

International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics
Volume 17 Number 2

© 2021 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/macp_00044_1

Received 29 October 2020; Accepted 9 October 2021

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Mythologizing the face mask: How protective covers became political during the fine-dust and COVID-19 crises in South Korea

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to demonstrate how South Korean news media routinized and sensationalized the face mask amid two recent public health crises: the fine-dust crisis and the COVID-19 epidemic. News media appropriated the mythologized meaning of the face mask as a symbol of individual safety during the two crises. This study analyses news articles to answer three questions: (1) How was wearing the face mask mythologized as a routinized practice in days of uncertain risk? (2) How was the face mask politicized as a mythologized sign indicating China as an external threat? and (3) How was the face mask politicized as a symbolic code of the government's responsibility for the crisis? Once signified as the primary means of individual protection in the context of Korean risk society, the face mask became politicized amid the shortage of the face mask. Placed in the context of the recent disastrous crises in Korea, China was identified as the culprit not only in the epidemic but also in the shortage of the face mask. The meaning of China as

KEYWORDS

COVID-19
face mask
Korean news media
risk society
Sino–Korea relations
news and myth

an external threat was continuously strengthened when the South Korean government opted out of the entry ban on Chinese citizens. The last analytic part presents how news media politicized the epidemic by associating the face mask crisis with the Korean government.

INTRODUCTION

The term face mask has become a buzzword across a world facing the unprecedented pandemic of COVID-19, a disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Along with other safety measures, such as social distancing and frequent hand sanitization, wearing face masks has been strongly recommended or even mandated by public authorities across the world. During the pandemic, wearing face masks has been proven as a basic, easy protective practice that effectively lowers the risk of infection. Extensively covering the deadly impact of the virus, news media have paid close attention to this small piece of equipment. While delivering essential information regarding the effectiveness of the face mask, news media often sensationalize the exponential demand for it. Since wearing a face mask is a very visible practice, visual images portraying the mass adoption of the face mask all over the world have become typical signs of the global pandemic. The extensive media attention to the face mask in this global crisis has made it a symbol of individual protection from the virus. This study probing the semiotic meaning of the face mask during the epidemic does not intend to discuss the quality of the information regarding the efficacy of face masks. Instead, it focuses exclusively on how news media have appropriated this small, important piece of protective equipment to sensationalize and politicize the unprecedented crisis.

Face masks have become everyday goods in South Korea (hereafter, Korea), mainly due to the frequent threat of fine-dust pollution. More recently, the face mask was quickly adopted in the early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic. This protective practice has become routinized as a common reaction to the two recent crises. However, when this small piece of equipment was in short supply, it became an easy target for politicization. In the course of identifying the culprit in the shortage, the face mask was placed in a broader, sociopolitical context. Sensationalized and politicized by news media, the shortage of face masks implied threatened individual health. This set the stage for the face mask, once denoted as cheap protective equipment, to become a mythologized sign of precious equipment that saves individuals from the deadly virus.

In order to provide a background for understanding this mythologization, this study briefly reviews the related contexts that explain the Korean risk society, complex Sino–Korean relations and domestic political changes. The concept of risk society and the semiotic understanding of the myth-making process are reviewed to provide insight into the face mask-wearing practice and news media. The analytic part of this study starts from the routinization of the face mask in Korean society. Analysing the news coverage that associated the face mask with the two recent disastrous crises, this study demonstrates how the face mask was discursively mythologized as the primary means to respond to the crises. In the second stage of semiotic analysis, the present study takes a close look at how the mythologized meaning of the face mask was appropriated to characterize Korea as a victim harmed by China and Chinese people in the COVID-19 epidemic. The last analytic part presents how news media politicized the epidemic by associating the shortage of

face masks with the Korean government. Grounded in a multistage semiotic analysis, this study argues that the face mask, sensationalized and politicized by news media, became a mythologized sign of individual safety, which was often portrayed as threatened by China and the government.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Risk, the face mask and public safety

As introduced earlier, the face mask has become a common means for individuals to cope with recent disastrous events in Korean society. In Korea, people often wear face masks for various occasions, such as on cold days, when construction is producing dust and on sick days. Although it has long been common to come across people wearing face masks in public spaces in Korea, it was the recent fine-dust crisis that brought the face mask to the forefront.

Particulate matter (PM) 10 and 2.5, which is more generally called 'fine dust', has been one of the most publicized environmental threats in Korea. The Korean government has officially offered detailed information about the pollution by mobilizing various communication channels (e.g. Ministry of Environment 2016). As the environmental concern has become a norm in everyday life, a variety of relevant social, political, economic and cultural issues have surfaced in the Korean public sphere. News media have extensively covered those issues, ranging from scientific inquiry into the culprit (e.g. Lee 2019b) to public opinion on safety measures implemented by the government (e.g. Lee 2019a). Concerning the increase of respiratory disease potentially caused by fine dust, the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety of Korea has suggested the use of face masks on a regular basis (e.g. Ministry of Food and Drug Safety 2017). A survey reports that the percentage of people wearing face masks on a day of high fine dust has increased from 29 per cent in 2014 to 53 per cent in 2019 (Gallup Korea 2019).

