

## People come together to overcome mask crisis

Written by Hsu Jen-hui 許建輝

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The COVID-19 outbreak has triggered panic buying of masks in Taiwan. Starting on Feb. 6, the government centralized the distribution of masks and imposed a limit of two per person per week.

Despite the restrictions, Taiwan does not have the capacity to domestically produce sufficient masks to meet demand. In response, a campaign to persuade the public to forgo masks unless they really need them, called “I’m okay, you take one first,” has gone viral.

This spontaneous outpouring of concern for fellow citizens and a willingness to shoulder hardships together shows the strength of civic power in democratic societies.

Contrast this with distressing reports from China of hostility and discrimination toward people from Wuhan — the epicenter of the outbreak — by their fellow citizens. This includes stories of Wuhan-based migrant workers who, upon returning to their village for the Lunar New Year holiday, were locked up in their homes by fellow villagers, thrown out by their families or even prohibited from entering their village by knife-wielding vigilantes.

It is entirely understandable that people want to look after their own safety, and prevent themselves and their family from being infected by a frightening new virus. Nevertheless, this kind of excessive and inappropriate behavior is utterly bereft of empathy.

Some people who are worried that the virus would cause a full-scale epidemic in Taiwan have selfishly chosen to stockpile masks. The government’s rationing system has restricted freedom of choice, but sacrificing an element of personal liberty for the wider public good is a choice that even liberal academics acknowledge is a necessary evil.

However, such restrictions must rest on a legal foundation, and be transparent to ensure that personal rights are protected and privileged groups do not receive preferential treatment.

The “I’m okay, you take one first” campaign is an expression of consideration and tenderness

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toward those in need, treating strangers as if they were their own kith and kin, and showing that all Taiwanese are part of a shared community.

It demonstrates the importance of a sense of belonging, central to the philosophy of communitarianism. This allows us to more deeply identify with and feel a sense of pride toward our native land. This, in turn, helps engender a sense of responsibility toward our community and a willingness to make sacrifices.

There is reason to hope that the majority of Taiwanese will respond positively to the campaign, as there is already a social consensus that prevention is the joint responsibility of the government and all Taiwanese.

This consensus exists because the public trusts the government: They can see that the Central Epidemic Command Center has been expending enormous effort to protect Taiwan from the virus, and when people's rights are protected by the authorities, it breeds self-discipline and virtuous behavior.

By contrast, when people from Wuhan post videos online in utter despair, warning people not to trust their government, when China's government delays publicly announcing the existence of the outbreak, bungles the supply of virus-prevention equipment and suppresses data on the true number of dead and infected individuals, it is not very surprising that Chinese officials cannot win the trust of the public.

Is it any wonder that many Chinese decide first to look out for themselves, appear to lack empathy and compassion, and display dubious moral behavior? It is a moral crisis their government has created.

*Hsu Jen-hui is a professor at Shih Hsin University's department of public policy and management.*

Translated by Edward Jones

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