

日本のマスク着用について：
その背景と役割を考察する

Masks in Japan:
An Investigation of Background and Roles

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Abstract

Wearing surgical mask looks like a common habit in Japan, not only the wintry season but all year round. Tour guides are often asked by tourists from overseas during their trips about the reasons Japanese wear masks. This paper clarifies the background of today's surgical mask usage in Japan, including protection from illness and hygiene education, moreover, of the diversified usage of seeking psychological comfort by concealing the lower parts of face, in order to hide mask-wearers' emotions on nonverbal communication. It also suggests the possibility of influences backed by religions and traditional ethics.

キーワード : Surgical mask in Japan, psychological comfort, nonverbal communication, tour guide

Introduction

“Why was the driver wearing a surgical mask? I thought he had a serious illness.” The question about surgical mask habits is one of the frequently-asked questions by my clients when I showed them around Kyoto as a tour guide. Some of them said that surgical mask-wearing in daily life was quite rare in their countries and thought some kind of epidemic had occurred in Japan.

For people in Japan, mask-wearing is a familiar habit and has been regarded as public eti-

quette, but for some people outside Japan, mask-wearing habits do not exist, and there is some controversy about covering some parts of face.

From the journals, magazines and websites written in English, English-speakers who have visited Japan seem quite interested in Japanese surgical mask-wearing behavior. According to the article of Gordenker (2014), he describes the feeling of her friend citing an e-mail, “What the heck is the deal with people in Japan wearing surgical masks? (para. 1)” Another example is the online news website of Baseel (2014), which says “The number of people you’ll see in Japan wearing surgical masks is pretty surprising” (para. 1).

Furthermore, they describe the role of the surgical mask for more than hygiene reasons. According to Joy (2017), “By wearing a mask, you not only make yourself less approachable, but you no longer have to put effort into the interactions you do have and react accordingly with a smile, frown or laugh, because no one can see it.” (para. 4).

In this paper, the term “mask” is used to describe “the surgical mask developed for daily use in Japan.” Although there are many articles on websites, newspapers, magazines, etc. talking about Japan’s mask culture as I introduced, not so many academic studies have been done on analyzing why Japanese people wear masks, including the mask’s history in Japan, the Japanese sense of etiquette, manners, the need for psychological comfort, and the possible connection among religion and traditional cultures. In this sense, it is worth summarizing the reasons for and occasions of mask-wearing in Japan; moreover, this research especially aims at filling the niche concerning to the possible connection to the notion of “Human breath,” religions and traditional cultures.

I hope this research will further advance understanding of the mask culture in Japan, and will in addition contribute to Japanese people’s proficiency in explaining correctly this feature of their contemporary culture to foreign visitors to Japan.

2. History of surgical mask culture developed in Japan

2-1 The definition of the mask and reasons for wearing it in Japan

The history of Japanese masks is greatly related to the prevention of influenza. According to the Japan Hygiene Products Industry Association (hereafter, JHPIA) (2008), “The history of surgical mask dates back to the pandemic of the ‘Spanish Flu’ in 1919, as an important

item for flu prevention.”

One of the mask manufacturers, called *Shirohato* (n. d.), says: “We were the pioneers in adapting surgical masks for ordinary people’s daily use; originally they were for medical use only.” It has been developed according to the needs of Japanese. JHPIA identifies the shape and the function of the mask as “covering one’s mouth and nose in order not to permit the invasion of pollen and dust inside of the body and also used to prevent infection by droplets from coughing and sneezing. (para. 2)”

2-2 Popularization of the surgical mask and the development of its usage

2-2-1 Overview

There are four important factors in the popularization of mask in Japan. Basically, three of these factors emanate from public health education, the incidence of a natural or artificial disaster, and hay fever. Aside from these three factors, a new and uniquely developed phenomenon arises whereby the wearer resorts to mask-wearing when seeking psychological comfort, the fourth factor.

2-2-2 Hygiene education

Japanese people undergo public health education from an early age. In this framework, one of the key points to notice is that Japanese children have school lunches at elementary school. According to the Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Japan Association for Improving School Lunch (hereafter, PIIFJAISL), “School lunch is the daily meals at school that provide children with opportunities to learn about nutrition, hygiene, culinary culture, local produce, food distribution” (2015).

The website of PIIFJAISL (2015) explains that students who are in charge of serving meals to their classmates wear aprons, caps and masks all in white.

As for the color, white is said to represent “innocence”, according to Umesada, Kin-daichi, Sakakura, and Hinohara, (1989, p.986).

Japanese school lunch education can be thought of as teaching certain roles and behavior to children whenever they distribute food or they have to be clean, show the cleanliness by their costumes and tools such as surgical masks. It is appropriate for students to learn to have a “clean” life as much as possible, and they become accustomed to partially masking

their faces when they have to serve lunch.

Taking these matters into account, the discussion now turns to whether Japanese people really believe in the effect of their surgical masks. The short answer is no.

When a new type of flu occurred in 2009, the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet (hereafter, PMJHC) published a Q&A, ‘The Fundamental Principles of Treatment’. According to the PMJHC, people should wear masks to protect themselves in closed and insufficiently ventilated places, although the world standard elsewhere is sanitizing hands and gargling, and this is mostly understood by Japanese people today (2009).