Korean people who are coughing and sneezing have commonly worn face masks in order to avoid possibly harming someone or to signal their conditions to others. Face masks have more widely been adopted when a contagious disease outbreak threatens the society. During the recent epidemic of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2015, for instance, it was a mass trend that people wore face masks in public areas such as schools even if the majority of infection occurred in hospitals treating infected patients (Park 2015).

Public safety and health have been very important political agendas in Korea. The failure of safety measures has often been blamed on the incompetence and ineptitude of the government in modern Korean society, where many disastrous events have hurt the stability of regimes. However, it was political unrest in recent years that heightened the concern over public safety. Former president Park and her administration were strongly condemned for mismanagement during a catastrophic accident called the Sewol Ferry Disaster in 2014 that left 304 people, mostly high schoolers, dead. Soon after, the government repeated the managerial misconduct during the MERS outbreak in 2015. Along with multiple scandalous affairs, the failed leadership on public safety precipitated wide distrust of president Park, who was finally impeached in 2017 (Hahm and Heo 2018). High uncertainty caused by both managerial and communicative misconduct provoked public outrage, and people took to the streets (Kang et al. 2018).

Recent Sino-Korean relations

In the midst of the two recent crises, China is haunting Korea like a spectre. A majority of the population attributes the fine-dust crisis to China (Min 2019) even though the official report from the Korean government notes both domestic and foreign causes of the pollution (Ministry of Environment 2016). China has been represented more explicitly as an external threat to Korean citizens during the COVID-19 epidemic, mainly because Wuhan, China, was well known as the epicentre of the virus. The entry ban on Chinese citizens has been one of the main political disputes raised by oppositional political groups. It was easy to come across news and social postings blaming Chinese visitors who took a large number of face masks out of Korea. Even though the real causes and consequences of the COVID-19 still remain largely unknown in the early stage of the pandemic, China has been deeply placed in the social contexts of Korea because Korea has faced an unprecedented crisis.

The image of China as an external threat is not entirely caused by the two recent crises. While China is the largest trading partner of Korea and Chinese tourists make up the largest group of foreign visitors, the two countries' relationship is closely entwined in the political context of the Korean peninsula (e.g. Kim 2016). A recent dispute between Korea and China over a new American military deployment in Korea demonstrates the prominent presence of China in the Korean political economy. In July 2016, the United States deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in Korea, which reflected complex international relations in East Asia. China, promptly objecting to the decision, accused both the United States and Korea of destabilizing the multilateral relationship (Sankaran and Fearey 2017). The Chinese reaction was clearly visible in a series of economic retaliations, including the ban on Chinese group tours to Korea, the blocking of streaming services of Korean media products and the forced closure of many Korean retail stores in China (Juan et al. 2017; Park et al. 2019). Domestic Korean news media extensively covered the direct impact of the retaliation by presenting textual, visual and numeric data, often depicting the Korean economy as a victim sandwiched between the United States and China, or criticizing the diplomatic mismanagement of the Korean government (e.g. Kim and Cho 2017). Grounded in the intertwined political economic context, the stance on China has been an important political agenda (Choo 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Risk society

Recent social experiences with scientifically unclear disasters, untrustworthy public authorities and an uncontrollable external threat typically represent the concept of a risk society. Especially in the days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the uncertain causes and consequences of the disease, the exponential spread across the world and the shortage of various items of protective gear have dramatically shown what a globalized risk society looks like. The government, international institutions and mass media have poured out information regarding the epidemic and protective measures. Despite staying informed, individuals are hardly free from anxiety over anticipated risks.

According to Beck (2009), science and technologies have endangered our society. Risk as 'the anticipation of the catastrophe' is now more perceptible due to the advanced technologies surrounding our everyday lives (Beck 2009:

9). At the same time, advanced science has maximized its destructive forces in such ills as war and environmental pollution. The anticipation lies in the paradox that risk as ‘the side effect of successful modernization’ is no longer controllable in our modern, globalized world. Like the global impacts of fine-dust pollution and the COVID-19 epidemic, the scope of anticipated catastrophe spans the globe, which makes it difficult to calculate the consequences. As individuals are scared of uncertain, but anticipated, catastrophes, the risk becomes translated into reality (Giddens 1999).

Uncertainty causes an uneven relationship between lay people and the professional experts who are involved in various sectors dealing with relevant information, such as mass media, NGOs, academia and government (Beck 2009; Giddens 1991). The staged risk, which is seemingly irremediable as well as intangible, ‘determines the attitude toward life’, forcing underinformed individuals to seek individual protection to avoid uncertain risk (Beck 2009: 8). Thus, risk is a socially constructed reality grounded in public discourse, reflecting the power relationship between the general public and people with various powers. This power-driven perception of risk eventually reforms the mode of thought (Beck 2015; Cottle 1998).

The media as ‘a prime site of social definition’ plays an active role in defining risks (Cottle 1998: 8). A mediatized disaster on a global scale is constituted rather than simply transmitted by media and communications. In the course of covering disasters, advanced media and communications have exhibited the massive scale of global disasters promptly and constantly, which has even further increased the needs for media and communications (Cottle 2014). Staying informed, individuals reflexively perceive remote disasters as intimate and personalized risks (Beck 2009; Giddens 1999). However, reflexive individuals who experience blurred information on disasters covered by the media may feel more fear about a dangerous future.

