

We Care, We Are Concerned

A masked city cannot stop words of compassion from coming out from the mouths of university students who express, during phone interviews, their concerns about the pneumonia epidemic in Hong Kong.

With the number of confirmed cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome soaring to 1,755 as of June 13, no place in this cramped city is immune to the threat of this deadly disease. Local inhabitants appear to experience an overnight handover to a mystery virus whose first route of transmission still remains unidentified. Housing estates and hospitals, once counted as sanctuaries, become places of fear.

The evidence of care and concern is everywhere, however. Mr Chan, a second-year student in the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, said during a phone interview that the public awareness of civil obligations was no more explicit than any period since his first day of birth. He was also quick to point out the people's attention is no longer narrowly focused on the stagnating economy.

"The agenda changes to health problems. How warm it is when the greeting words of friends are nothing but care and concern," exclaimed Mr Chan.

"Although the shocking news of Leslie Cheung (a local pop star who plunged to his death on the same evening as quarantine measures were taken upon residents of Block E, Amoy Gardens on April 1, 2003) apparently drags us further into despair," he confided in a coarse voice. "It let us reflect on the issue of life and death. Together with the pneumonia crisis, these times give us a rare chance to find out more about our personal needs—caring relationships."

Likewise, worries transcend the youngsters' own personal concerns. Mr Lee, a final-year student at the University of Hong Kong, was able to seek empathy with senior citizens living in centers for the aged, after viewing a local TV programme on how the pneumonia crisis made an impact on the elderly.

"The elderly are tortured by mixed sentiments. On the one hand, they take the initiative and urge their relatives not to visit them," said Mr Lee, "on the other hand, they are scared to death that their beloved will fall prey to the fatal disease."

While Mr Lee gained his insight from the screen, Charlie Choy, his schoolmate, showed a similar concern about the elderly, not from second-handed information but first-hand experience.

Ms Choy told the phone interviewer that a considerable number of senior citizens in Sham Shui Po, her district of residence, put their lives at risk by ignoring the importance of wearing masks. Despite the fact that the old people are more vulnerable to the pneumonia virus, they show, Ms Choy commented, no sign of getting the message.

“I’m anxious. Their ignorance is disturbing,” said Ms Choy.

Although these students feel that they are living through some of Hong Kong’s darkest days they remain hopeful that there is light at then end of the tunnel. ■

My personal view: the past couple of months were the first time in my life that I felt I was an informed citizen by keeping up with news in various formats. I tried to use what I learnt from the media to reassure my mum and my friends. The process was painful and tough, however. Painful in the sense that I was bombarded with sad pieces of news. Tough in the sense that I had to keep up with the news in part for assignments of a journalistic course, and in part because I could not help watching it. Nevertheless, I’m proud of witnessing this unusual period in Hong Kong. I firmly believe it’s a good chance for youngsters like us to grow through difficulties. In the past, older generations always took pride in themselves by pointing out that they are the one who lived through the Japanese occupation, poverty, and all sorts of toughness. Of course, I do not mean I am happy about the current situation. But we can draw some lessons from it. Never have I felt so intensely that I have to become more mature. In short, I feel a deep urge to grow up. So many of my friends have shed their tears for the unfortunate. Tears, I think, are the evidence that we love HK.

My compliments go to the following friends who kindly accepted my phone interviews:

Chan Ying-wai, HK Academy for Performing Arts.

Lee Kwok-kueng, the University of Hong Kong (HKU).

Choy Lai-yee, HKU.

Charlotte Yeung, HKU.

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