



The Masked Face in the Theatre of Pandemic and Protest

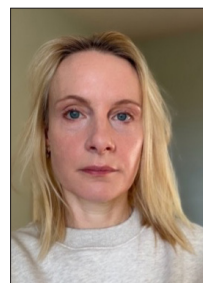
Public Lecture

by Prof. Dr. Margaret Hillenbrand (University of Oxford)

Wednesday, 6 May 2026, 16:15-17:45, Room RAI-F-041, Rämistrasse 74/76, 8001 Zurich

This talk explores cultures of masking in pandemic-era China, arguing that it is easy to underthink the role of the mask at a time of epidemiological peril: masks save lives, end of story. I suggest to the contrary that masks were never only about public health during Covid-19, but instead communicated far more complex biopolitical propaganda, especially at a time when memories of mass masked protest during the Hong Kong demonstrations of 2019-2020 were vivid. From the death of Wuhan whistleblower Li Wenliang to the White Paper Movement of November 2022, masks played an extraordinary role in Chinese politico-visual culture at a time when pandemic and protest intersected in tense ways. Exploring three sets of little-studied primary sources – official propaganda posters about the virus; cartoons about fighting against the pandemic published in the *People's Daily*; and artwork produced by children and young people in DIY mask-making get-togethers – I discuss how masks functioned as vibrant objects during a brief but

monumental period in the history of biopower in China.



Margaret Hillenbrand is Professor of Modern Chinese Literature and Visual Culture at the University of Oxford. Her books include *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Duke University Press, 2020), and *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (Columbia University Press, 2023), which was awarded the Modern Languages Association's Scaglione Prize for East Asian Studies in 2024. She is now working on a new project about the cultural politics of the face in Chinese visual culture during the era of biometric surveillance, cosmetic surgery, and masked protest.

Further information

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