2-2-3 The effects of natural and artificial disasters

Various kinds of natural and artificial disasters including earthquakes are closely related to mask-wearing in Japan. For example, the Great East Japan Earthquake, which occurred in March, 2011, was an unforgettable and critical disaster. This earthquake hit the northeast of mainland Japan, and it led to a catastrophic tsunami, which furthermore caused the nuclear power reactor explosion at Fukushima Nuclear Power Plants.

Burgess and Horii (2012) argued that, “the world witnessed the widespread of wearing of surgical face masks in Japan, associated with health protection against flu but here employed in the debris against the threat of radiation from the Fukushima reactor” (p.1184).

The lives of the survivors in the temporary shelters were very hard, according to a weblog of reporting the living situation of women survivors in the shelters, which detailed the difficult situation they had in crowded and non-private spaces. They endured the dusty, crowded spaces and “disgusting smells of viscous sludge outdoors” (Hoken Socrates, 2014). Moreover, it was hard to wash their faces at that time, so masks were very useful to hide their dirty faces.

2-2-4 Hay fever

The influence of hay fever cannot be ignored. A report from the Environmental Ministry says that the number of hay fever patients is not generally counted; however, a survey in 2008 indicated that about 29.8% of the Ear, Nose, and Throat specialists and their families were allergic to pollens (The Ministry of Environment, 2014). According to Osumi (2018), there were “tens of millions of people struggling to cope with hay fever caused by cedar and cypress pollen across Japan” (para. 1). The article advises that people wear surgical

masks and protective glasses and spend less time outdoors to defend themselves from the allergens (Osumi, 2018, para. 2).

As for the issue of hay fever prevention, Unicharm, one of the major manufacturers of masks, proudly advertises on its website, “We have the mask which can cut 99% of viruses and pollen!” (Unicharm, 2017). Allergy sufferers wear masks hoping to ease their symptoms with high-quality masks.

2-2-5 Psychological comfort

Besides the health reasons, psychological comfort or mental health is pointed out as a new aspect of mask wearing in recent years.

Kinouchi (2017, May) introduced the term “Mask-Addiction”, which referred to the inability of some people to remove their surgical mask even when they were well because of “without reason, and they [the mask wearers] have the difficulties in communicating with others face to face.” Moreover, the magazine says young women tend to be addicted to masks (367, p.26).

Kikumoto (2011), who is a professional counsellor listened to people’s anxiety, stresses, and strains, interviewed some young mask-wearers and discussed the practice in his book, *Da-te-masuku izonsho* or “Addicted to ‘Date’-masks”. Kikumoto reveals that ‘Date (showy)’-mask is often used for other reasons than its main reason of maintaining one’s health.

One of his interviewees answered, “I feel relieved whenever I wear the masks, because I can hide my existence.” Kikumoto (2011) concluded in his book, “They seem as if they are taking some certain distance to others by the means of ‘Date’-masks. (p.13)”

In this respect, wearers conceal their feelings by hiding their facial expression. If some parts of the face are covered, it becomes hard to know the person’s facial expression. The interviewee seeks to construct barriers by keeping a comfortable distance or territory in interpersonal communication, in order to ease or limit the expression of emotion.

3. Characteristics of Japanese expression of emotion

Why are Japanese people so sensitive about showing their facial expressions? It seems to be critical to investigate this issue from the viewpoint of Japanese people’s ethics and relig-

ion. According to Japanese ethics, “Japanese people feel that *wa* (harmony) is the most important, and don’t want conflict with others. They try not to show their negative emotions such as sorrow or anger so as not to make others uncomfortable or worry them,” (JTB, 2003, p.164). This means that they prefer the indirect expression of emotions and language. However, Japan has changed dramatically in the past 150 years. Japanese people have kept their traditional ideas; however, they have encountered different styles of communication from other countries, and accepted other thoughts, changed, and diversified their lifestyles. In this sense, Japanese people maintain a particular tradition of ideas; however, their lives have been much modernized today, which presents some contradictions that differ from traditional notions. Therefore for Japanese people, it might be suitable to mask the face partially to make a balance between old and traditional conceptions and the need to conform in modern Japan.

4. Religion and traditional cultures related to masks

4-1 Overview

The contemporary mask’s history dates back to the early 20th century, as mentioned in the beginning. However, there are some similar examples that can be seen related to religion and traditional cultures. In these cases, masks have taken an important role in religious and cultural ceremonies.

Japanese religion was a syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism for a long time until the Meiji Restoration, about 150 years ago, and the syncretism contributed to a unique Japanese religion and mentality.

4-2 Shinto and masks

According to an instruction book written for English-speaking tour guides by Ueyama (2003), Shinto is “the indigenous religion of Japan,” and “Shinto has neither a specific founder nor any books of scripture (Ueyama, 2003, p.70). One of the features of Shinto faith is purification. The website of the Jishu-Jinja shinto shrine, which is the guardian Shinto shrine of Kiyomizu Buddhist temple in Kyoto, offers the Hito-gata-harai, which is a kind of talisman “to get rid of bad luck, illness and disaster by a paper cut-out like a doll,”

(Jishu-jinja n.d.).

