

Down With Your Masks!

Dr. Li Manhua received her PhD in philosophy at École Normale Supérieure in Paris in 2019. Her dissertation entitled “Le corps ascétique”(“The Ascetic Body”) explores genealogy as a transcultural critical approach, and provides an account of the body as the milieu of ascetic practices in Mencius and Zhuangzi on the one hand, in Nietzsche and Foucault on the other. Her research focuses on contemporary French philosophy, 19th and 20th century German philosophy as well as pre-Qin and contemporary Chinese philosophy. Her writing of the body engages actively with current affairs such as bio-ethics, gender, technology, environment and cross-cultural value conflicts involving these issues.

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These days, a doctoral student is lucky to find the opportunity to apply her acquired skills immediately after her dissertation, which will have taken years, after the sleepless nights she will have endured and the long monologues she will have delivered in front of an audience so as to convince them. This is why it was a kind of privilege for me, having defended a dissertation on asceticism in 2019, to be able to confront over these past few months an authentic and lived kind of asceticism—and what could appear to some an ancient if not outmoded topic suddenly became a harsh reality.

At the beginning of March, in front of a Parisian audience, I spoke about asceticism by quoting a Taoist ascetic who led an eremitical life, like a tree atop a mountain; far from the crowd, the ascetic makes himself *available* to a true life, away from semblances of life, spectacles, luxuries. At that moment, I did not foresee that this speech would become a sort of prelude to the hardships I would face in the following months. Mid-March, I took one of the last flights for Berlin where I was to settle, planning to spend a “gap year,” that is, a true vacation—in my mind—to temporarily retire from philosophy. Despite my intentions, this “vacation” will have had an

unusual meaning, which has more to do with a “gap” in the CV, difficult to summarize.

Instead of the word “*Ausgangsbeschränkungen*” (the German word for “confinement”), I find the pair “*jin-zu*” (禁足)—literally “feet prohibition” in Chinese—a more concise appellation for this vacation spent in the metropolis. When I hesitate to put a foot down in a streetcar bound for the city center, I live, in some ways, an ascetic life, a life made up of all sorts of constraints, including the impossibility of an encounter over five kilometers away from my home. But it is not as easy as I thought. During my daily walks from the kitchen to the bedroom, headphones plugged into my ears, my eyes glued to the screen, I pretend to compensate for the distances my feet cannot cover. Instead of getting in touch, I get *connected*. Is it a kind of availability? I don’t know. But I am sure of one thing only, which is that I was not ascetic in the traditional sense of the term—when I think about the six pounds I put on during the “*Ausgangsbeschränkungen*.”

Another word, discipline, came to my mind in February, before the beginning of confinement in France, on a day I took a walk with a friend in Parc Montsouris. Seeing the mask I was wearing, people in the park were throwing suspicious looks our way. My friend asked: “Are you sick?” I explained that I was not, that it was only to protect myself. But what struck me is what she claimed afterwards: far from protecting me, the mask might instead put me at risk. She warned me that Asians wearing masks had been evacuated from public transportation and attacked in the street. Thus, the remainder of our walk was entertained by a debate on the following question: can the fact of not wearing a mask, due to the risk of being evacuated or attacked, be considered a discipline of one’s body?

That evening, during a Chinese class I was teaching, I was scarcely trying to hide my mask from the students. Watching me attempt to differentiate the articulation of the character *qi* from that of the character *ji*, they began to laugh. To pronounce the character *qi*, one must forcefully expel air from the mouth; I articulated it, the mask

inflated. For the character *ji*, on the contrary, air remains in the mouth; and when I pronounced it the mask did not even vibrate. A student then remarked that it was one of the most pedagogical classes he had ever attended. I was very thankful that my students did not evacuate me from the classroom!

On my way home, I received a message from my mother who reminded me: “keep your mask on; if someone attacks you, leave!” Seeing this message sent from my city in China—still under quarantine—I asked myself since when this small accessory, the mask, had become a symbol of heroism. Even though I was only peacefully walking in the street, I was a hero. I was unconsciously defying an entire culture by “covering my face.” Unless all of this is simply a farce?

I hope to be able to survive this twofold struggle—availability and discipline—that will, in all probability, endure beyond my “vacation.”