The Korean experiences explain the concept well. According to a report from the Ministry of Environment, the level of fine dust (mainly PM 10) was even higher in the early 2000s than in recent years in major Korean cities (Ministry of Environment 2016). Nevertheless, fine dust has been extensively publicized in recent years. Although the government has provided detailed information and implemented safety measures, there have been continuous controversies over many issues, such as how harmful the pollution is, whether the pollution originates in China or in Korea and whether a face mask is effective in preventing potential harm. In addition, extensive information from news media and public alerts via mobile phones have made the environmental crisis more visible. The response to the COVID-19 epidemic has been similar. In the early days of the unprecedented epidemic, Korean news media, not unlike news media across the world, produced a tremendous amount of news even before the first infected patient was tested in Korea. The government has constantly informed its citizens about ever-changing epidemic situations. Nevertheless, the amount of information was not able to completely relieve anxiety about the uncertain scope and consequences of the rapidly spreading virus. Instead, individuals relying on information from limited outlets were possibly more afraid of the invisible yet anticipated risk.

Myth and news

A face mask denotes protective or preventive equipment for daily living. However, a face mask connotes different meanings for different occasions;

as seen in the days of the epidemic crisis, it could be a warning sign of the massive scope of the epidemic; in other contexts, celebrities or criminals covering their faces may signify their unwillingness to expose their identity. The signified meanings of the face mask are continuously floating on the interplay among different contexts surrounding the object. Grounded in semiotics as a study of 'signification apart from content' (Barthes 1972: 111), this study aims to analyse the complex modes of signification constructing the mythologized meanings of the face mask, which are often separated from its content in this unprecedented epidemic

In a society made up of a complex web of significance, the meanings of objects, behaviours and events are deeply placed in given histories and contexts (Geertz 1973). A contextual approach is key to understanding a myth-making process. Stressing the historicity of a myth in a certain context, Barthes (1972) introduces the notion of the second order of significance. Anything can be a myth when it is 'constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it' (Barthes 1972: 114). In this system of myth, a single chain of signifier-signified-sign is incorporated into another historic chain in which a sign becomes a signifier that signifies another meaning. For example, while denoting a piece of protective equipment, a face mask may become a warning sign of the rapidly spreading virus during the epidemic, which composes a semiological chain. This semiological chain interplays with another semiological chain that existed before the ongoing epidemic to signify a new meaning of the face mask. The present study delves into the multiple myth-making processes that infiltrate the political, social and cultural values imposed on face masks.

As Barthes (1972) interprets how a picture of Black soldier in a French magazine in the 1950s reflects the dominant ideology of the French Empire, the main semiotic object of this study, the face mask, also becomes a signifier delivering social values and ideologies of Korean society when placed in the recent social context of Korea. The best way to understand the mythologized value and meaning of the face mask is by 'articulating the relationship between all aspects of a sign system that constructs meaning around cultural assumptions embedded in the form' (Gaines 2007: 313). A face mask in this study does not generally connote the prevailing risks during the epidemic. Rather, it becomes multiple signs that are coupled with the semiotic meanings of China and the Korean government.

In order to access the multifaceted myths of the face mask, the present study analyses news. As a primary institution that is made up of language, discourse and speech in modern society, news media provide archetypal stories (Lule 2001). In other words, news fulfils the function of myth by providing a 'mythological narrative with its own symbolic codes that are recognized by its audience' (Bird and Dardenne 1988: 71).

[M]yth has provided the stories that make sense of a society, for a society. Myth has been called upon to give meaning to incredible events, to explain that which cannot be explained and to reaffirm values and beliefs, especially when those values and beliefs are challenged.

(Lule 2002: 276)

Thus, news and myth have been coupled to be cultural and ideological forms, which aim to sustain existing power and dominant ideologies (Lule 2001). Many studies have delved into the myth-making practices of news media. Fiske and Hartley (2003) analyse the myth-making process in television news

by applying the analytic framework of Barthes's semiological chain. Barnette (2006) has revealed how news narratives mythologize the meaning of women in various contexts. Fürsich (2002) interprets the mythologized meaning of capitalistic practices constructed in American newspapers. Establishing a research method that focuses particularly on the discursive construction of myth in news media, Kelsey (2013, 2017) has analysed many news stories that mythologized historic events and victimized people. A recent study also demonstrated how the mythologized meaning of a financial practice is constructed by British news media (Budd et al. 2020).

Natural disasters, power struggles and conflicts with neighbouring countries tend to be widely covered by news media, as these stories contain conventional news values such as timeliness, familiarity, conflict, unexpectedness and superlativeness (Bell 1991; Galtung and Ruge 1965). Although a face mask is not a newsworthy object by itself, it becomes a value-driven news story when associated with other newsworthy events and subjects such as disasters, external enemies and public authorities. The text (face mask) is mutually constituted by the interplay between international and domestic political contexts. Therefore, this study posits that the interplay between the face mask and surrounding contexts has constructed multifaceted mythological meanings of the face mask during the COVID-19 epidemic.

Social semiotics

Social semiotics as an analytic method emphasizing 'social action, context, and use' is employed to interpret the connotative meanings of study subjects (Hodge and Kress 1988: 5). Social semiotics intersecting with formal semiotics and the social usage of signs is applied to discuss how signs are constructed and exchanged in certain semiotic chains (Barthes 1972; Hodge and Kress 1988: 5). As Chandler (2017) pointed out, despite its constant existence, a sign can only be recognized through its mediation. Once signified by social convention, a sign becomes familiar to people through repeated use by various media (Chandler 2017). Following the methodological convention of social semiotics focusing more on various semiotic resources than on signs, this study also analyses various modes of communication like texts, visual images, discourses and contexts placed in news stories (Van Leeuwen 2005).

