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A Cross-Cultural Study of Mask-Wearing During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Comparing China, Japan and the USA*

Abstract: During the Covid-19 epidemic, Japanese and Chinese have overwhelmingly tended to wear face masks, while Americans have not. Why? In this paper, based on ethnographic interviews with members of these three societies as well as examination of mass media and scholarly reports, I provide a preliminary interpretation of this question.

I first consider social psychologists' large-scale analyses of collectivism versus individualism; China and Japan are both considered to be collectivistic societies, whereas the United States is considered to be individualistic. I also consider ethnic belonging to one's nation in China and Japan, as opposed to civic belonging to one's nation in the United States. These explications have value in understanding Covid-19 policies but seem of limited use in explaining mask-wearing. For such understanding, I turn to ethnographic interviews – some twenty in each society – as well as participant-observation in public sites.

My findings are these: While in Japan social pressure is paramount in leading to mask wearing, with the state mostly absent, in China state pressure is paramount, with social pressure largely absent. In the United States, with social pressure absent beyond one's sub-group and state pressure hotly contested, mask-wearing becomes a matter of politically-based individual choice. In these three societies, there have thus been different axes as to why mask-wearing is accepted or contested. This research is of too small a scale to fully explicate these factors; but it does show how anthropological analysis is essential in combining with the findings of other disciplines such as social psychology to arrive at a fuller understanding of contemporary social phenomena.

Keywords: Covid-19, mask-wearing, individualism vs. collectivism, ethnic and civic belonging, Japan, China, the United States

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Introduction

During the Covid-19 epidemic, Japanese and Chinese have overwhelmingly tended to wear face masks, while Americans have not, with many refusing to wear them. Why?

Social psychologists such as Geert Hofstede have set forth cross-cultural measurement frameworks, including collectivism vs. individualism. China and Japan are both considered to be collectivist (although Japan less than China), whereas the United States is considered to be individualistic. The argument made in the social psychology literature is that in collectivist societies wearing a face-mask is seen as a social responsibility towards others, whereas in individualistic societies, it is seen as an individual choice. I maintain that while this generalization is broadly true it is insufficient.

The premise of this paper is that to understand why Japanese and Chinese wear face masks but Americans often do not, we need to examine this issue not only through the generalizations of social psychology but also through the close social analysis and ethnographic interviewing and observations of anthropology. Ethnographic analysis illustrates how there is a fundamental difference in mask-wearing between socially-imposed collectivism, as in Japan, and state-imposed collectivism, as in China, with the former allowing individual citizens to not wear a mask if they so choose, and the latter not. In Japan, there is immense pressure from society at large to wear a mask, and one who does not conspicuously stands out, which most citizens seek to avoid; but there is no law proclaiming that one must wear a mask, and indeed some people do not. In China, both mainland China and Hong Kong, there has indeed been such a law, with violators facing fines or even jail; actions against government Covid-19 policy may have dire personal consequences. In the United States, with social pressure absent beyond one's immediate group and state pressure hotly contested, mask-wearing is an individual choice shaped by one's political views. In some contexts in the United States, those who wear masks may be seen as deviant, unlike in Japan and China, where those who do not wear masks may be viewed as deviant. In these three societies, there are different societal bases as to why mask-wearing is accepted or contested. This paper thus shows how ethnographic explication in anthropology is important in adding to the findings of disciplines such as social psychology to arrive at a fuller explication for contemporary social phenomena such as mask-wearing.

Theoretical Background:

Collectivism vs. Individualism and Ethnic Belonging vs. Civic Belonging

Social and cross-cultural psychologists have long made the distinction between individualistic societies and collectivistic societies. Geert Hofstede, who explored this distinction, and whose research, along with that of Harry Triandis, has been foundational for subsequent generations of social psychologists, maintained that "Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after her/his immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede 2001, 225; see also Triandis 1995). Kamal Fatehi et al. 2020 elaborate on this definition:

> In individualistic cultures, people behave according to self-interest and personal preferences and consider independence and self-sufficiency very important. In collectivist cultures, groups are of primary importance – individuals are secondary. In these cultures, individuals acknowledge the contributions of others to their existence. They may sacrifice self-interest to promote the interest of the collective.

Countries such as Japan and China, among many other countries, are generally designated as collectivistic; countries such as the US and UK, among other countries, are generally designated as individualistic (See Hofstede 2001, "Clearly Cultural" 2022).[1] These broad labels have been used to analyze Covid-19 mortality rates. Yossi Maaravi et al. extend the individualistic-collectivist analysis to Covid-19:

> We found that the more individualistic (vs. collectivistic) a country was, the more COVID-19 cases and mortalities it had. We also found that the more individualistic participants were, the higher the chances they would not adhere to epidemic prevention measures.
> (Maaravi et al. 2020; see also Melton and Sinclair 2021).

As Covid-19 has evolved, this may no longer be the case. However, in the countries examined in this paper, the high number of Covid-19 deaths in the

[1] This is complicated in some recent reviews of the social psychology literature, such as that of Takano and Osaka (2018), reporting that in a number of recent studies, Japan has appeared more individualistic than the U.S. I myself have found a growing Japanese individualism in my own recent ethnographic research (Mathews 2018), as I later discuss.

United States (1.1 million) as compared to Japan (67,000) and China (78,000, although deaths may be under-reported) as of Jan. 2023, seem to support the above argument. [2] American deaths were no doubt disproportionately among those who exercised their individual right not to be vaccinated or take other precautions against the disease, such as wearing masks.

In other areas related to Covid-19, however, the labels "individualistic culture" and "collectivistic culture" seem too broad to make full sense as explanatory variables – they obscure more than aid explanation.[3] In this paper, I argue that mask-wearing is one such area. There have been a number of arguments by social psychologists on collectivism vs. individualism in mask-wearing. Jackson G. Lu et al. (2021) indicate the expected correlation between collectivism and high mask-usage in China and Japan, and individualism and low mask-usage in the United States. Other social-psychological studies (Chang Hyo Jung et. al. 2021; Ana Paula Santana et al. 2022) as well as mass media reports (see Hillary Leung 2020) also argue that people in collectivist societies are more likely to wear masks than people in individualist societies. Adding to this evidence, protests against mask-wearing have taken place in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, and Australia (Philipose 2020) – all Western countries. There was also a protest in Japan (Ryall 2020) but one that was tiny. All in all, it seems difficult to dispute that mask-wearing is associated with collectivist societies as opposed to individualistic societies. But what this actually means for those who live in these societies is not touched upon by these findings.

