Obligatory Mask, Forbidden Mask: Rigidity and Flexibility in the Brave New Normal*

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FRANCE: OBLIGATORY MASKS AND OBSERVANT MUSLIMS

After lifting the national lockdown caused by the outbreak of Covid-19, France made mask-wearing mandatory in public transport and high schools. The new mandate of mask-wearing and social distancing suddenly halts French traditional intimate cheek-kiss 'la bise' greetings, while unexpectedly encouraging artistic creativity in designing home-made masks. Nevertheless, the law of 2011 on banning face veiling mostly worn by Muslim women remains unchanged. Apparently, making mask-wearing essential but at the same time banning face veil sounds counter-intuitive and inconsistent. One of the unintended consequences of the outbreak of Covid-19 apparently exposed how the French policy of secularism (laïcité) is excluding veiled Muslim women in the public sphere. The new law of making mask-wearing obligatory to contain the spread of virus but upholding the Republic's values of uncovering the face in public places reveals a new social ambiguity. As a result of the new era of relative normlessness (Emile Durkheim's notion of 'Anomie') after the outbreak of Covid-19, it initiates the French society negotiating new practices of interpersonal intimacy and social distancing. Most importantly, the new social condition opens an uncharted path and platform of dialogue in pursing common values, identity and social solidarity in France.

HONG KONG: SELF-DEFENCE AND STATE SURVEILLANCE

After the intense street conflicts between protestors and police over the controversial Extradition Bill, the outbreak of the pandemia spreading from Wuhan was an additional challenge for Hong Kong. Haunted by the nightmare of the SARS virus causing 286 deaths in 2003 plus social distrust to government's initial guideline of mask-wearing being unnecessary, civil society transformed the painful lessons into a quick collective self-defence practice of mask-wearing. Hong Kong even takes pride along Taiwan to be counted as one of the successful Asian examples in subduing Covid-19. But the key factor of success largely attributes to the voluntary mask-wearing of civil society. Despite mask-wearing is proved effective in containing spreading of the virus, Hong Kong High Court surprisingly maintains prohibiting mask-wearing on the grounds of preventing masked radical protestors from vandalizing the city, as the government imposed an emergency law banning protestors wearing masks in public demonstrations. But for many protestors, the voluntary practice of mask-wearing is both: self-protection from the virus, but also a symbolic stand against state surveillance. Many protestors were wearing masks, and

some of them deliberately destroyed street smart lamp posts, because they suspect that biometric data collected by the installed facial recognition technology enabling to identify protectors' identity would be send back to the Chinese central government.

AFTER THE COVID-19 CRISIS: BRINGING HUMANITY TOWARDS 'BRAVE NEW NORMAL'

In this short essay, it is through briefly illustrating the cases of France and Hong Kong how authorities conflictingly approve the necessity of a generalized use of masks in containing the spike of Covid-19 and at the same time de-legitimize mask-wearing when it poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the state's rule. The rigidity and failure of the WHO and of governments in swiftly containing the virus outbreak leads to social distrust, liberating global civil society's creativity and flexibility to react. The lack of clear agreed social norms or even contradictory claims of mask-wearing implies the new social condition of normlessness. As the protesting slogan in Chile, 'No volveremos a la normalidad, porque' la normalidad era el problema' ('We won't return to normality, because normality was the problem') suggests, the French society initiates a journey of soul-searching in seeking how to bring together the new intimate distance and the Republic's values after the outbreak of Covid-19, whereas in Hong Kong protestors have identified a protest logic of 'Be Water' in new social solidarity through mask-wearing in resistance against state surveillance.

In conclusion, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis there will be no reverse to normal. It awakens humanity in transition from normality to the indeterminate challenges of a 'Brave New Normal'.