Reflecting the online practice in Korea in which people rely predominantly on portal web services such as Naver and Kakao in their news consumption, this study collected target news articles from the news aggregation site Naver (Dwyer and Hutchinson 2019). First, to analyse the mythologized meaning of the face mask in the fine-dust crisis, this study collected news articles by using search words combining *fine dust* and *face mask* from two different periods: (1) two to three days around days with a severe fine-dust alert and (2) ordinary days. Then, this study theoretically selected certain news stories that contained various modes of communication constructing the meaning of the face mask in relation to the fine-dust crisis. Second, the analysis of the meaning of the face mask during the COVID-19 epidemic was conducted by collecting news stories using multiple strategies: (1) to know about changing social circumstances, this study compared news articles related to the study subject from three different periods, namely pre-first case of COVID-19 in Korea (20 January 2020), between the first case and the peak of the outbreak (15 March 2020), and later; (2) search words were combined in multiple ways: *face mask–corona*, *face mask–Wuhan pneumonia*, *face mask–China*,

face mask–government and *face mask–China government*. Due to the tremendous amount of news using these words, this study often employed target search words such as *shortage*, *hoarding*, *entry ban* and *mask distribution*; (3) since news reports posted by news agencies were intensively reproduced by many news outlets, these articles came up frequently in the selection process of news articles for the analysis. The news aggregation site listed those articles according to its own algorithm, which is not known publicly. Thus, the author selected target news articles from search lists without putting weight on certain news outlets and the number of news reports that were similar to each other. Instead, the articles were selected theoretically to present the myth-making practices of news media that sensationalized the face mask during the recent crises. Due to the large number of news articles in the search list, the author selected target articles by focusing on headlines. Pictures included in this article were also selected as representative cases demonstrating the myth-making news practices.

ANALYSIS

'Wearing your face mask is necessary' was a common news headline during a fine-dust alert in Korea. The face mask was again a hot news topic when an unknown yet very contagious virus arrived in Korea. Articles covered a wide variety of stories related to the face mask, ranging from the mass adoption of the face mask amid the epidemic to controversial information discussing the effectiveness of the face mask. However, it was the shortage of face masks that caught the unanimous attention of news media, which poured out news associating the shortage with sociopolitical contexts. These outlets often politicized the face mask in relation to international and domestic political actors like China and the Korean government. When China and the government were identified as the culprits, the face mask as individual protective equipment was further mythologized as the epidemic threatened individual health. Analysing the politicized meaning of the face mask, this study was designed to answer three analytic questions: (1) How was wearing the face mask mythologized as a routinized practice in days of uncertain risk? (2) How was the face mask politicized as a mythologized sign indicating China as an external threat? and (3) How was the face mask politicized as a symbolic code of the government's responsibility for the crisis? Throughout the analysis, this study demonstrates how the face mask was mythologized by news media to sensationalize the two public health crises. Also, this study presents how the face mask was further mythologized in problematizing China and the Korean government during the early phase of the pandemic.

Face mask: Sign of routinized risk

The number of news stories mentioning face masks increased correspondingly with fine-dust alerts. Recently, there were three time periods when news stories on fine dust and masks were extensively posted: around 11 November 2019, 10 December 2019 and 22 December 2019. Many articles recommended the face mask as essential equipment for protecting individual health from severe fine-dust pollutants. The headline of one news story presented a typical link among fine dust, health concerns and the face mask. The article titled 'If wearing a general (noncertified) face mask you would inhale all the fine dust

[...] What is the correct way of wearing one?’ emphasized the need for face masks by citing professional opinions and by specifying scientific studies.

Experts emphasized that you prevent inhaling fine dust when you correctly wear a face mask certified by the government. Because fine dust smaller than 10 μm would pass a general mask, it is useless. Even a certified one (for fine dust) becomes useless unless worn correctly. [...] After putting on a mask, it should be confirmed whether there is gap (between the mask and your face).

(Eum 2019)

For lay people without expertise, the story was composed of two pieces of symbolic information: the confirmed effectiveness of the certified mask and the potential vulnerability of health. Despite their anonymity, experts approved the mandatory necessity of face masks certified by an authority. The certified mask was supposed to filter even small particles that could be identified only by scientists. Also, the certified mask was to be used in a standard way. Discursively confirmed by the signified meanings of experts, the government, an inscrutable scientific unit (μm) and a standard for wear, the (certified) face mask became a must-have equipment to protect individual health.

