

## Exploring scientific and political discourses of (un)vaccinated body

### Introduction: (un)vaccinated bodies as social bodies

Good morning, everyone! Welcome to this seminar on exploring various discourses of vaccination in Hong Kong. I am so glad to see you here today, eager to learn and explore new possibilities. Our school's debate team organises this seminar to help you discover this controversial topic and develop critical thinking skills. Before starting our case studies, I would like to begin with a warmup question: Did you get vaccinated? Why would you like to get or reject vaccinated? Most of you are vaccinated because Education Bureau set up a vaccination requirement for all secondary students. Whether you agree or disagree with the vaccination policy, we cannot disagree that our bodies are closely linked with our society. Therefore, our bodies are not merely biological but also social.

Let me clarify: This seminar is not going to discuss the effectiveness of vaccination and justify the choices of different people. However, we would like to describe the complexity of these discourses (how we discuss the vaccine). We don't focus on vaccination itself but the discourses of vaccination.

### "New Type" and "Zombies" : scientific discourses of vaccination

Obviously, (un) vaccinated bodies are the intersections of different discourses; even these measures also imply an imagination of normal/non-normal bodies. Before the implementation of the vaccine pass policy, the citizens who had positive and negative attitudes about vaccination also used a scientific discourse to narrate (un)vaccinated bodies.

The introduction of the COVID vaccination was good news in the age of the pandemic because some scientists and citizens believed it would be the best way to end the pandemic. Therefore, they showed a positive attitude toward vaccination. By studying their narratives,

we can clearly see these narratives are firmly linked to scientific discourses, which implies our fantasy of science. "If you choose not to get vaccinated, sorry, there will be a result of natural selection: you are destined to be eliminated by the virus (Ming Po, 2022)". Certainly, there is an obvious evolutionist rhetoric in Yuen's speech because he quoted two of Darwin's concepts in his tiny speech. According to *On The Origin of Species* (Darwin, 2019), Darwin thinks that "natural selection" is the key mechanism of evolution: all species have to adopt the challenges of the natural environment and suit the natural environment. Elimination is the term used to describe the removal of individuals with traits that are less adapted to their environment. So to speak, Prof. Yuen considered vaccinated bodies are the winners in natural selection because these bodies are able to adapt to the changes in the pandemic times. Conversely, unvaccinated bodies should be eliminated because they are less adapted to the environment. Yuen's claim implies an evolutionist, and Darwinist thought. Interestingly, these evolutionist ideas are not only supported by scientists and doctors, but the general public and mass media also love using similar metaphors to describe vaccinated bodies. "New Type(新人類)" is a term to describe the individuals who have already been vaccinated and infected because the mass media and public believe that the "New Type" have already overcome the challenges of this pandemic (Hung, 2022). This term comes from a sci-fi animation series, "Gundam". In Gundam, Newtype means a person who has reached a new stage of a human revolution: in order to adapt to life, the human body evolves with heightened mental awareness and eventually, "Newtype" will be more powerful than ordinary humans in the Gundam Universe. After reading the meaning of "Newtype", we can easily understand why the mass media use this term: vaccinated individuals and "Newtype" are the symbols of successfully adapting to the environment. "Natural Selection" and "Newtype" are closely associated with Darwinism and ableism (Wolbring, 2008), so it also drew the line between vaccinated bodies and unvaccinated bodies: vaccinated individuals are more able to survive in the age of the pandemic while unvaccinated individuals fail to make a correct selection to face the natural selection.

Interestingly, scientific discourse can also be appropriated for making arguments against vaccination. It is essential to state that conspiracy theories about vaccination have existed for decades, but the introduction of COVID vaccines boosted the concerns about vaccines. Insufficient time for developing and testing vaccines (the duration of the typical vaccine development timeline is longer than five years) and the use of new biotechnology (gene-

editing) are the main reasons for worry about the safety of COVID vaccines. So to speak, anti-vaxxers also used scientific knowledge to develop their arguments: the development of COVID vaccines is not safe (from the perspective of scientists), so getting vaccinated somehow is a dangerous experiment. The fear of vaccines is surprisingly associated with zombie movies by the netizens of different countries (zombie movies were more popular during the beginning stage of the pandemic). For instance, some posts on LIHKG stated that getting a vaccination may cause you to be a zombie. Even though most members thought this claim was a kind of fake news, some commenters also understand why there is a connection between vaccination and zombies: a zombie apocalypse often is a result of failed science experiments in different cultural texts; for instance, *All of Us are Dead* and *28 Weeks Later*. Zombies, as a symbol, have often been used as a metaphor for contemporary fears (Drezner, 2022), so, according to previous associations, zombie is a representation of the fear of unsafe vaccines. In this cultural imagination, there is a line between vaccinated bodies and unvaccinated bodies: zombies represent that vaccinated bodies are polluted by dangerous and unknown technology; survivors are associated with unvaccinated individuals because they also fight for remaining the pureness of their bodies. Certainly, we know the linkage between vaccination and zombie is fictional, but this fictional imagination has represented the fear of vaccination and technology.

While the citizens (who agree with getting vaccinated) used "Newtype" as a metaphor for vaccinated bodies, anti-vaxxers articulated the zombie apocalypse with the danger of vaccination. Even though these two groups have opposite stances, the narratives of vaccinated bodies are also linked with scientific discourse. "Newtype" and "Natural Selection" are highly related to Darwinism and even Eugenics. The fantasy of human evolution is projected to vaccination: the invention of vaccines can be considered as a kind of symptom that humans successfully resist the threat of viruses. Therefore, referring to Darwinism, scientists believe that the "vaccinated body" is a symbol of evolution; Conversely, anti-vaxxers also used scientific evidence to justify their claims. The safety and ethical concerns of new vaccine technology are the main arguments of anti-vaxxers. The conspiracy of vaccination is more interesting than understanding the fear of vaccination. Some anti-vaxxers believe that vaccination is a possible way to cause a zombie apocalypse. (once you get vaccinated, then you will be a zombie). This thought reflects the fear of unsafe scientific experiments; then, the unvaccinated body is a symbol of resisting the pollution of

our bodies. Certainly, we understand that being new humans or zombies is just a "tale" and "nightmare" of vaccination, but we should not ignore the fantasies, fears, and emotions behind these dreams.

