

From COVID-19 Facemask Culture to the Struggling History of Hygiene: “Su Zhi” as Parasitifer of Chinese Hygienic Modernity on “Modernized” Body

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(Dear Class,) In 1984, author Bo Yang held a speech at the University of Iowa, he entitled his speech as *The Ugly Chinese* (醜陋的中國人), in part of which criticized the Chinese as dirty, messy, filthy, and disorderly. Two years after, he wrote a book with the same name (Bo Yang 1986). Noticeably, numerous Chinese writers have praised it as a book that makes all Chinese people reflect deeply despite his book and speech triggered heated debates in China at that time. I personally resonate with the “messy” image of China during his time when people with limited hygienic precautions against diseases and health crises. However, Bo Yang attributed the negativity of the Chinese to their inner inferiority and bad nature, which aligns with the views of Western scholars who hold an Orientalist perspective towards China.

For years, Chinese people have strenuously tried to smash the “inner inferiority” and negative collective images presented, reaching its summit as the comparison between the Orient and the West when media dissemination popped into our horizons. To eschew and respond to bad images the West has depicted and proves the modernity China possesses through the years of development, “Su Zhi” has always been emphasized nationally and individually, which closely connects with Chinese modernity. Despite the wide contexts “Su Zhi” can be referenced in China, this presentation aims to present “Wei Sheng” and “Su Zhi” (Weisheng Suzhi, hygienic awareness and modernity) as they have been always closely tied since the hygienic campaign took place in the mid-20th century in China. In this presentation, I will start with the present-day case of face masking during the COVID-19 outbreak in China and trace back its history of hygiene by arguing that to prove hygienic modernity impacted by biopolitics, “Su Zhi” renders an approach to rebut Orientalism by practicing self-discipline in the personal hygiene of Chinese citizens while “Su Zhi”, in many ways, is regulating body behaviors since by imposing hygienic habitus on the Chinese to behave as modernized and reasoned subjects, which reminds to think of “Su Zhi” as the trauma of history of hygiene in China. Do not worry about these terms mentioned, I will elaborate later throughout the whole presentation.

First, I shall contextualize the COVID-19 outbreak in China as it was deemed as a huge progress for the Chinese to practice hygienic modernity. During the very outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese people conduct in-time precautional acts (wearing facemasks), which remained unimaginable in early 20th century of China. For better visibilities, **slide 1** has shown the totally dissimilar circumstances between China and the West, in which Chinese people were

cooperating with the facemask act advocated by the authorities whereas the freedom parades were held frequently in the West to oppose the facemask mandates and lockdown.

Distinct Reactions Toward Face-masking Between China and the West SLIDE 1

▲ *After the government's advocacy, almost all Chinese consciously wear masks during the epidemic*

▶ *The Western "liberal" masses who go against frontline medical staff and epidemic prevention organizations refuse to wear masks and oppose lockdown measures*

The distinct reactions toward face-masking during the COVID between China and the West were broadly disseminated, reposted, and reported by China's press, news, and media influencers. All of these seem to convey one key idea: the “Wei Sheng Su Zhi” (hygienic awareness and modernity) in China is improving and even surpassing the West, in which the facemask became a descriptor of hygienic modernity. Beyond the progressing hygienic practice in modern China, many scholars have argued that biopolitics is the main drive of hygienic modernity. Biopolitics was proposed by Foucault (1976), in my context, Biopolitics can be understood as “to ensure, sustain, and put life in a hygienic order”. As scholars discussed earlier, biopolitics has disciplined us into medically reasoned subjects (Gong 2022: 196), and in the COVID context, mask-wearing culture comes to be a hygienic practice as responsabilized citizens (Zhang 2021: 8). Aligned with the statement of scholars, the media dissemination of mask-wearing culture aims to overthrow the depiction of orientalist, including critics like Bo Yang, that Chinese people are no more “messy” and “inferior” with a bad nature.

I am prone to argue that the desperateness of Chinese people to demonstrate hygienic modernity lies in the traumas of its struggling history of hygiene. Rogaski (2004: 225), in Chapter *Weisheng and The Desire for Modernity* of his book, has clarified the intense desire of Chinese medical experts for hygienic modernity in China as in the 1920s and 1930s, both nation and citizens failed to achieve their hygienic ideals and presented the “backward” unhygienic masses, which perfectly authenticates how Bo Yang described Chinese as ugly and messy. The origin of the unhygienic circumstances is obvious – lack of education, including “Wei Sheng” education and “Su Zhi” education. Of course, the Chinese government was well aware of the

lack of national education on “Wei Sheng Su Zhi” (hygienic awareness and modernity) at that time, which resulted in a failure to promote public health awareness. As a solution, the Chinese government used posters to enhance the “Wei Sheng Su Zhi” of the people, which continued until the early 21st century (refer to **Slide 2**).