The face mask was signified as a mandatory protective equipment in many news articles that discursively placed the wearing of the face mask in a daily context. An article with the headline ‘Masks like hot cakes amid fine dust’ (Kim 2019) implied the mass adoption of face masks in responding to the fine-dust crisis. Also, many news stories used visual images nested in



Figure 1: A weather forecaster wearing a face mask. © 2019 iMBC, https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2019/nwtoday/article/5638253_28983.html. Accessed 7 December 2021. Screenshot by author.

headlines articulating the mass mask-wearing practice. An article with the headline 'Commuters wearing masks amid the fine dust alert' (Min 2019) and another one titled 'Taking a commemorative photograph on graduation day while wearing masks due to fine dust' (Hong 2019) typically signified the wide adoption of face masks for daily occasions. In addition, the sign of public authority was frequently cited by news media. A news article with the headline 'Even policemen are wearing face masks amid fine dust' (Kim 2019) included a photograph of policemen wearing face masks, while another article posted a visual image of a group of soldiers wearing face masks (Lim 2019). Placed in the semiological chain of uniformed public officers, wearing face masks was formalized in the days of the fine-dust crisis. The face mask was more directly associated with fine dust when a weather forecaster wearing a face mask reported a high fine-dust alert in a television news video. During the report, the forecaster explicitly recommended the face mask as a protective means. Seen as a reliable information source, the weather forecaster confirmed the necessity of face masks on a day of severe fine dust (Kim 2019). The high demand for face masks, the wide adoption of face masks for daily occasions, public officials wearing masks and weather forecasters with face masks commonly signified the meaning of the face mask as an essential, yet routinized, means to protect individuals from fine dust. When the face mask as a news subject was repeatedly coupled with everyday narratives, it became a symbolic code signifying not only its function as a protective equipment but also the environmental crisis itself (Bird and Dardenne 1988). The face mask was mythologized to be a visual sign of the fine-dust crisis.

Face masks immediately resurfaced in the news upon the arrival of COVID-19 in Korea. In the early stages of the epidemic, news media provided contradictory information regarding the efficacy of face masks in protecting against the unknown virus. Whereas some articles devalued its effectiveness, other articles reported that a face mask designed to protect against a certain level of fine dust could prevent infection; news media portrayed the mass adoption of face masks in the days of the epidemic similarly to how they portrayed it during the fine-dust crisis. Many photographic news articles illustrated diverse everyday scenes of people wearing face masks, such as young students in a classroom (Nam and Jeon 2020), Confucian scholars in traditional attire at a ceremony (Kong 2020) and policemen guarding a quarantined facility (Jang 2020). A tremendous amount of news included celebrity photos showing entertainers and politicians wearing face masks. Because of news media practices, the face mask was embedded in the social consciousness as a routinized means of protecting individual health from the epidemic (Gaines 2007). Similar to the case of fine dust, the face mask joined diverse everyday narratives, becoming a symbolic code of the public health crisis itself (Bird and Dardenne 1988).

Although the two recent disastrous events were irrelevant to each other, there were several commonalities: first, despite its limitations, the face mask reduced the risks in the two crises; second, the causes and effects of both crises were not sufficiently known scientifically; and third, both were known to lead to potential respiratory problems at least. The common uncertainties and potential risks became contextualized in news media practices mythologizing the face mask as routinized and thus symbolic equipment believed to protect individuals from uncertain risks. As the face mask repeatedly appeared in news stories with texts and/or visual images, the small piece of medical equipment even symbolized the presence of a public health risk.

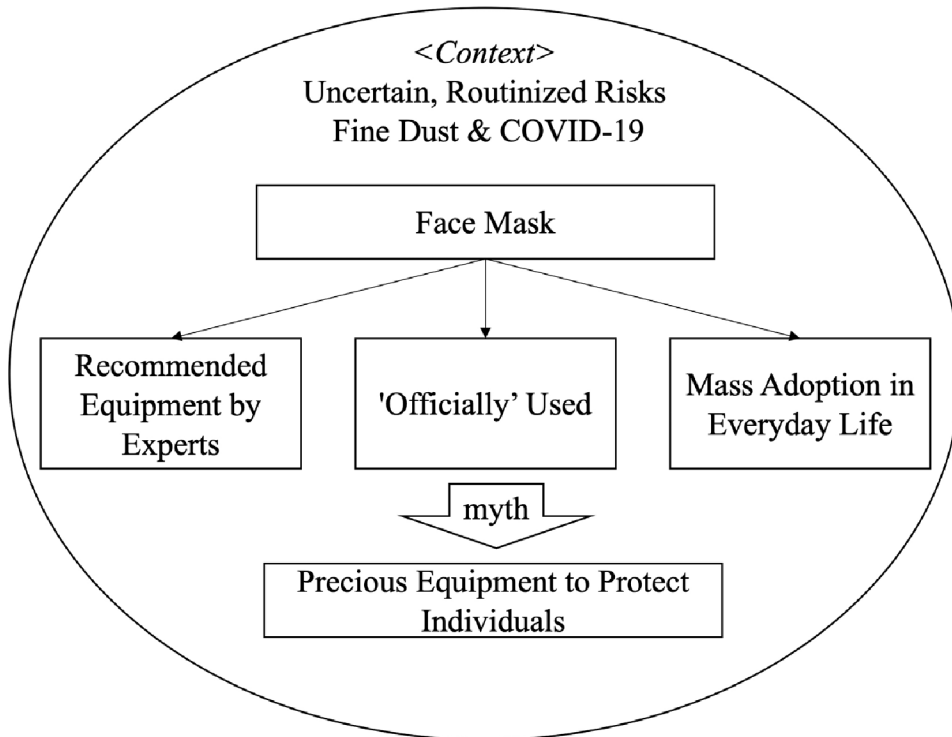


Figure 2: Face mask in the risk society of Korea.