In the following analysis I focus on China and Japan as opposed to the United States in exploring why members of the former societies have readily worn masks in response to Covid-19, while many members of the latter society have refused to wear masks, showing that broad cultural generalizations need to be augmented by more specific cultural analyses. But before turning to the issue

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[2] Deaths from Covid-19 are difficult to compare because of different ways of accounting for death, as shown by China's recent revision of its death rates (BBC News 2023). But deaths in China and Japan remain a full magnitude lower than those in the US; this, I think, goes beyond differences in how deaths are calculated.

[3] Social psychologists have complexified their conceptualizations of individualism vs. collectivism. See, for example, Singelis et al. 2016, in their discussion of Japanese "vertical collectivism," emphasizing that the group to which the individual belongs is characterized by different statuses, a conceptualization applying to Japan, although not to the examples I later explore in this paper. Nonetheless, I maintain that the methods of investigation of social psychology, whereby individuals are asked survey questions apart from their actual behavior in the world, limits its usefulness, however well-conceptualized. Ethnography, in the thick of the world, is needed to complement its findings.

of masks, which is complex, let me examine one more large-scale cultural generalization, that of ethnic belonging and civic belonging, in its relation to the blocking of incoming visitors. China up until January 2023 allowed almost no foreign nationals to enter the country, and all faced a 14-day quarantine upon entry. Japan too severely limited the entry of almost all non-citizens visitors, up until Oct. 2022. The US, Canada, and most Western European countries allowed in vaccinated visitors throughout 2022, and indeed encourage them for the sake of their tourist industries despite the threat of Covid-19. Why this difference?

There are of course epidemiological factors involved in when countries fashion their Covid-19 policies, related to their infection and vaccination rates as opposed to other countries at a given point, and thus the degree of danger that visitors may or may not pose. There are also geographical factors, such as whether or not a country is made up of islands, making it easier to block off visitors than countries with land borders – New Zealand prohibited visitors for an extended period as France, for example, did not, although all today allow in vaccinated visitors. There are also reasons overtly related to national policy. A major reason why China has not opened its borders is that the Chinese government has insisted that only its own nationally-developed vaccines be used, which are less effective than other vaccines (*Asahi Shinbun* 2022) – as of Jan. 2023, vaccines of foreign manufacture remain blocked in mainland China for use by Chinese citizens (Ip 2023) although they have been available in Hong Kong. China thus has remained deeply concerned about Covid-19, even of the comparatively less lethal Omicron variants, a concern proven valid by the epidemic that as of Jan. 2023 has been sweeping through China.

But there also are cultural-historical factors that seem difficult to deny. The fact that China and Japan have been particularly strict in their quarantine policies seems linked to the fact that China and Japan have had a primarily ethnic basis for membership and have had historically a mistrust of foreigners. Theorists of national identity have written of civic identity and ethnic identity as two poles of national identity (see Mathews et al. 2008, 6; Smith 1991, 11). Ethnic identity, as epitomized by societies such as Japan and, to a degree, China, is akin to belonging to a family, with ethnic belonging, "blood," thought of as being key to one's national membership. Civic identity, as epitomized by societies such as Canada, Brazil, and, to an extent, the United States, is akin to belonging to a club, with citizens' personal choice to belong being most essential to one's membership. A white, black, Hispanic, or Indian person may have lived in Japan for many years, speak close-to-native-speaker Japanese, and be legally Japanese in terms of their passport, but socially they will never be accepted as Japanese, as I myself have probed my interviews: "A person

can't be Japanese unless they have Japanese blood," I was told by one woman in her sixties, echoing others I spoke with. The same is true in China, as the European interviewees of Aldina Camenish (2022) came to understand after Covid-19 restrictions set in and foreigners became increasingly restricted. One of her interviewees sums up Chinese attitudes towards him: "'It's not enough to marry into Chinese society. You're still not one of us.'" As this interviewee continued, "I don't know what it takes to be accepted, it's probably an issue of ethnicity.... But it's a clear sign: 'You're not one of us.'" (Camenisch 2022, 188). This is not the case in societies such as Brazil, Canada, and the United States, and in recent years, to some extent, European societies, which have had a primarily civic basis for membership in their societies – anyone can become a member regardless of ethnicity or national background (even though racism profoundly exists in these societies: racism seems as prevalent in civic-based societies as ethic-based societies.)[4]

The above explanation is not ironclad; Korea also remains largely ethnic-based in its societal membership; but although it remains stricter in its entry requirements than many Western societies, it did allow in 2022 vaccinated Covid-negative foreign visitors to enter without quarantine. On the other hand, Australia is very much a civic-based state. and yet had extremely draconian entry restrictions, so that even citizens were not permitted to return for a period in 2020. Nonetheless, cultural-historical factors such as ethnic belonging versus civic belonging do seem significant in explaining the different policies of China and Japan as opposed to the United States, the societies examined in this paper. There is no absolute correlation between poles of identity and quarantine restrictions but there seems indeed to be a link – large-scale cultural background does indeed seem to be a factor shaping quarantine restrictions.

I have gone into this at length to show that large-scale cultural comparison, in terms of collectivism vs. individualism, or in this case, ethnic vs. civic belonging to one's society are in a broad sense significant in terms of Covid-19 policies of different societies. But I am more skeptical about the usefulness of these concepts in explaining mask-wearing in particular societies. What is instead required is detailed ethnographic investigation.

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[4] The ethnic-civic poles of belonging have been challenged in some recent literature, as well as by a reviewer for this paper. There are recent Japanese writings on "multi-ethnic Japan" by scholars discussing immigration into their country (see Watado and Izawa 2010). China has its 55 "minority nationalities," by which it has claimed multi-ethnicity, although Han Chinese identity has long been paramount (Wu 1991, 150–151). I agree that ethnic belonging to one's country is eroding in East Asian societies due to immigration and intermarriage, but it remains predominant today in Japan and China (see Mathews 2020), as well as, as a minority view, in all societies.