Posters Advocating “Su Zhi” and “Wei Sheng”: Desire of Modernity SLIDE 2

**Wei Sheng: Hygiene
Su Zhi: Culture, ethics, and respect for rules or common courtesy*



▲ 1956 Poster (Left) & 1983 Poster (Right): Develop the people's health care industry and strengthen rural Wei Sheng work & Embrace Wei Sheng, Embrace Civilization (Su Zhi)



▲ Posters that bond Su Zhi and Wei Sheng are everywhere even in early 21st century of China

The reason for the vigorous promotion of these posters was not baseless, but rather due to the severe pandemics that China experienced in the 20th century, which left a traumatic mark on the country's history of hygiene. According to a report presented at the 49th Executive Meeting of the State Council in September 1950, during that time period, "the cumulative annual incidence rate of the entire population in our country was about 140 million people, with a death rate of over 3 percent, and more than half of them died from **preventable infectious diseases** such as plague, cholera, measles, smallpox, typhoid fever, dysentery, epidemic typhus, and relapsing fever, which were the most harmful diseases." The reason that the huge

The Hygienic Campaign Led by Mao in the Mid-20th Century SLIDE 3



▲ The scene of epidemic prevention propaganda on the street



▲ Patriotic hygiene campaign slogans on the street

“养成人人讲卫生、家家爱清洁的良好习惯”

◀ One of the slogans of the campaign: Developing good habits of hygiene (Jiang Wei Sheng) for everyone and promoting cleanliness in every household

population died from these “preventable” diseases lies in the weak foundation of “Wei Sheng” left over from ancient China collectively. Thus, President Mao actively held hygienic campaigns (refer to **slide 3 above**) to uplift awareness of hygiene of the Chinese without proper education, more importantly, to eliminate those preventable diseases that troubled China at the time.

Through navigating the struggling history of China to tackle preventable diseases, two issues can be implied: one, Chinese people at the time lacked fundamental hygienic awareness (Wei Sheng) and modernity (Su Zhi); two, these unhygienic presentations authenticated the statement by orientalists, and disappointed domestic scholars like Bo Yang with education and hygienic awareness, who wrote *The Ugly Chinese* – “ugly” hygiene is one of the numerous ugliness. As I mentioned above, the hygienic “ugliness” exposed in China at the time is like traumas haunting the hygienic history of China, and Chinese people, through years of development, are desperate for displaying the hygienic modernity they have acquired to rebut orientalism and to wash the bad images ancient China has demonstrated, in which the face-masking during the COVID-19 serves as an opportunity.


Back in civilized today of China, “Su Zhi” is still a buzzword among Chinese people at any time and everywhere. At the outset of my presentation, I hold an argument to think of “Su Zhi” as the trauma of the Chinese since in many ways, it regulates body behaviors by imposing hygienic habitus to behave as modernized and reasoned subjects. Habitus, proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), is the way that people perceive and respond to the social world they inhabit, in this context, it specifically refers to the hygienic awareness and modernity inherited by the Chinese. In this presentation, discussing how relevant face-masking is “scientifically” linked to “Su Zhi” is out of my scope, but the COVID-19 pandemic is a turning point of the mythologization of “Su Zhi” in the West. After witnessing the turmoil and death tolls in the West, the truth about “Su Zhi” is slowly coming to the surface as it triggers a marked proliferation of discussion on social media in China (see **Slide 4**). Strikingly, those discussions have manifested the inferiority they have felt and held the stereotypes of the national “Su Zhi”. Undeniably, we are the generation that grew up under the discourse of “ugly Chinese”, thus, we behave ourselves in a modernized and hygienic way to avoid engulfing such discourse once again. As “Wei Sheng” was introduced by the West and Japan to tackle the deficiencies of the Chinese (Rogaski 2004: 251), the Chinese people have been struggling for meeting the expectations and standards of “Wei Sheng” as well as “modernity”. That’s why I address “Su Zhi” as the trauma – we are expecting an admission as a modernized ethnicity, and we are desperate to show that we have totally overthrown the unhygienic collective images that were presented in the 20th century when both Orientalists and domestic scholars criticized.

Mythologized “Su Zhi” of the West and “Su Zhi” Hierarchy SLIDE 4

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Coronavirus, lo scontro tra professori: perché Gismo
ha ragione

24 FEBBRAIO 2020 - 13:47 di Redazione



Medical expert & director of the epidemiology center at SACCO hospital, Gismo
ndo, has publicly stated that Western developed countries with higher “Su Zhi” will not experience the same severe epidemic situation as China.

Americans robbing supermarkets without masks during the lockdown



Su Zhi Discussion on Social Media

在美国等发达国家，人的素质真的这么高么？
本人没出国，但看下面的文章，很好奇，美国这些发达国家的人素质真的这么高么？

The topic entitled “Whether people from developed countries possess higher ‘Su Zhi’” owns a viewership of 3.6 million

璿琪
键盘侠没人谴责洋大人的素质，只质疑现场的国人为何不挺身而出，只怕这些键盘侠到了现场都听不明白洋大人骂的什么吧👍👍👍

fleminghu
我以前也相信那些胡说八道，去了一趟灯塔，所有的肥皂泡都破了。

对于“中国人的劣根性”这个话题，我想我是比较有发言权的。我是在充斥着“丑陋的中国人”的论调中成长起来的一代人，也曾带着对国家和民族的误解“自卑”了很多年。直到后来，我走过了数十个国家和地区后，我才恍然醒悟。

Numerous people have resonated with the “Su Zhi” hierarchy and felt inferior in “Su Zhi” to the nation for many years.

In this presentation, I used “Su Zhi” as a descriptor of Chinese hygienic modernity (connected to “Wei Sheng Su Zhi”) to demonstrate the desperateness of the Chinese to rebut orientalism and wash the bad images by connecting the face-masking culture during the COVID-19 period with its struggling history of hygiene. Through navigating their interconnectedness, this presentation aims to convey that “Su Zhi” is far more than a presentation of the hygienic modernity of China, it closely links to the trauma as “inferior” and represents the “modernized” body habitus. Hope you all enjoy my presentation, thank you.

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The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Academic Honesty Declaration Statement

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Student Name	ZHOU Kaijun (s1155182169)		
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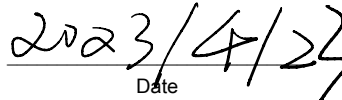
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