Filtered Life: Air Purification, Gender, and Cigarettes in the People’s Republic of China

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Fraught feelings about fibrous filters are on the rise in homes across the People’s Republic of China, as people there reach for old and new ways to limit exposures to and cleanse themselves of the unwanted. Teleologies of purity are hardly new in this part of the world (Rogaski 2004; Edwards 1990), but how residents of the PRC are filtering for them has been changing—and so has the emotional toll of those efforts. Apparitions like “airpocalypse” (kongqimori), and more recently “aerosolized transmission” (qirongjiao chuanbo), have prompted cycles of affect and action.1 Urgencies and practices have converged around how and whether to filter out contaminants from what one breathes. To profit seekers, this convergence has been an unrivaled opportunity. If the most dependable moneymakers during the American gold rush were those selling shovels, sieves, and scales, today in China the shrewd opportunists are those flogging air-cleansing paraphernalia—the filter itself, what it delivers, and all manner of instrument to measure that delivery. Air purifiers, face masks, kitchen exhausts, low-VOC paint, spectrometers, pollution-monitoring apps, and PCR tests are just a few examples.

What should we make of all the air filtration sweeping China in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic? Was it largely another example of market capitalism and risk society mixing with communist authoritarianism (Beck 1992, 1999; cf. Kohrman 2004)? Was it just one more Chinese Communist Party-sanctioned neoliberal, biopolitical response to a large governmentally generated mess (in this case, air pollution)? Sounds plausible. To be sure, filtration technologies have held the promise for the Communist regime of defusing a potentially destabilizing problem, by encouraging people to bury their heads in rhetorics of personal responsibility and retail remedy. Beijing authorities have preferred that citizens, rather than call into question the party’s culpability for air pollution, buy and deploy personal air

1. All translations in this article were made by the author, unless otherwise noted. “Airpocalypse” is now a common translation of kongqimori.
purifiers as acts of health consciousness (Kay, Zhao, and Sui 2015). Filtered out, presumably, is political defiance.

**Memes and Masks**

That line of analysis has many merits, to be sure. There are other matters, though, that I want to consider here in this discussion of air filtration in Chinese contexts. Namely, how does a technology promoted as parsing one binary—dirty versus clean air—become the medium for reinforcing and challenging sociopolitical divisions among people, divisions such as those pertaining to gender? And what, as Emmanuel Levinas would have it, are the ethical implications for how people come to dwell among others with such technology? I take up those questions here by giving special focus to one facet of China’s pre-pandemic fascination with filtration: home air purification.

But my discussion is not restricted to just the household. Allow me to begin by introducing an ongoing thread of Internet communication that draws on a genre—comedy—that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has at times indicated it would prefer filtered out of circulation (Magnier and Lin 2016). A stock-in-trade of humorists everywhere is using material culture to skewer common concerns and political rhetoric. So, it should be of little surprise that some have been generating whimsical images at the interfaces of air, filtration, and the CCP’s “War against Pollution.” One thread of this whimsy has been appearing intermittently in Chinese visual media since at least the time of SARS, in the early 2000s, most often in the form of Internet memes. It draws on two commercial objects that until recently possessed seemingly opposing gendered valences. I call this humorous handiwork the “cigarette mask,” for it combines (1) the surgical-style respiratory mask and (2) the cigarette (figs. 1–2).