Methodology

In order to investigate this issue, I conducted in-person interviews in summer 2021 and 2022 and winter 2022–23 in Japan and in the United States, and in summer and fall 2021 and 2022 and winter 2023 in China; I also spoke with many interviewees in all three societies by Zoom during these years. I choose these societies largely because these are the three societies I know best, having conducted research on a variety of different topics comparing them (see Mathews, Yang, and Kwong 2023). But these societies also comprise the world's three largest economies, making their different attitudes towards mask-wearing and towards Covid-19 in general a matter of global relevance. Their different cultural attitudes towards masking in their recent histories, as well as their contrasting political and social situations at present, must all be examined at least as background in this paper.

In Japan, I conducted interviews in Sapporo, on the northern island of Hokkaido. In the United States, I conducted interviews in Denver, Colorado. These cities have their unique characteristics – in particular, Denver is more Democratic politically than many other American cities, such as the nearby Colorado Springs, and thus more amenable to mask-wearing. In China, I conducted interviews in Hong Kong, and also, by Zoom, in nearby Shenzhen and also in Shanghai and Beijing and several other cities. Hong Kong is today very much under the control of mainland China – it is indeed part of China.[5] As a supplement, I interviewed several Japanese and American students in Hong Kong, asking about their reactions to the more stringent masking regulations in Hong Kong as compared to their own societies. Interviews with Japanese people were in Japanese; interviews with Chinese and with Americans were conducted in English.

I interviewed 18–21 people in each of these three societies, chosen through snowball sampling; interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to an hour or more. This is a small number of interviewees, which I justify both by their diversity – I interviewed people of different ages social classes, and political persuasions – and by the nature of questions I was asking: not just, "what do you think about

[5] With the handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China in 1997, Hong Kong was established as a special administrative region of China (SAR) for 50 years, maintaining its own economic and governing systems from those of mainland China during this period. Hong Kong was a British colony 1841–1997, and has long been different from China, in its governance. However, in recent years, and particularly after the Beijing-mandated implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, Hong Kong and China have been increasingly interlinked in governance, as attested to by the similarities of their Covid-19 policies. Masking in public is legally required in China and in Hong Kong, except when eating, as of this writing (Jan. 23, 2023), and one who violates these policies may be fined or jailed.

mask-wearing?" but "what do the people around you think?" I also use mass media and scholarly articles to analyze these societies in their attitudes towards mask-wearing. I also did participant-observation in parks, in stores, in mass transit, and on the street in the three societies.

An ongoing methodological issue is that attitudes towards masking in Japan, China and the United States have significantly changed in 2021, 2022, up until today, in accordance with how the Covid-19 virus itself has evolved and transformed in these societies, as well as how citizens of these societies have been evaluating their governments' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. I spoke with different interviewees in all three societies several times over the course of these years, and at points in the pages that follow, I discuss how their views changed over these years. I should mention that as of this writing – 22 January 2023 – mask-wearing remains all but ubiquitous in China and Japan and is comparatively rare in the United States. However, given dramatic shifts in policy in China, with the abandonment of the zero-Covid policy, it seems possible that by the time this paper reaches print, all three societies will be open to the non-wearing of masks: it will have become optional.

Mask-Wearing in Japan

In Japan, mask wearing was apparently engaged in by miners and factory workers in the 19th century but became a widespread cultural practice beginning with the influenza epidemic of 1918–1919 (Yang 2020). In the decades before Covid-19, many Japanese, often to the surprise of foreign visitors, wore facemasks in public places, as a protection against catching or spreading a cold or influenza, or against pollen afflictions that affect a significant number of Japanese. The anthropologist Horii Mitsutoshi noted in a 2014 article that

> a significant number of Japanese people immediately [have] started to wear masks when perceiving health risks in the air, almost instinctively, prior to any scientific arguments for or against, in their hopes of avoiding these risks. Mask-wearing absorbs anxieties over invisible threats and uncertainties.

If Horii is correct in his assertion, then mask wearing in a Japanese context may be less a matter of protecting others against one's potentially infected self than of protecting oneself against a threatening world. As Horii writes, this attitude today represents not collectivism but rather an "ideal type of neoliberal individual subjectivity," of individuals protecting themselves in the only way they can against a world they may see as a threatening.[6]

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[6] In fact, mask-wearing, according to the World Health Organization in 2020, is less effective in protecting a wearer from Covid-19 infection than in preventing the wearer

Certainly, this is not always the case. Among my Japanese interviewees, I have been told by several people that they have the motivation both of protecting themselves against possible infection from others and of protecting others in case oneself is infected. As a woman in her sixties told me, “You can’t separate one of these from the other; I wear a mask both to protect other people from me, in case I have Covid-19 [*korona,* or *shingata koronauirusu* in Japanese] and don’t know it, and to protect myself from other people in case they have it.” However, several people also admitted that self-protection was their deepest underlying motivation; as a woman in her fifties said, “I really don’t want to get sick. *Korona* is really dangerous.” Why some Japanese feel this need for self-protection is itself a fascinating cultural topic – in a Japan that has been aware of invisible radiation in the air, due to the Fukushima disaster of 2011, there is a particular awareness of the menaces that the air may bring – but in any case, by Horii’s interpretation, mask-wearing is not a matter of collectivism but of individualism: “In an unsafe world, protect yourself any way that you can.” Nakaya et al. 2020 in exploring the psychological complexities of mask-wearing in Japan, partially corroborate Horii’s argument. This argument, again, is that mask-wearing is more a matter of protecting oneself from others than the reverse; it is a matter not of collectivism (valuing the group over oneself) than of individualism (protecting oneself against the group). How predominant this view is unclear, since individuals themselves may not know, but it certainly is one factor in Japanese attitudes towards mask-wearing

Rich and Dooley (2022), writing in a *New York Times* article, discuss another factor in mask-wearing in Japan: peer pressure, and how it is key to understanding Japanese mask-wearing, and Japan’s comparative success in dealing with Covid-19 as compared to Western countries. The Japanese government has never mandated masks, or for that matter vaccinations, but because peer pressure is so powerful in Japan, masks have been all-but-universally worn. As Rich and Dooley write (2022), “social conformity – and a fear of public shaming that is instilled from the youngest ages – has been a key ingredient in Japan’s relative success in Covid prevention, experts say.” This is not quite collectivism as defined above – it is not a matter of individuals valuing their group and community over themselves, but rather of them feeling social pressure to act as if they so value. Nonetheless, this is powerful pressure, I was told. “When everyone else is wearing a mask, not wearing a mask in public is like being naked,” a Japanese man in his twenties joked to me.

