



Cultural Transformation of Masks as Etiquette, Threat, and Prevention

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This is a personal reflection in the midst of the fears, worries and uncertainties surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. We would like to first thank essential workers and those on the frontlines. We also want to acknowledge those who are (in)directly affected by COVID-19. We work with students who have been impacted by the pandemic in drastic ways. While knowing their stories, we feel selfish to write about our own experiences which pale in comparison. Yet, we hope this reflection would assist bringing some social change and sense of open mindfulness, as well as promoting empathy and respect across cultures. Below, we offer some chronological reflections between a voluntary migrant from Japan and an involuntary migrant from Bosnia-Herzegovina, both working and living in New York State.

Masks While Growing up

[EK] I grew up in Japan where wearing masks is a common behavior or even a polite manner to hinder any cough or sneezing related droplets from landing on other people. Wearing masks culturally symbolizes the act of caring for others and the importance of prevention. From an early age, I learned that it is okay to wear a mask at any time I feel it is needed. For example, it is a very common practice for students to

use masks during preparation of lunches in Japanese schools (Kawano, 2016). I recall being required to wear a face mask when participating in such an activity of serving lunch to others as an elementary school student. My younger relatives living in Japan told me that current elementary school students often wear masks with characters such as minions. Similarly, some adults wear fun patterns or brand logos instead of simple, generic masks. These masks are increasingly becoming a fashion accessory. It is not even surprising to see individuals wearing masks on the TV shows, social media, streets, train stations, while walking in a park, etc.

[SA] Such an introduction to masks from a young educational or cultural standpoint doesn't quite exist in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was neither introduced to them, nor required or suggested to wear them at any point as a child. Of course many cover their mouths when going through some construction site where dust and other pollutants are raised in the air, but it is typically not something anticipated in advance. It is possible to see some elderly adults wear masks or cover their mouths with a scarf or handkerchief when walking on the streets, but not something I recall seeing regularly like it occurs in Japan.

Masks in the U.S. Prior to the Pandemic

[EK] Soon after I arrived in the U.S. as an international student about 10 year ago, I saw one of my Japanese friends, who was also new to the U.S., wearing a mask on campus. Other students around were looking and avoiding him as if he was a virus or criminal. I quickly learned that masks did not symbolize polite manners here. Rather it often connoted the unknown threats, such as danger due to the sickness or anti-social

act of hiding one's identity. This brings up other issues of inclusivity that we will put aside for today. I further learned that Asian international students often stopped wearing facial masks. My teenage self followed their footsteps as well for my own safety because I did not want to be perceived as a threat. Some years later, my parents sent me a package from Japan, which included masks. I smiled and thought I would not need them in the U.S., thus I would take them with me and wear them when I visit Japan. I put them in a box, and forgot about them until this pandemic.

[SA] My first observance of people wearing masks was as a college student in California during wildfires. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I often heard "jokes" from locals along the lines that we could recognize Asians from a distance merely by the fact they wore masks. This of course brings up important issues about social oppression, too. However, I never considered wearing a mask even though my nose would bleed during the wildfires and my car windshield was covered in ashes. I viewed those few from a distance who did wear masks as merely being careful not to inhale the air in order to protect themselves.

Masks as Protection During the Pandemic

[EK] Living in New York State under the pandemic, I dug up a box to find the masks my parents sent me years ago. I even shared some with neighbors. By wearing these masks, I aim to portray myself as a non-threat, in a somewhat similar manner as I did in my home country. I found it ironic that, before or even at the beginning of this pandemic, Asians wearing masks in the U.S. were unknown threats. Now Asians not wearing masks are societal threats due the rhetoric some politicians use describing

COVID-19 as “China” or “Chinese” virus, which has led to some interesting encounters at grocery stores.

[SA] Prior to the lockdown in New York, I mentioned to my students that I would wear a mask after Spring Break. I suggested they do the same just in case. Some smiled and others laughed; perhaps I sounded like an alarmist to them at that moment. Shortly after, the state locked down as the coronavirus situation skyrocketed, and masks became a commodity like toilet paper. When masks were sold out, I sent links to my students from some Japanese vloggers about how to make masks at home using handkerchiefs and hairbands. Some appreciated it since they were worried about “carrying” the virus home with them. Since then, the state passed laws requiring people to wear masks, and grocery stores posted signs about the mask requirement. Now, when we walk outside, there is a sense of ease when we see someone wearing a mask while avoiding those that don’t. There are even some small local stores advertising and selling “handmade masks made from cloth,” something unheard of prior to the pandemic.

Cultural Transformation

If culture is a shared pattern or idea and continuously evolving, the evolution of masks and discourse surrounding them is an example of such cultural transformation in this time of uncertainty. What was once a symbol of a “threat” or “stereotypical joke” in the U.S. is now a sense of “safety” and “protection.” The new graffiti on streets shows people of different ages, occupations, and backgrounds wearing masks in unity. Cute

and fashionable mask designs that have been common throughout East Asia are now marketed in the U.S. too. It will be interesting to witness if and how this cultural transformation continues to evolve post-pandemic.