Shortage of the face mask as signifying the threat from China

As explained in the contextual review, there have been controversies over the cause of the recent fine-dust crisis. Even though the Korean government has not suggested China as the major source of fine dust, news media have covered a possible link between China and the pollution. The general public has also expressed their suspicions of China in multiple opinion polls (e.g. Min 2019). COVID-19 was even initially called ‘Wuhan pneumonia’, named after the Chinese city known as the first epicentre of the virus. Since the first patient tested positive for the virus in Korea was a Chinese national who was visiting Korea, the association between the virus and China seemed obvious. Even though the Korean government officially named the virus Corona-19, its link with China did not disappear, as the name of country was frequently mentioned in relation to the virus. Placed in the contexts of the two recent crises, China was already mythologized as the culprit in raising uncertain risks. The sign of China as an external threat and the sign of the face mask as the primary means of individual protection were associated with each other by news media that sensationalized and politicized China as the culprit in the public health crisis. In other words, repeating the link between China as the main cause of the crisis and the shortage of face mask mythologized the face mask as a symbol of safety threatened by China.

A news outlet published a report on Daerim-Dong, the location of the largest community of Chinese-speaking people in Korea:

[T]here were prevailing unhygienic practices around the town. Most foods including meats, sausages, tanghulus, and donuts were displayed outside. It was seen that visitors touched tanghulus with their bare hands, and sellers touched jellied foods.

(Yoon 2020)

This article epitomized the negative connotations of China and the Chinese people in the COVID-19 epidemic in Korea. Although the exemplified scenes of street foods were not uncommon in Korea, the article put Chinatown and the Chinese people in the frame of unhygienic practices. The unhygienic scene was likely to be overlapped with a filthy wild animal trading market in Wuhan, which was widely known as the exact epicentre of the virus in the early stages of the epidemic. Interplaying with existing contexts, the unhygienic practices in so-called Chinatown became a sign signifying a potential risk. The negative image was even further constructed by the news article that illustrated Chinese people stocking up on face masks for profit.

[We] spotted a Chinese who carried six boxes of masks. As the demand for high-quality masks made in Korea soars even with the added premium, Chinese people increasingly hoard masks. The purchased masks are supposed to be sold in China. Jumping on the bandwagon, some pharmacies sold masks in bulk for cash only.

(Yoon 2020)

The prevalence of mask hoarding, the added premium and the cash-only deals connoted unlawful acts practised in the town, on the one hand. On the other, the emphasis on the high quality of Korean-made masks implied the importance of the face mask as a piece of protective equipment for Korean people. The necessity of face masks conflated with unlawful acts implied a negative impact on the safety of a Korean society facing the contagious disease spread from China.

It was the face mask that was in peril because Korean society failed to prevent its falling into Chinese hands. Articles with the headlines: 'The demand for masks skyrocketing [...] Chinese tourists sweeping masks in bulk' (Park 2020), 'Mask related stocks doubled amid Chinese peddlers' hoarding' (Goh 2020) and 'Custom service agents counting the number of masks carried by Chinese tourists' (Jeon 2020) were typical examples that demonstrated how the face mask was negatively associated with China. Words like 'sweeping', 'peddlers' and 'custom services' and visual images portraying a pile of face masks at the airport discursively connoted smuggling. Framed in the context of the epidemic, the smuggled face masks were likely to be associated with the lack of safety in Korea.

The depiction of a Korea that failed to secure face masks was more common after the outbreak picked up speed in Korea. A news article titled 'Masks depleted in Korea are sold for double the price in China' (Cha 2020) implied the unauthorized transaction of selling face masks by mentioning peddlers in the article while highlighting the high demand in China for 'qualified' face masks made in Korea. Similarly, other news articles also contrasted the availability of face masks in China to the shortage in Korea (Lee 2020). Multiple crime reports, such as a Chinese face mask peddler and a Chinese face mask swindler, negatively linked the face mask to China; information such as the large number ('Hoarding 29,000 masks') (Son 2020) and the legal status of Chinese criminals ('Chinese without Visa in face mask scam detained') (Goh 2020) highlighted the negativity. These news stories commonly strengthened the problematic meaning of China and Chinese people by appropriating the face mask as the sign of individual safety (Lule 2001).

In sum, the frequent association of China and the recent crises constructed the mythologized meaning of China as an external threat causing uncertainty

중국인 관광객 마스크 개수 확인하는 관세청 직원들

등록 2020.02.06 13:02:50



Figure 3: A pile of face masks at the airport. © 2020 Newsis, https://newsis.com/view/?id=NISI20200206_0016055344. Accessed 7 December 2021. Screenshot by author.

in the crises, while the face mask was mythologized to be a symbol of general safety, which was threatened by China. In the myth-making news practices, the sign of China and the sign of the face mask constructed the semiological chain mythologizing the face mask as a symbolic code of the risk exacerbated by China (Barthes 1972). China was mythologized to be the main culprit not only in the epidemic but also in the shortage of protective equipment. In the meantime, the face mask was mobilized to further sensationalize China. News media sensationalized the pandemic and its consequences by provoking public sentiment against China, which had worsened because of

recent political, economic and sociocultural issues in the region. The face mask became a convenient vehicle for associating the crisis and the neighbouring country.