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from infecting others (Nakaya et al. 2020). In line with Horii’s argument quoted above, it seems that most wearers of masks in Japan and elsewhere do not pay close attention to the latest scientific reports.

This conformity to masking has been fought against by some. A woman in her sixties I interviewed in summer 2022 had a medical reason for not wearing a mask but was also an individualist in how she lived her life, including in her refusal to always wear a mask in public. She said that when she meets others who are not wearing masks, she feels a certain kinship with them: "that person and I share something!" She explained that in summer 2021, she was considerably more cautious, wearing a mask in public both because Covid-19 seemed a more serious disease at that point, and also because virtually no one was not wearing a mask, making her highly conspicuous if maskless. Today, she maintained, with Omicron becoming more of a taken-for-granted part of life, social pressure has significantly diminished: "I'm really not too worried about what other people think," she said. She also said that the Japanese government had recommended people not to wear masks outdoors in summer because of the danger of heat stroke, although because its recommendation was written in equivocal language, its message was not taken up by many people.

There are some ambiguous areas in Japanese mask-wearing, such as exercising and eating. In restaurants in Japan in summer 2022, the rule seemed to be that as long as one was seated at a table, masks were not required, but as soon as one stood, they were. Exercising, such as riding a bicycle, was more ambiguous; some 15% of bicycle riders did not wear masks in summer 2022. It seemed, from my observations in a public park, that one person's decision not to wear a mask when outside may influence others not to wear masks. If enough people in one's group do not wear masks, then the pressure to wear a mask largely dissipates, as I have seen where one person in a group, and then another, and then another shed their masks over a brief period. I asked several of my interviewees about this; as one university student in his early twenties told me, "If you're outside exercising, you're probably safe. But it's a matter of whether other people are taking off their masks as well." When I pressed him as to what he meant by "other people," he made it clear that his friends came first, but so too did everyone else as a larger context. "If some of my friends take off their masks, I probably will too, but maybe not if no one else there has taken off their mask." But he also said, "Sometimes I'll take off my mask anyway."

This attitude of not wearing masks despite social pressure to do so may indeed reflect individualism – despite my earlier interviewee's medical condition, she nonetheless also makes a personal choice to go against the collective grain. In Japan recently the pressure has been dissipating; and mask wearing in 2022 and 2023 has slowly been moving from being a social necessity to a social choice, at least when outside. This seems partly epidemiologically driven, due to the fact that the current Omicron variant of Covid-19 seems less lethal then than earlier variations of the Covid-19 virus (see Blauer 2022), and a far greater percent of the population of Japan is now vaccinated (77% as of late 2022) than

was the case in earlier months and years. But this may also be a function of a growing individualism in Japanese society as compared to earlier eras. In today's Japan, as compared to decades ago, Japanese enjoy somewhat more freedom from social pressure as to how to live their lives (see Mathews 2017) and this may include to at least a limited degree whether or not to wear masks. To some extent, anyway, social pressure in Japan may be losing some of its power.

In terms of mask-wearing, each of my Japanese interviewees to some extent calculated when they should wear a mask and when they did not need to, based on 1) the social setting (indoor or outdoor), 2) the activity (eating, exercising, bicycle riding, sitting in a subway car), 3) the people around them, both friends and people in general, and whether they were wearing masks, and 4) the perceived health risks of the setting, for themselves catching Covid from others, or others catching Covid from themselves. Everyone I spoke with acknowledged social pressure to wear a mask, but it was mitigated, at least by summer 2022, by their own taken-for-granted but still meticulous calculations of social norms, personal volition, and physical safety. The people I interviewed felt it was their own choice, even if most felt hardly immune from social pressure in some settings.

Mask-Wearing in China

The most fundamental difference between China and Japan in terms of mask-wearing practices is this: In Japan, mask-wearing is enforced by society, by other people, and the state stays out. There have been no Covid-19 laws in Japan requiring that a person in public must wear a mask, and government advice has been more in terms of polite requests. In China, on the other hand, both in mainland China and in Hong Kong, there are such laws. Mask-wearing is enforced by the state, and one who does not wear a mask in public may be caught by the authorities and fined and possibly jailed. This does not happen often, but certainly can happen. This is a major reason why if in Sapporo, Japan in summer 2022, some 5–10% of people did not wear masks outdoors, in Hong Kong and mainland China, aside from restaurants and gyms, the percentage of non-mask-wearers was closer to zero. Some people did indeed not wear masks, but their numbers were negligible compared to Japan.

Masking seem less alien in a Chinese cultural context than is the case in a Western context, according to some authorities (Yang 2020). In traditional Chinese medicine, the concept of *qi*, or air/energy/vapor, is central to treatments, and bodily *qi* is closely associated with breath, with noxious wind is seen as a leading cause of sickness. Many Chinese continue to consult Chinese medicine practitioners, and so its ideas retain a considerable degree of cultural currency;

this at least indirectly supports masking. Beyond this, in recent years in China many people have become used to wearing masks because of the high degree of air pollution in Chinese cities in the early 2000s (Flaskerud and Lesser 2020). However, it was SARS in 2002–2003 that most essentially taught Chinese the critical importance of wearing masks. SARS was so dangerous – with a mortality rate of 14–15% (Roos 2003) – that anyone speaking out against masking would have been seen as grossly irresponsible if not insane. With Covid-19, there has been a very high number of infections globally but a mortality rate that is considerably lower. This was not clear in the initial stages of the epidemic, but became clearer over time, with the emergence of less lethal strains such as Omicron. This has made masking more plausibly argued against – I f Covid-19 had a 10% or even 5% mortality rate, then there would no doubt be far less argument over masking: it would be simple common sense. However, with a 2% or lower death rate (although this is not fully clear, since modes of calculation of Covid-19 deaths have been different in different societies), whether to mask and quarantine or not becomes a plausible public health question worldwide. The United States and many European and other societies around the world have more or less decided to accept Covid-19 and go on with life normally, with optional or minimal mask-wearing; China has not, continuing, up until early 2023, quarantines for incoming visitors and all but universal mask-wearing. This is this case, as earlier noted, partly because the mainland-China-made vaccines that its citizens must take have proven less effective than other vaccines; this is true in Hong Kong because, particularly after the passage of the national security law in 2020, after which hundreds of supporters of democracy were jailed, the Hong Kong government felt the need to very closely follow China in its policies.