Should these memes be dismissed as nothing more than senseless dalliances with

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2. Gauthier, as follows, elucidates Emmanuel Levinas’s thinking on place in response to Martin Heidegger’s reflections on homecoming and dwelling. “Heidegger advances several ontological models that highlight the embedded nature of human existence, whether it is the world of things and others, the art of language of a particular Volk, or the . . . sky. . . . Moreover, Heidegger identifies how man can return to the house of Being via solitary resoluteness, communal heroism, and poetic-mystical dwelling. . . . For Levinas, Heidegger’s homecoming project is objectionable because it is averse to transcendence and conducive to tyranny. Mindful of the flaws endemic to the Heideggerian project, Levinas advances an alternative that is infinite in scope and liberationist in intent. For Levinas, the self maintains a proper relationship to place when it welcomes the Other into the home. However the host is also obligated to extend welcome to the Third by creating political institutions that are ethically responsible, respectful of human dignity, and monotheistic in orientation. Levinas thus not only levels an insightful critique of Heideggerian ontology, but also advances an alternative vision of how human beings should properly relate to place” (Gauthier 2011: 155–56).
absurdism? After all, what is more incongruous, more ludicrous than conjoining the respiratory mask, designed to filter out airborne particles, with the cigarette, a consumer product that generates thousands of different chemicals when ignited, many of which are immensely pathogenic?

In this article, I return to the cigarette mask meme intermittently, unpacking some of the cultural method behind its seemingly comedic madness. Rather than casting it aside as senseless, I look to mask memes and other filtration mash-ups as scholarly portals, seeing them as imagistic gateways for my larger goals of understanding air-purification technology in pre-COVID-19 China—its history and its emerging affective economy—and for thinking across filtration into social theory.

For one thing, the memes gesture to an uncanny backstory to air filtration. This is a backstory heavily refracted by gender and tied to the development of a global product—the filter-tipped cigarette—manufactured across China in far greater numbers in recent decades than any other commercial category of air purifier. Second, this backstory fills out a theoretical truism for the study of technology and public culture. Excavating the shards of satire is a valuable way to comprehend how new products of science and technology, reputedly designed for one purpose—assessing and cleansing air, say—have been long textured by and complicit in something else.
far larger, the gendered sociopolitical assemblage that Wendy Brown has theorized as the “male state.” Third, such complicity is never stable. At the same time that the popularization of technologies like personal air purifiers may promise a fantasy of domestic well-being, and thus seem to be worthy of celebration whenever possible, they can also become founts for some people of fraught feelings about domesticity and, in turn, become matériel for an incipient politics calling into question toxic effects of gender power.

Learning from Mafalda: Feminist Filtration of Science and Technology Studies

Cigarettes and satire have been no stranger to social analyses of technology. They feature front and center, for instance, in one of Bruno Latour’s (1999) pathbreaking essays. The epigraph of that essay is a cartoon strip by the famous Argentinian humorist, Quino. The strip features a domestic scene occupied by a family of three . . . or is it four? It begins with an emotional juxtaposition: an adult at home in an armchair puffing contentedly on a cigarette as a child, Mafalda, watches fretfully. Here’s how Latour describes the cartoon’s opening: “‘What are you doing?’ [Mafalda] asks in the first scene. ‘As you can see, I’m smoking,’ responds her father unwarily. ‘Oh,’ Mafalda remarks in passing, ‘I thought the cigarette was smoking you’” (21).

Latour goes on to use this cartoon as a touchstone for questioning how the social sciences have hinged on the relative agency enjoyed by individuals and society. Since then, we have seen a stampede of scholarship, including some in the anthropology of East Asia (e.g., Kipnis 2015; Kim 2016; Zhan 2005), drawn to Latour’s questions, some overreading his agenda regarding materiality. My preference, like Michael Herzfeld’s (2015: 19), is “to avoid the rather arid debate about whether objects have agency.” Instead, I examine here responses to the arid itself, in part to help redress

