virus was not very contagious and that there was a low risk of human-to-human transmission. On 12 January, as I boarded a train at the West Kowloon Station, public service announcements reminded any travellers to Wuhan that they should prepare facemasks. The train stopped in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Changsha before arriving in Wuhan five hours later. However, despite the volume of travellers, few donned a mask.

On 23 January, after 830 confirmed cases and 25 deaths, and after human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 was confirmed, the Chinese Government abruptly locked down Wuhan, blocking expressways and banning flights. At that time, not wearing a mask in public was designated a behaviour that went against public security. Within one day, the number of infections surged to 1,287 and the lockdown was expanded to 16 cities in Hubei Province. Under such circumstances, masks became a measure of political competence, civil responsibility, and familial intimacy. During a press conference on 26 January, for example, Hubei Provincial Governor Wang Xiaodong mistakenly overestimated the production capacity for masks three times in public statements, downgrading estimates from 10.8 billion to 1.8 billion, to 1.08 million. Medical resources were in desperately short supply and 'appeals for help' from nurses and doctors burst out across social media. My pregnant sister asked me whether I could get

some masks for her husband, a doctor on the frontline. Grounded at home, I asked friends to buy masks from the Philippines, but my order was intercepted by Hong Kong customs officials because, as of 26 January, the Chinese Government had announced that all medical resources could only be distributed by the Chinese Red Cross—an inefficient bureaucracy directed and funded by the Communist Party. The Red Cross's inefficiency during the outbreak stirred harsh political critique seldom expressed so blatantly in China.

Criticism of the government's response to COVID-19 increased on 6 February 2020, when Doctor Li Wenliang, one of a group of 'whistleblowers' who later was disciplined for 'spreading rumours', passed away after having been infected at work. On 10 February, Wuhan residents were grounded at home and all public and private transportation was suspended. On 12 February, the daily count of confirmed cases rose to 14,840 (Liu 2020), reducing the government's credibility with respect to data transparency. The opacity of information, in conjunction with concerns about political stability, resulted in a further quarantine of urban systems. Rage and grief welled up among Chinese netizens, but the relative success of the Chinese authorities in containing the outbreak in China, along with the mishandling of the pandemic in some Western countries, created a hostile international environment, ultimately creating fertile ground for nationalism (Zhang, C. 2020).

One Pandemic, Two Systems

Against the backdrop of ongoing protests in Hong Kong, the COVID-19 pandemic consolidated and accelerated the spatialised trauma of 'One Country, Two Systems'. The first change wrought by the pandemic was the tightening of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. Since 5 February 2020, mainlanders have been required to quarantine for 14 days

in Hong Kong (GHKSAR 2020), while Hong Kong residents are required to quarantine for two weeks on arrival in China. Since 25 March 2020, all border checkpoints except Shenzhen Bay have been closed to private cars and buses. Although Hong Kong International Airport, the Shenzhen Bay Port checkpoint for flight transfers between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, and the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge have remained open, the number of Shenzhen–Hong Kong border crossings, normally around 8 or 9 million per month (and even higher during holidays), dropped to a mere 36,000 per month in March 2020.

Those who do cross the border are treated differently in Shenzhen than in Hong Kong, even though the public health emphasis in both cities is designed to track individuals. People who cross from Hong Kong to Shenzhen are quarantined the moment they pass through the Shenzhen Bay Checkpoint, even if they obtained a negative test result in Hong Kong within the previous 24 hours. They are placed on a bus, sent to an assigned hotel with no choice of food, and forced to pay the costs of quarantine themselves. After the 14-day quarantine ends, they remain under surveillance through the 'health QR code' app, which is downloaded on to mobile phones and can be scanned on entering public buildings. A green code means normal; yellow means you need to be observed; red means return to quarantine. Indeed, the state's capacity to track individuals has expanded with the pandemic, permeating everyday life as private trajectories become data within public security systems. Nevertheless, because the health QR code is used throughout the country, anyone who wishes to reduce restrictions on their domestic mobility must download the app. Indeed, nearly all of Wuhan's 9.9 million citizens participated in mass testing in May 2020 because they wanted to re-enter public life.