In terms of Covid-19 the Chinese government has great mandating powers, and these were apparent in terms of Covid-19 responses (Yu and Na 2020). If the government, and its ubiquitous neighborhood agents, deems that masks must be worn, then all residents must do it. In April 2020, some African residents in the southern city of Guangzhou refused to wear masks and to obey Covid restrictions – although most indeed did – with the consequence that Africans became subject to quarantine and eviction from their residences (see Human Rights Watch 2020). Mask-wearing in China is, again, not a matter of choice – if the government mandates that you do it, then you must do it (see Chik and Ip 2021). When, in 2021, I asked my Chinese interviewees why they wear masks in public, their answers were simple: “You have to.” “You really have no choice” (their responses echo the responses of Chinese interviewees in Kwok et al. 2021). While no Chinese I interviewed in 2021 expressed personal objections to mask wearing, all felt that the very question about how they themselves felt about the matter was a moot point. If in Japan, a dominant reason for people wearing masks is social pressure, in China it is state mandate: if you do not, and refuse to wear a mask, you may be apprehended.

As earlier noted, in China, the comparative ineffectiveness of mandatory China-made vaccines, along with the comparably low vaccination rate among the elderly, has led China to take a more cautious approach to Covid-19 than other societies, with the Chinese economy taking a particularly massive hit. China in particular has been willing to sacrifice economic growth for the sake of Covid protection, to an extent that most other societies in the world have not. This has meant continuing quarantines, lockdowns in cities where any Covid-19 cases are found, and ongoing universal mask-wearing, including in outdoor areas (Gan 2021).

The Chinese Covid-19 policy can be specifically attributed to Chinese nationalism (no other society in the world has required that only vaccines developed in its own society be used by its citizens, although in Hong Kong, residents can choose which vaccines to receive), and Chinese authoritarianism: Xi Jinping runs no risk of losing any popular election, and so the government can weather the short-term economic effects of a Covid-policy induced economic slowdown without much concern for its survival. Chinese people may indeed be collectivist – communism[7] by definition is a collectivist political system, even though China today is arguably as capitalist as it is communist – but while many Chinese have indeed supported its government's Covid-19 policy (see Wang 2021) at least up until recently, when lockdowns in cities such as Shanghai have created a degree of disillusionment (see Qian 2022), this may be less because of an underlying collectivist orientation among its citizens than because the Chinese government tightly controls mass media and the information that its citizens may encounter. If China is collectivist, it is a top-down collectivism, unlike that of Japan. Its citizens have accepted this system of government largely because it has been so economically successful over the past fifty years, bringing hundreds of millions of Chinese from poverty to middle-class affluence; but what the future holds remains to be seen.

By summer 2022, I received a different response from a number of interviewees than I had in 2021. A professional woman in her forties from the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen said that authorities sometimes ignored her when she was not wearing a mask, or only cursorily asked her to put one on. "Many people are getting tired of all this, including them," she said. She meant not simply mask-wearing, but also the lockdowns of entire neighborhoods and entire cities taking place whenever cases of Covid-19 were found. In fall 2022, protests against these lockdowns sprang up in various Chinese cities, highly unusual in China (Hale and Penafuerte 2022). Another interviewee, a woman in her twenties living on a university campus spoke to me of

[7] The Chinese in PRC themselves call their system "socialism" (shihuizhuyi), which they consider a preliminary phase to communism.

> the absurd Covid restriction policies. I experienced two lockdowns, one for two months and the other for a month. Iron board fences with barbed wire on top were placed around the whole campus to cut us off any possible contact we might have with the outside world...This took place in the name of protecting our lives from the virus, even at a time when no virus was detected around here.

Nationally, debate emerged among historians as to what some saw as a recurrence of Chinese cultural isolationism (see Zhou 2022), to the dismay of some of them; caustic anti-government commentary emerged on the internet, in cat-and-mouse games with censors. Disdain for the Chinese government's zero-Covid policy eventually led to a reversal in Chinese government policy in Dec. 2022, with most Covid restrictions relaxed. This has led to a surge in Covid-19 deaths, although numbers remain unclear (BBC News 2023). However, mask-wearing regulations have remained.

If Chinese were not required to wear masks, would they wear masks? Perhaps – surveys have shown that Chinese living in North America have a more favorable attitude towards masks and a higher incidence of mask-wearing than non-Chinese (Zhang et al. 2022). Illustrating this, a mass media report tells of a young Chinese woman living in New York city exclaiming after being stared for wearing a mask by maskless New Yorkers, "It's a civic duty!" (Leung 2020). There seems indeed to be a more positive attitude towards masks among overseas Chinese, implying collectivism. However, we cannot know the extent to which this collectivism extends to China itself, since in China one simply must wear a mask in almost all public contexts.

The situation in Hong Kong is more complicated. At the 2019 protests that roiled Hong Kong, most protesters wore masks for fear of being identified. Wearing a mask was deemed illegal by the government in October 2019. However, the government's edict on masks were transformed with the emergence of Covid-19. By 15 July 2020, mask-wearing, declared illegal nine months earlier, became mandatory for all Hongkongers in public places, a complete reversal. Covid-19 and government restrictions on public gatherings were key factors in ending the Hong Kong protests, along with the national security law placed upon Hong Kong by China; this involved a reversal in the meaning given to masks. Wearing masks became a symbol in just a few short months not of resistance against the current social order, but at least an implicit acceptance of that order, but very few Hongkongers saw it that way.