Face mask: A symbolic code of safety threatened by the incompetent government

The link between China and the shortage of face masks was extended to the Korean government when the shortage was politicized by news media. The shortage symbolized the failure of the government in two ways; first, because of its diplomatic incompetence, the government failed to block the virus from China; second, the government failed to secure a supply of face masks because of poor management in the initial stage. Once mythologized as the symbol of threat and the symbol of threatened public health, China and the face mask were mobilized in the effort to blame the government.

Although the Korean government was one of the first countries to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak with intrusive measures (Dudden and Marks 2020), Daegu, the fourth largest city in Korea, became the first epicentre outside China in mid-February. It was highly newsworthy that right-wing opposition parties and civic groups started criticizing the government for the failure in prevention. Whereas many straight news articles simply delivered oppositional political opinions, many other news stories discursively linked governmental responsibility to the causes and the consequences of the epidemic. The mythologized meanings of the face mask and China were again interwoven in the context of news stories politicizing the crisis.

The World Health Organization decided to call the contagious disease COVID-19 based on the naming guideline to avoid names that indicate geographical regions or people's names (WHO 2015). The Korean government officially named it Corona-19 and advised against using such names as Wuhan pneumonia. However, the leading right-wing opposition party continuously used names including China or Wuhan, accusing the official name of reflecting the pro-China position of the current government (Seo 2020). Also, the two largest, conservative newspapers, *Chosun Ilbo* and *Joongang Ilbo*, consistently called the disease 'Wuhan corona'. The discourse imposed on the name of the disease became explicit as the rapidly spreading virus was linked to the government's decision against an entry ban on Chinese citizens. News media extensively covered the opposition's claims that the loose border policy was responsible for the severe outbreak in late February. Some news media referred to the low infection rates in other countries like Taiwan, which implemented an early entry ban on Chinese citizens (Yoon and Heo 2020).

The political discourse on the government's failure supported the mythologized meaning of China as an external threat to Korean public safety. The link between the Korean government and China was often mediated by the face mask. News media reported a public petition for impeachment, accusing the president of allowing the entrance of Chinese people while giving out face masks to China (Kim 2020). Also, many news articles talked up an entry ban on Chinese citizens and an export ban on face masks, both of which were promptly implemented in Taiwan (Jo 2020). Exemplifying the case of Taiwan, a news article titled 'I envy Taiwan' highlighted the Taiwanese government's strict control over face masks. Contrasted with the case of Taiwan, the failure of the Korean government was implied by the unsecured face mask.

The policy on the mask in Taiwan was surprising. Taiwan banned the export of masks completely from January 24. [...] Having no foresight, the Korean government announced that it would send masks and protective clothing to China. The Incheon International Airport was once choked with Chinese peddlers carrying masks out.

(Jung 2020)

It was the implementation of a new measure centralizing the distribution of face masks that prompted news media to start concentrating on the political cause of the shortage. Drawing attentions to the initial disarray, news media posted many illustrated stories signifying the shortage of face masks, such as long queues of people waiting to buy face masks (Song et al. 2020). While those news stories politicized the face mask by implying the responsibility of the government, public safety was represented by nothing but the face mask. Headlines of many news articles demonstrated the discursive association clearly: 'Being infected while lining up for buying masks? [...] What are the government's measures?' (Choi 2020), 'Still lacking masks despite government measures [...] Patient with lung conditions feels their life is threatened' (Hankyung Newsroom 2020) and 'Masks in short supply even for medical doctors on the front lines [...] The consequence of the government's procurement of public supplies' (Jung 2020). In the course of implying the government's responsibility, the shortage of face masks was directly associated with various health threats in the context of the epidemic.

Public anger over the shortage of face masks was illustrated with provocative expressions like 'rage' (Ahn 2020) and 'bitter tears (literally bloody tears)' (Jung 2020), which were cited in news highlighting the government's mismanagement. 'Socialism' was another word used to politicize the unsettled emergency measures. A number of news articles described the government's decision to centralize the distribution of face masks as a socialist practice, appropriating a negative connotation of the political word. Grounded in the context of inter-Korean relations, the political narrative aimed to undermine the managerial capacity of the government by mobilizing anti-socialist sentiment in Korea (Lule 2001). The government was discursively identified as the culprit in the shortage of face masks, which implied anticipated danger to individual health. The shortage of face masks was widely politicized by news media criticizing the government. In the meantime, the face mask became further sacred, as its scarcity implied threatened individual health. As Lule (2001) demonstrates in his discussion of how myth-making news narratives impose new meaning to social events, the new articles analysed for this study politicized the pandemic by sensationalizing the initial confusion of the unprecedented crisis. The face mask was mythologized to be a symbol of public safety threatened by the incompetence of the government.