In contrast, in Hong Kong, those who cross the border are tracked only during the 14-day quarantine period. In August 2020, for example, I passed through the Shenzhen Bay Checkpoint with a tracking wristband that connected to an

app that was downloaded to my mobile phone, as required by the Hong Kong Government. Once through the checkpoint, I took a taxi to the metro, and then the metro to a hotel of my choosing. Within an hour of arriving at my hotel, I went shopping and returned to my hotel with a take-away meal I had ordered online. I may have come into ‘intimate contact’ with hundreds of people before I settled in the hotel, but it would have been impossible for the Hong Kong Government to identify who they were since, although I was trackable, my mobility was not limited. On the last day of my quarantine, I received a call from a Hong Kong officer, who reminded me that I could immediately uninstall the tracking app. In September, a mass testing program supported by the mainland stretched for two weeks, aiming to find previously unknown cases as well as to prepare for unveiling a health QR code that could be mutually recognised in Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong Province. Only about 1.78 million of the 7.5 million people in Hong Kong participated in the programme.

Border Infrastructure

The Mass Transit Railway (MTR) is not simply a means for spatially unifying Hong Kong; it is also the means through which Hong Kong is integrated into the mainland via Shenzhen. On 2 February 2020, four months after the Yuen Long incident—when a mob of alleged triad members indiscriminately attacked passengers at the Yuen Long MTR station, presumably as punishment for participation in protests earlier in the day—two explosives were found on a train at the Lo Wu MTR station, which is linked to the border checkpoint in Shenzhen (Mok and Cheng 2020). The foiled explosive attack of anger towards the government’s refusal to fully close the border to prevent COVID-19 spreading from the mainland to Hong Kong. The following day, thousands of Hong Kong medical workers went on strike, demanding a complete closure of the border to ‘save Hong Kong’ (Ip 2020). The strikes converged with the anti-



Kowloon Bay Station, Hong Kong. PC: Kwok Ho Eddie Wong.

mainland sentiment that had been escalating since the anti-Extradition Bill movement. From the protestors' point of view, the Hong Kong Government's proposal to address the pandemic had to display consideration for Hong Kong people, rather than subordination to Beijing. Hong Kong medical workers argued that if the border were kept open, they would soon be inundated with infected persons who would spread the virus. With limited medical resources, they refused to make sacrifices for an indifferent government, which, in their view, did not care about their lives. Carrie Lam, Chief Executive of Hong Kong, initially objected to a complete prohibition of mainlanders and a lockdown, criticising the medical workers' demands as discrimination and not in line with recommendations from the World Health Organisation (Cheung et al. 2020).

In contrast, mainland public health professionals frequently faced a conflict between acting with scientifically informed professionalism or obedience to their leaders (Mason 2016). This meant that on-the-ground responses to COVID-19 were city-specific. In Shenzhen, for example, experience combating Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and a commitment to public health as a sign of modernisation compensated for problems that arose in other cities due to initial obfuscation around the pandemic. Shenzhen's public health department activated its centralised response the day after the city's health authority network detected widespread online discussions about a pneumonia of unknown cause on 30 December 2019 (Zou et al. 2020). This decision occurred on the same day that BlueDot, a Toronto-based startup, first recognised the novel coronavirus in Wuhan (Niiler 2020).

Shenzhen's first case was detected on 8 January 2020, suggesting that public health officers were working behind the scenes even before the first infected case imported from Wuhan to Shenzhen was publicly reported on 20 January (Bai 2020). By 7 February 2020, while Wuhan's medical system was struggling to cope with the chaos of large numbers of COVID-19 cases and limited public

transparency, Shenzhen had already produced and made available an online map of cases in the city. In addition, Shenzhen mobilised 720 public health personnel to find cases and perform contact tracing, with the result that the city recorded no local infections after 22 February 2020 (Zou et al. 2020). In contrast, more than 40,000 medical workers from all over China gathered in Hubei Province to suppress the outbreak, with more than 3,000 of them diagnosed with COVID-19 by 28 February (Zhang, L.-T. 2020).

Border Contradictions

Regulation of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border during the pandemic has revealed how easily cross-border infrastructure can be deployed to buttress competing—even contradictory—ideologies. In China, for example, it became common to explain foreign failures to contain COVID-19 as a failure of countries 'to do their homework' (抄作业) (Zeng 2020). The implication was that if foreign governments had emulated China's top-down strategy for responding to the virus, they would not have experienced high levels of infection. Similarly, in Hong Kong, measures to control the influx of people from the mainland overlooked Shenzhen's success in combating COVID-19, and assumed the city's experience was more like that of the rest of the country. The politicisation of the border and its deployment through mask-wearing protocols raises important questions about how One Country, Two Systems can be safely navigated on both sides of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border. ■

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