In Hong Kong, there was a politicization of masks in terms of the color of mask worn. Yellow was the color of pro-democracy protesters, and wearing a yellow mask was deemed a political statement, with some wearers of yellow masks forced to leave courtrooms in Hong Kong and manufacturers of yellow masks threatened with prosecution (see *Economist* 2021; Wong 2020). But although the color of the mask one wore was a disputed symbol, there was never

any call in Hong Kong to stop wearing masks. Two of the female Hong Kong university students I interviewed expressed hesitation about vaccinations given at community centers, for fear that the government might in the process of vaccination place within their bodies a means by which their location could thereafter forever be traced (a highly improbable fear). But no one I interviewed, sought to forego their public wearing of masks. "Wearing a mask is common sense," I was told by one interviewee in her twenties. Indeed, I myself have felt this. I have found myself moving away from one who does not wear a mask, thinking, "There must be something wrong with that guy! He must be crazy!" In Japan, non-mask-wearing led to a sense of fraternity among people such as my interviewee, as we saw; in Hong Kong, even up until the present, non-mask-wearing is seen as a distinct mark of weirdness. When I asked my interviewees about this, they agreed; as one man in his thirties told me, "Someone not wearing a mask in a public place might be mentally unbalanced."

This is absolutely not because there is little disdain felt in Hong Kong towards government; there is massive alienation felt by the vast majority of Hong-Kong-born young people against the Hong Kong and Chinese governments. When I spoke with my interviewees in their twenties about mask-wearing in autumn 2022, several spoke of how the Hong Kong government had no choice but to follow the policies of the mainland government, arguing that the mask-mandate was political in motivation. "Hong Kong really has to," one interviewee told me. "If the mainland has a zero-Covid policy, then Hong Kong must too. This is the rule in Hong Kong today!" But this skepticism as to the government's underlying orientation did not extend to mask-wearing itself. Mask-wearing, in a highly politicized Hong Kong, is seen by almost everyone as transcending politics. "Of course, I wear a mask when I go out. This isn't a matter of political views but of health!" I was told by a Hong Kong woman in her thirties. As in Japan, whether one wears a mask to protect oneself or to protect others is a moot point for many in Hong Kong – "both!" is the answer I have received when I asked about this – but wearing a mask is unquestionable. As in Japan, there is some leeway as to when one takes off one's mask, for example, when engaging with close friends, or when exercising; and as in mainland China, there are government-proclaimed rules – "even when you exercise, you must wear a mask" (Government of Hong Kong 2022) – although these rules are generally less draconically enforced than in China. It has only been a few "ignorant foreigners" in Hong Kong – Westerners and South Asians – who have resisted mask-wearing, as portrayed in Youtube videos and elsewhere (see Wong 2021). In fall 2022, one non-Chinese interviewee in his early twenties in Hong Kong related how even on isolated mountain hiking trails, the hikers he encountered wore masks. "There's no need to wear masks on a hiking trail. Why on earth do they do this?"

There is considerable suspicion in Hong Kong concerning the government's Covid-19 policies in general, which are often seen as being politically motivated, demonstrating Hong Kong's fealty to China more than being motivated by epidemiological concerns. This is particularly the case for the strict hotel quarantines – three weeks in early 2022, later reduced to one week – that all travelers visiting or residents returning to Hong Kong had to undergo, wreaking havoc on the airline industry (whose personnel are thus stuck in hotels for an extended period and cannot work) and an array of other international businesses in Hong Kong. Indeed, it is sometimes informally claimed in Hong Kong that more foreigners have fled Hong Kong because of the burdensome quarantine restrictions than because of the national security law that has quashed democracy and press freedom, and that these restrictions have been left in place as a way of making Hong Kong less international and more Chinese. Whether or not this is the case is impossible to judge; but in any case, while many aspects of Hong Kong Covid-19 policies have been highly controversial, wearing a mask has not been. In January 2023, in the wake of China's relaxation of its Covid-19 policies, health experts in Hong Kong recommended that Hong Kong's mask mandate be dropped (Cheung 2023). Whether and when this actually happens, of course, very much remains to be seen.

Mask-Wearing in the United States

In the United States, in Denver, Colorado, even near the height of the pandemic in summer 2021, some 30% of the population did not wear masks. Thus, while wearing a mask at the grocery store, for example, seemed advisable for one's health, there was minimal social pressure to do so, since so many people were not wearing masks, and so one could choose not to wear a mask and feel little opprobrium: it was simply a personal choice. In summer 2022, an interviewee in her late sixties, a political organizer, told me that when she attended a meeting and wore a mask, she felt obliged to explain it to her non-mask-wearing fellow attendees. As she said, "No, I didn't need to apologize for it. But I did need to tell the other people there why I was wearing a mask, because of my medical condition. When I did that, people accepted it; there was no problem." If in Japan and China, non-mask-wearing marked one as atypical or even deviant, in the United States, in some contexts, mask-wearing did.

This interviewee was a Democrat, as were her interlocuters. Her need to explain herself was eased by the fact that the others in her meeting shared her political views. The other participants in the meeting probably felt no general antipathy towards masking, but rather were curious about her own choice to mask in their presence.[8] In the United States there has been a political divide,

[8] Leone (2022, 2) makes this point in large-scale. Unlike in East Asian societies such as Japan and China, "When the pandemic broke out, common people in...most

whereby Democrats wear masks but Republicans often spurn them. One 2020 survey early in the Covid-19 pandemic (reported in Flaskerud and Lesser 2020) found that 75% of Democrats said they wore masks in public, while only 52% of Republicans so claimed (see also Aratani 2020; Baxter-King et al. 2022). As Horii has noted in a blog post arguing that the crucial question is not why East Asians wear masks but rather why Westerners do not (2020), in the US, "people's differing attitudes towards mask-wearing seem to reflect an ideological divide. On the eve of the Presidential election, we saw images of unmasked Trump supporters and masked Biden supporters. People's decision to don the mask or not, are connected to contesting value orientations."