CONCLUSION

The fine-dust crisis and the COVID-19 epidemic are commonly known to cause serious respiratory problems, which causes people to wear face masks routinely to prevent potential harms. News media, the major information outlet, explicitly as well as implicitly suggested the importance of face masks in response to the risks. Along with scientific information, the discursive connotations from texts and images were appropriated to mythologize

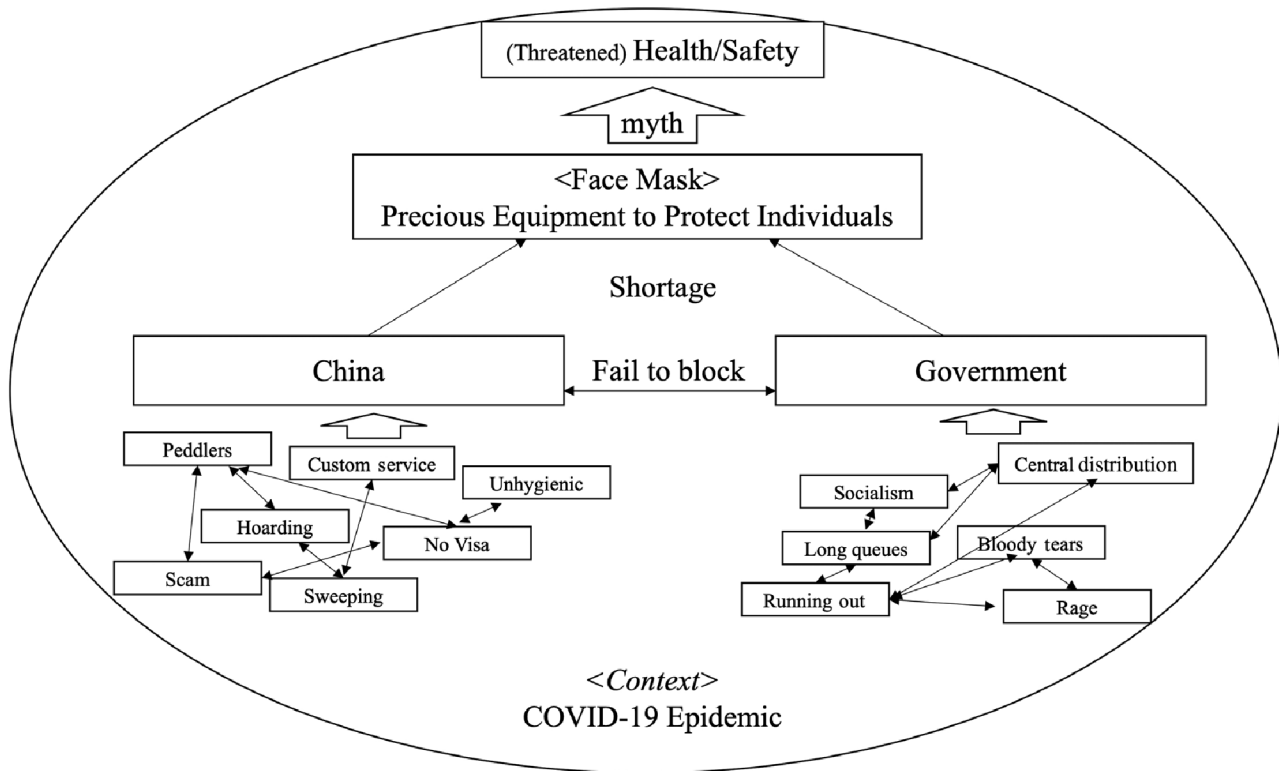


Figure 4: The mythologized meaning of face mask in the media sensation and politicization.

the face mask as the primary means of protection. The face mask in unprecedented and uncertain times became a sign of individual safety.

The mythologized face mask in the epidemic became further sanctified by the imbalance of supply and demand. Deeply placed in the context of the recent disastrous crises in Korea, China was signified as the culprit not only in the crises but also in the shortage of the precious face mask. Chinese people taking a large quantity of face masks to their country from Korea were negatively sensationalized to identify them as the culprits in the shortage. The high-quality face masks made in Korea, which was swept by Chinese people breaking the law, signified threatened safety. In a time of scarcity, the protective equipment became further mythologized as a sign of safety, health or ultimate protection.

The signified meaning of China as an external threat was continuously strengthened when the Korean government opted out of the entry ban on Chinese citizens. The government was blamed for failing to protect Korea from the origin of the epidemic, a failure often represented by the shortage of face masks. Then, the government was identified as the actual culprit in the shortage. In the meantime, the shortage suggested anticipated risk. The face mask was again symbolized as a precious means for saving individuals from the deadly virus.

Along with other safety measures, such as hand-sanitizing practices and social distancing, wearing face masks is recommended or even mandated as a necessary means for individual protection. The pandemic has caused a steep increase in the demand for face masks across the world. In this circumstance, it is imaginable that the scarcity makes them more precious. As this study demonstrates, the shortage of face masks sensationalized in mass-distributed

news could have become a sign of the anticipated risk to individual health. In the days of an uncertain risk, a series of negative discourses mapped onto Chinese people could instigate xenophobic sentiment. A tremendous number of news stories that hinted at the collapsed public safety system by overrepresenting the shortage of face masks could have caused mass anxiety, especially in such uncertain times.

As the pace of the epidemic slowed down and the supply of face masks became stabilized, news stories on the face mask decreased remarkably in Korea. Once regarded as an Asian practice, wearing a face mask has become the most dramatically globalized practice in a short period of time in the global pandemic. The face mask is not only protective equipment but also visual material. In the pandemic, the face mask has become a visual sign of the global crisis. The unprecedented demands for it as well as its visibility have also opened a space for weaponizing it in many ways.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Kim, Tae-Sik (2021), 'Mythologizing the face mask: How protective covers became political during the fine-dust and COVID-19 crises in South Korea', *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 17:2, pp. 97–117, https://doi.org/10.1386/macp_00044_1

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