### (un)vaccinated bodies and political imagination

After launching different vaccine pass policies, the imaginations of (un)vaccinated bodies have been changed from scientific to political. We can see that the (un)vaccinated body is a site containing different political imaginations.

Different governments started forcing people to get vaccinated to control the spread of coronavirus by implementing various laws. In Hong Kong, after launching the vaccination program, the HKSAR government kept announcing the population with vaccine doses daily (HKSAR, 2023). It stated that this figure is the key indicator to launch the resumption of normalcy. For instance, the HKSAR claimed that the high vaccination rate would lead to reopening the border. While the state articulated vaccination with the normalisation of society and the economic system, unvaccinated individuals are also labelled as the enemy of public health. Different pro-government specialists criticised the citizens who reject vaccination, damaging the public health system and the whole society and intending to kill the elderly and children. Here, we clearly found that getting vaccinated is not a personal decision and affair anymore. Conversely, it has been included in the public sphere. By launching Foucault's "Biopower" (Foucault, 2020), we can understand why (un)vaccinated bodies are included in consideration of public health. Foucault found that the mechanism and tactics of power focused on life (e.g. individual bodies and populations). By launching different techniques, the state can manage and optimise the population to ensure the safety of the whole society and population. Vaccination is a technique to manage the population to protect the whole society from the threat of a pandemic. To maintain the normal operation of the whole society, the state used different methods to control vaccinated and unvaccinated bodies: vaccinated bodies have already been included as figures for the government to plan disease prevention measures. Unvaccinated bodies were considered as the obstacles to controlling the pandemic,

so the government launched different laws to minimise their influences and transformed them into vaccinated bodies.

However, not all citizens were successfully motivated by the call of the state, but some scholars have realised that the state gradually violates individual rights during the pandemic. Agamben's "state of exception" (Agamben, 2003) is a vital concept to understanding this phenomenon. Agamben argues that the state of exception, which was meant to be a provisional measure to deal with emergencies, became a standard paradigm of government in the twentieth century that threatened democracy and human rights. He further mentioned that this paradigm was more popular during the pandemic: by highlighting the fear of the pandemic, the states can legitimate any acts violating human rights and democracy. Hong Kong's government also produced different narratives to legitimise limiting unvaccinated individuals' living rights. For example, Basic Law Centre (a pro-government think tank in Hong Kong) released an article (Basic Law Foundation, 2021) about the relationship between Basic Law and vaccination. By quoting Basic Law Article 39 and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article 12, the HKSAR government is responsible for preventing the spread of the virus and stopping any acts of abusing social resources and violating other citizens' rights. Then, the author of this article classifies unvaccinated people as a group violating other citizens' rights because he thinks they are the free riders in this antivirus project. After that, the government launched a vaccine pass policy to limit citizens' living rights; for instance, unvaccinated individuals were forbidden to enter public spaces, and vaccinated individuals were forced to leave their footprints to chase the infection chain. Here, we should recap another of Agamben's concepts to understand the body in the state of exception. Bare life (Agamben & Heller-Roazen, 2016) refers to a life that is reduced to a biological existence, stripped of any political, legal, or social significance (not protected by law). In this case, unvaccinated bodies are legally separated from the public sphere while the state also monitors vaccinated bodies; To resist the pressure from the government, some Hong Kong citizens firmly rejected any COVID vaccines. These citizens started gathering on social media, then they constructed their own identity: zero-vaccine (which means they never get vaccinated). Even though there were different reasons for them not to get vaccines, they eventually manifested that resisting the oppression from the government was the only reason they rejected COVID vaccines.

Moreover, some members of the zero-vaccine firmly believe that the unvaccinated body symbolises resisting the coercive vaccination program. This case showed that our bodies are not only receiving different ideologies passively. We also have the agency to use our bodies as a site of resistance.

We can use the concept of "biopolitics" to illustrate how governments shaped and regulated the vaccinated bodies. Biopolitics refers to the management and optimisation of the population and aims to defend the regular operation of society. It is obvious that getting vaccinated is considered an act of protecting the public from the threat of viruses. Therefore, the state articulated vaccination with citizens' obligations. Conversely, non-vaccinated individuals are framed as the enemies of the general public, so this discourse is legitimate for implementing coercive measures against unvaccinated people.

## Conclusion

By reviewing the different cultural imaginations of (un)vaccinated bodies, we can see that our bodies (which contain different fantasies and fears) are tightly linked to society. 'Newtype' and 'Zombie' are metaphors of the vaccinated body, which contain the fantasy and fear of technological advancement. However, (un)vaccinated bodies are not merely cultural imaginations. By studying the vaccine pass policy, we understand that our bodies are actually closely linked with the whole society and monitored by the states, so the state and society always want to regulate our bodies. We should be cautious that kind of surveillance gradually violates our rights. By reviewing the case of zero-vaccine, we can realise our agency's existence: we can also use our bodies to present our thoughts.

We may feel uncomfortable listening to so many interesting cases in this short seminar. You may disagree with some of them. I hope you can have an open mindset to understand the linkage between our bodies and society and the uses of our bodies. We may disagree with some cases in this seminar, but it is okay. However, I hope there are so many voices but no

model answer in our world. We should use a respectful but critical mindset to face different voices.

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