These value orientations seem particularly related to the degree to which one trusts science and the authority of experts. It is tempting to see this political divide, and these different value orientations, as linked to individualism and collectivism. It seems very broadly the case that Democrats in the United States resemble East Asians in their values more than Republicans do, in seeing the larger group as superseding individual expressions of rights; this, anyway, is the implication of Democrats typically preferring, in their philosophies, larger governments than Republicans do – a larger engagement in the collective, with less emphasis on individual rights. However, this issue is complex. If many Republicans in the United States might be thought of as individualists on gun control ("everyone has the individual right to bear arms") they are collectivist on abortion ("no one has the individual right to get an abortion"). It cannot be broadly claimed that "Republicans are more individualistic and Democrats are more collectivist," for these issues divide differently depending on the particular issue at hand.[9]

However, in terms of wearing masks, this claim indeed seems to be the case: Republicans, following the lead of their then-President Donald Trump have tended to see mask-wearing edicts as "ways our freedom is being eroded" (Aratani 2020). As one interviewee told me, a self-proclaimed libertarian in his seventies, "Wearing a mask or not is my own choice, rather than anyone telling me what to do. If I get Covid, it's my own problem." (He did indeed get Covid subse-

European and western countries were not used either to wear masks and to see masks worn by other people. In this initial situation, the fact of someone wearing a mask in public, for instance, in a plane or in public transport, would inevitably attract attention and, systematically, puzzlement mixed with preoccupation."

[9] In fact, a global survey (Richler 2016) exploring the linkage between individualism vs. collectivism and the political values of liberalism vs. conservatism found that worldwide, conservatives think more like those from collectivist cultures, whereas liberals think more like those from individualist cultures. It seems that the values of individualism and collectivism are sufficiently abstract as to be capable of characterizing a variety of different groups in different cultural and political contexts; who is to be deemed "individualistic" and who is to be deemed "collectivist" is by no means obvious.

quently, and self-isolated until he recovered.) There were, early in the Covid-19 pandemic, practical arguments given for not wearing masks; some American authorities argued that at a time of mask shortages, it was better to not wear a mask rather than wear a mask, ensuring that healthcare workers could receive adequate supplies of masks. When the mask supply became sufficient for all, a different argument rose to the fore in Republican circles: not just mask-wearing but the closing of many schools and limitation on many businesses (with working at home and Zoom meetings becoming the new norm) simply was not worthwhile, given the relatively limited mortality rates for Covid-19: Covid-19 should simply be lived with, as influenza typically is, without altering American social practices, these Republicans maintained.

Several of my interviewees, even those who were more liberal in their political views, concurred with this; as one young man in his twenties said, “Why are we bothering with all these precautions? Just get Covid-19 and get over it!” Indeed, as of summer 2022, many of the Americans I spoke with had already had Covid-19 and had recovered. “It wasn’t much fun; it’s like a really bad cold, and I had an awful sore throat,” one Republican-leaning woman in her eighties told me. “But it’s not that big a deal.” This woman acknowledged that over a million Americans had died of Covid-19, but believed that in many cases, those who died of Covid-19 were already in impaired health and would otherwise die of other causes. “It’s not worth making everyone wear a mask all the time just for this,” she emphasized. I asked her what would happen if she did wear a mask to a political event; she said that she would certainly have to explain her choice and might arouse disdain in the people around her: “Even if I felt a little sick, I might not do it. I just wouldn’t go – I’d stay home.”

Americans of all political persuasions have increasingly come to share some of the above interviewee’s views, as Covid-19 comes to seem less lethal in the United States – among my interviewees, none as of fall 2023 continues to wear a mask in public, although several do wear masks in settings such as concerts and lectures, where an audience is at close quarters indoors. However, the philosophical divide between Democrats and Republicans I spoke with (or those leaning towards either of these two party’s positions) remained: Was wearing a mask a contribution to the common good, or was it an infringement on individual rights? The Democrat Americans I interviewed very broadly resembled the Japanese described earlier as to the four factors influencing their mask-wearing calculations, although they tended to wear masks less than their Japanese counterparts. The Republican Americans, however, differed, often making no such calculations.

There are other factors in the ideological war over facemasks in the United States. In some American states, and particularly in Western Europe there have been anti-face mask laws predating Covid-19, against Muslim face-coverings such as burqas: the United States and Europe have been particularly guarded against terrorist attacks in a way that East Asia has not. If face-coverings have

been seen by many young people in Hong Kong as a disguise enabling a fight for Western democracy, face-coverings have been seen by some in the West as a disguise enabling a fight against Western democracy. Beyond this, there are also the acts of racism against Asians for wearing masks in the US, with East Asians seen as carriers of Chinese-made viruses. Although China itself enacted what some saw as racist policies towards Africans in the city of Guangzhou, as we have seen, the preponderance of xenophobic and racist attacks against Asians as "bringers of the coronavirus" took place in the United States.

All in all, we can conclude that in the United States, mask-wearing has been politicized as it has not been in East Asian societies, leading a significant proportion of the American population to be unwilling to wear masks, as has not been the case in Japan, Hong Kong and China. It is tempting to label this a matter of individualism vs. collectivism, particularly in that much of the Republican rhetoric has indeed been in terms of the individual freedom not to wear a mask, a rhetoric that more collectivist Democrats have not engaged in. However, when we examine this more closely, it seems apparent that, as always, the issue is more complex – Republican positions do not necessarily reflect the values of individualism, and all in all the issue of masks seems to reflect political antagonism more than underlying philosophical differences. This is not entirely the case, but mostly it does seem accurate.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have explored the different attitudes towards mask-wearing in Japan, China, and the United States in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. In each society there are very particular reasons for why masks are worn, or, for some in the United States, spurned. In Japan, arguments have been made that mask-wearing is a matter of individuals masking to protect themselves from others more than of individuals masking for the sake of others: masking, in this view, is thus a matter of the individual protecting oneself from the collective more than the individual sacrificing oneself to the collective. Beyond this, there is immense social pressure to wear masks, which may push individuals to wear masks regardless of their own predilections, although some are now breaking free of this social pressure. In China, mask-wearing is enforced by the government, through its myriad agents at the neighborhood level. In the face of this force, whether Chinese are individualist or collectivist is beside the point – they have little choice in the matter. This has been the case in Hong Kong as well, where masks were made illegal in 2019, since protesters used them to remain unrecognizable, but in 2020, in the midst of Covid-19, masks were made mandatory. While some Hongkongers resisted this in the

color of mask they wore – yellow, the color signifying democratic protest – no one except for a few foreigners disputed the wearing of masks itself, which seemed common sense beyond politics. In the United States, alone among all these societies, mask-wearing was intensely politicized, with Democrats more than Republicans acceding to wearing masks; but while Republican rhetoric often emphasized individual rights, closer examination reveals that the matter is more complex than that – Republican and Democratic Party values cannot be distilled into individualism versus collectivism.