Hito-gata is a thin, doll-like figure made from paper. It is a substitute for a person wherein the person breathes on the paper in order to transfer his or her spirit. Floating it on water means the person is cleansed, and the evil spirits from the previous year are totally washed away. Thus, the human breath represents the person's life or soul; moreover, it might have influenced the psychology of modern Japanese.

4-3 Buddhism and masks

Buddhism is Japan's non-indigenous religion. It emerged from India and was introduced through China and Korea to Japan in the 6th century. Ueyama asserts that "It teaches a way to enlightenment and has exerted great influence on the spiritual and cultural life of the Japanese (Ueyama, 2003, p.70)." In Buddhism also, the breath has an important meaning. There is one famous example that is seen in the temples of Mt. Koya, or Koyasan in Wakayama Prefecture. Koyasan is the headquarters of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, and priests and worshippers believe that Kukai, also known as Kobo-Daishi, the founder of the temples and of the Shingon Sect of Buddhism, continues his eternal meditation in his mausoleum there.

The priests who are in charge of carrying the meals to the resting place of Kobo Daishi wear some kind of mask in white to conceal their mouths. The explanation of the Mausoleum of Kobo-Daishi says, "This is one of the most sacred sites for followers of Kobo-Daishi around Japan. He remains at this site, ever praying for our salvation," (Koyasan, n. d.). Furthermore, "The masks are used in order to keep the priests' breath off the sacred offering" (*Ichiban wakariyau! Kobo daishi Kukai no kaisetsu weblog site*, 2017).

4-4 Japanese traditional arts and masks

Regarding Japanese Cha-do, or Tea Ceremony culture, there are also some impressive examples of mask-wearing. *Cha-do* (literally, the way of tea) has a tradition of around 400 years. Tea masters sometimes participate in the formal tea ceremony called *Kencha-shiki* to present the tea to the deities, as is explained on the *Omote-senke* website. *Omote-senke* is one of Japan's famous tea ceremony schools. At the solemn tea ceremonies held on days

such as New Year's Day, for example, grand tea masters cover their mouths with white masks to make and offer the tea, "with the mind of respecting the deities, to make and offer the tea to the deities of Shinto and Buddhism" (Omote-senke, 2008). A newspaper articles reported that the Grand Tea master wore a traditional mask in order not to breathe on a tea for the deities when they held a tea serving ritual (*Urasenke-iemoto-ga-kencha*, 2018).

The same idea is seen in the formal ceremony of "Ikebana" or flower arrangement. According to a picture on the website of Ikenobo (2017, April), the students who performed flower arrangements to the Shinto deities wore formal traditional attire and traditional-looking masks.

These examples show that the breath from the mouth is impure. Thus the people who need to serve deities need to make the maximum effort not to breathe out on or in the direction of the most important and sacred things.

5. Conclusion

As I have discussed, concealing one's mouth might be thought one of the Japanese virtues, as a form of etiquette and manners, for protecting oneself and others. Furthermore, it was considered important not to show one's mouth, which is the source of secular breath.

The examples discussed above showed that the priests and tea masters were implementing important missions by wearing white masks in order to distance themselves from other people nonverbally, in order to concentrating on serving the deities with their most serene minds.

In this sense, masking the mouth for the reason of indirect showing of emotion is not rude or impolite; it is appropriate manners for Japanese people in their interpersonal communication.

I assume these traditional ideas and religious ethics continue to influence Japanese people in a fundamental way, and have led to today's surgical mask wearing somehow, although people are not consciously aware of the reasons why they rely on masks; moreover, it has a considerable influence on nonverbal communication owing to the concealment of the face.

On this point, there are some discrepancies between Japanese and the non-Japanese visitors to Japan, who place importance on facial expressions of emotion.

In summation, Japanese people have extended their cultural history of mask-wearing by developing their own contemporary partially-masking face culture from their hygiene education, including the actual usage of protecting their bodies from infection, and, moreover, for psychological comfort.

As Horii wrote in his book titled *Masuku-to Nihonjin*, or “The Mask and Japanese,” “People wear the masks as good-luck charms or talisman, as a tool for being protected physically from viruses and also mentally,” (2012, p.224). Thus we may consider that Japanese people wear masks hoping to safeguard themselves physically and mentally. It is possible that surgical masks were developed and regarded in Japan as necessary goods from such a basis.

6. Further study

This research paper was written as a part of the final paper of the Academic Writing class 2017, and was the preparation of the author’s ongoing master thesis, which would be submitted in the spring of 2019.

My thesis will discuss the culture of Japanese mask-wearing from the viewpoints of non-verbal communication, documenting the results of a survey in order to clarify Japan’s mask culture. Moreover, another survey for non-Japanese people will be divided into Chinese-speakers and English-speakers in order to clarify their impressions and the mask’s influence on nonverbal communication.

Furthermore, I will summarize this study in order that English-speaking tour guides and the people who want to guide their friends around Japan may enhance their speaking skills.

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