Face Masks: Safeguard or Muzzle?

by Mao Shiotsu
My typical routine heading out the front door has always been as follows: a pat on my left pocket to check for keys and a pat on the right for my phone. This year, though, there’s one addition to the checklist—my reusable UNIQLO face mask. Here in Tokyo, it seems almost everybody, including wailing babies, have been wearing masks when outside the home (often the very same UNIQLO ones, in fact). An unmasked person sticks out, a rare bare mouth in a sea of cloth-covered faces. The action is also entirely unquestioned—mask-wearing has never been mandated here, yet it has become the norm.

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On the contrary, in the United States, wearing masks has become a topic of political debate. For Americans who do wear them, their very actions are making a political statement, as the majority of Democrats support mask-wearing. On the other hand, many Donald Trump supporters have adamantly refused to cover up, claiming that the mandate restricts their personal freedom. There seem to have been more unmasked people than masked at Trump rallies, and Trump himself often goes out in public bare-faced. The political debate around mask-wearing has spurred protests, where participants have held signs with slogans like “we will not be muzzled.”

The muzzle analogy puzzles me; a muzzle’s rigid structure is intended to physically prevent a dog from biting, but a face mask is merely a flimsy piece of fabric that doesn’t hinder speaking ability nor movement whatsoever. In my mind, mask-wearing and personal freedom are organized into two completely different realms, as two concepts that I never imagined had any overlap. This is probably because in Japan, since the SARS epidemic in 2002, mask-wearing has been as commonplace as wearing a woolly scarf on a cold day. During flu season every winter, masks are a common sight on trains, in schools, and workplaces. In past years when I had a cold or a cough, I would go to school wearing a mask, to prevent spreading my germs to other students. So naturally, when the world wouldn’t choose to wear them. This would very foreseeably lead to an even higher death toll. And it’s worth noting that the U.S. does have a culture of supporting other safety measures, many of which do not prompt public debate. What’s the difference between face masks and other paternalistic rules like wearing a helmet when cycling, or a seatbelt when driving? I can’t help but wonder, if a president claimed that seatbelts were an infringement upon individual rights, would supporters suddenly profess the same and hold rallies, crying, “we will not be chained?”

I believe there are a couple of ways to address this mask dilemma. First, help anti-maskers understand that masks prevent contagion. But how does one convince a group to suddenly change their minds about a simple fact they’ve adamantly kept denying? Another possibility would be to drop the mandate and instead frame mask-wearing as a noble, patriotic, heroic action. But there’s no guarantee that anti-maskers will buy this narrative either. The defiance is baseless, and more importantly, harmful. However we go about trying to increase the mask-wearing population, the fact remains that the Coronavirus outbreak just keeps getting worse. Everyone needs to start wearing masks, fast. There’s no time to concoct an elaborate plan for stirring a paradigm shift in the anti-maskers’ minds. So maybe the only thing left, the last resort, is pleading: Please, anti-maskers, wear the thin fabric that does not in any way hinder your freedom to move about, and cannot prevent the soundwaves of your free speech from finding their way through. •

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