All of the foregoing leads to the conclusion that while individualism versus collectivism may be useful as a broad brush for understanding values at a highly abstract level in different societies, it is inadequate as an explanation for why Japan and China have adopted face masks but the United States partially has not. The factors involved in these different choices are more complicated: each society needs to be looked at in its own particular terms. Most pivotal is the fact that mask-wearing in Japan has been a matter of societal pressure, with anyone who does not wear a mask in public very conspicuously standing out, something that most of my interviewees sought to avoid, although a few non-conformists did not comply with the larger social norm. There has been no law mandating masks in public places. In China, there has indeed been such a law; mask-wearing is enforced not by the indirect pressures of society, but by the direct pressures of the state and its agents. This state coercion explains why protests have broken out in China in late 2022 against the government for its zero-covid policy (with protestors now being jailed: CNN 2023). This is hardly imaginable in Japan, since social collectivism, unlike state collectivism, can be resisted by individuals if they choose not to mask, although they may pay a social price. All in all, Japanese and Chinese have their own particular reasons for donning masks, just as societies such as the United States have their own reasons why a portion of the population chooses not to don masks. These subtleties are not to be seen in the results of psychologists' surveys, but they are politically, socially, and culturally very real, as we have seen.

In closing, this attests to the value of ethnography, in viewing culture not as a broad-based set of universal values through which societies around the world are to be compared, but rather as an attribute that is very particular to each different society, and that can only be understood in terms of that society and its economics, politics, and history. This is why we need anthropology. Broad generalizations have their use; but in understanding why events occur as they do in different societies, those generalizations are necessary but insufficient. Fine-grained historical, social, and cultural analysis – of which I have here been able to offer only a preliminary depiction – is also necessary,

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Kroskulturalno istraživanje nošenja maski
tokom pandemije kovida-19:
Poređenje Kine, Japana i SAD

Tokom pandemije kovida-19, Japanci i Kinezi su uglavnom nosili maske za lice, dok Amerikanci nisu. Zašto? U ovom radu, zasnovanom na etnografskim intervjuima sa pripadnicima ova tri društva kao i na proučavanju masovnih medija i akademskih izveštaja, pružam preliminarnu interpretaciju ovog pitanja.

Prvo razmatram analize širokog obima socijalnih psihologa o kolektivizmu i individualizmu. Kina i Japan se obično smatraju kolektivističkim društvima, dok se Sjedinjene Američke Države (SAD) smatraju individualističkim društvom. Takođe razmatram etničku pripadnost naciji u Kini i Japanu, u poređenju sa građanskom pripadnošću naciji u SAD. Ova tumačenja imaju vrednost u razumevanju politike kovida-19, ali deluje da imaju ograničenu korist u objašnjavanju nošenja maski. Za takvo razumevanje, okrećem se etnografskim intervjuima – oko dvadeset obavljenih u svakom od tri društva, kao i učesničkoj opservaciji na javnim mestima.

Moji nalazi su sledeći: U Japanu je društveni pritisak od prvostepenog značaja za nošenje maski, pri čemu je država uglavnom odsutna, dok je u Kini državni pritisak primaran, a društveni pritisak je obično odsutan. U SAD, sa odsustvom društvenog pritiska izvan sopstvene podgrupe i izrazito spornog državnog pritiska, nošenje maski je postalo stvar politički zasnovanog individualnog izbora. U ova tri društva, postojale su različite osnove zbog kojih je nošenje maski prihvaćeno ili osporeno. Ovo istraživanje je isuviše malog obima da bi u potpunosti objasnilo sve ove faktore; ali ono pokazuje da je antropološka analiza neophodna u kombinaciji sa nalazima drugih disciplina, kao što je socijalna psihologija, da bi se došlo do potpunijeg razumevanja savremenih društvenih fenomena.

Ključne reči: Kovid-19, nošenje maski, individualizam vs. kolektivizam, etnička i građanska pripadnost, Japan, Kina, SAD

Une étude interculturelle sur le port du masque pendant la pandémie de Covid-19: comparaison entre la Chine, le Japon et les États-Unis

Pendant l'épidémie de Covid-19, les Japonais et les Chinois ont largement porter des masques faciaux, tandis que les Américains ne l'ont pas fait. Pourquoi ? Dans cette étude, basée sur des entretiens ethnographiques avec des membres de ces trois sociétés, ainsi que sur l'examen des médias de masse et des rapports académiques, je propose une interprétation préliminaire de cette question.

Tout d'abord, j'examine les analyses à grande échelle des psychologues sociaux sur le collectivisme et l'individualisme. La Chine et le Japon sont généralement considérés comme des sociétés collectivistes, tandis que les États-Unis sont considérés comme individualistes. Je considère également l'appartenance ethnique à la nation en Chine et au Japon, par rapport à l'appartenance civique à la nation aux États-Unis. Ces interprétations ont une valeur pour comprendre les politiques Covid-19, mais semblent d'une utilité limitée pour expliquer le port du masque. Pour cette compréhension, je me tourne vers des entretiens ethnographiques – une vingtaine effectuée dans chacune des trois sociétés, ainsi que l'observation participante dans les sites publics.

Mes résultats sont les suivants: au Japon, la pression sociale est d'une importance primordiale pour le port du masque, l'État étant principalement absent, tandis qu'en Chine, la pression de l'État est principale et la pression sociale est largement absente. Aux États-Unis, avec l'absence de pression sociale au-delà de son propre sous-groupe et une pression étatique fortement contestée, le port du masque devient une question de choix individuel basé sur des considérations politiques. Dans ces trois sociétés, il y avait des bases différentes pour l'acceptation ou la contestation du port du masque. Cette recherche est de trop petite échelle pour expliquer complètement tous ces facteurs, mais elle montre que l'analyse anthropologique est essentielle pour se combiner avec les résultats d'autres disciplines telles que la psychologie sociale afin d'arriver à une compréhension plus complète des phénomènes sociaux contemporains.

Mots-clés: Covid-19, port du masque, individualisme vs collectivisme, appartenance ethnique et civique, Japon, Chine, États-Unis

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