3. In her 1995 volume, States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity, Brown argues that Max Weber’s thesis regarding the modern state’s origins is actually premised on a male-female heteronormative order as well as a contract among male state actors and male heads of households, wherein male heads of households offer protection to weaker members of a household, and households are organized to reinforce male dominance (188). For more readings on this topic, see Cooper 2002: 239. To characterize China under communism as a country that has been led by a male state is hardly controversial. The Chinese Communist Party controls all aspects of the state, otherwise known as the People’s Government. Over the party’s nearly hundred-year history, it has always categorized members as male or female, and men have always constituted the majority of party membership. Rarely has the composition of the party’s Central Committee ever fallen below 90 percent male (currently it is 95 percent). As for the even more influential Politburo, only a handful of women have ever been members, with most of those being wives of top leaders; currently all but one of the twenty-five members of the Politburo are male. And finally, in terms of the Politburo’s Standing Committee, no woman has ever held a seat (C. Li 2016: 97–100).
how disinterest in some vitally important sociopolitical divisions has been baked into the science studies of *le professeur*. One sees this disinterest in Latour’s analysis of the Mafalda cartoon. In his push to puzzle over sociology’s historical obsession with agency, Latour skirts the mocking bite looming large in the strip’s last frame. There, in a doorway, dwells Mafalda’s mother, radiating a distinctive gendered ethics (fig. 3). She looks at us in utter dismay as the father despoils the tidiness of their heteronormativity with chopped-up cigarettes while she works two jobs: (A) comporting herself elegantly, standing upright in a miniskirt, slender legs exposed down to the ground, and (B) tending to domestic chores, transporting a stack of folded garments.

Years ago, scholars like Donna Haraway warned us to use care when analyzing technologies. Whether drawing on French-fueled science-studies approaches, Marx’s commodity fetishism, or other perspectives, we should not let practices of sociopolitical difference, including ones pertaining to gender, drift out of our purview, for it is always the case that “objects of technoscience are forged and branded in the crucible of specific, located practices” (Haraway 1997: 35). In this vein, Sara Ahmed (2010) galvanizes us to not simply be content falling back on Arjun Appadurai’s general call, to collect more than just the “cultural biography” of things (Kopytoff 1986), how objects “move through different hands, contexts, and uses” (Appadurai 1986: 34). She prods us to pay extra attention to the historical and performative intersections of bodies, space, and affect. It is there, at those intersections, she argues, where gender and objects come to be mutually naturalized and contested. She suggests that in order to better understand such naturalization and contestation, scholars need to provide richer descriptions, ones that tack back and forth between object and gender, examining how each has been “experienced from the points of view of those who share the space of its dwelling” (Ahmed 2010: 244).

In contemporary China, people are naturalizing and contesting air purification on a daily basis, and one space through which that is happening is the heteronormative household, conventionally dominated by the male authority figure and the female spouse. At first blush, one of the most tangible ways that husbands and wives
in many cities are now dwelling with air purification is vis-à-vis the air purifier itself, an electronic machine that became a must-have device for many urban households starting about ten years ago, somewhat akin to how the refrigerator was a must-have new electronic device in China in the 1980s. Dwelling with air purification is not a new, twenty-first-century phenomenon for China’s husband-and-wife dyad, however. Many married couples have for decades dwelled among innumerable air filters, many of them, as it turns out, attached to cigarettes. The domestic scene for the three (husband, wife, and filter-tipped cigarette) was fraught before the popularization of air purifiers in the 2010s. And, as I will show, the fault lines of affect became no less complex thereafter; indeed, they have served as the basis for experimental forms of performative critique regarding pollution. Before getting to that, though, allow me to offer some interludes. The first is definitional, regarding something typically ignored by scholars of public culture. The second interlude, somewhat longer, is genealogical, an account of the decidedly gendered origins of how air pollution has been made legible in contemporary China.

**Demarcating the Filter**

What is the filter? Many things might be labeled a filter, depending on the projects and disciplines they serve. In their broadest sense, filters are items facilitating processes of inclusion and exclusion, items that can be as much digital, semiotic, and discursive as they can be mechanical, cellular, and atomic. Social norms can function as filters, as can computer codes, human tissue, and nylon webbing.

Whatever their composition, filters are always political, because when working they both keep things flowing and stop things from getting through. They are also political because what they include, what they exclude, and where they get deployed can benefit some people while imperiling others. Who gets to decide categories of things included and excluded? Who gets to choose how and when a filter is deployed? Who is valorized for expertise in this domain? These are questions foundational to the filter. But there are more. The immediate utility of any filter (keeping something back, letting something through) invariably comes with long-term effects, some predictable, some less so. Who benefits and who gets hurt by those long-term effects? Who gets to decide what’s more important, the immediate benefits of any filter or its long-term costs? How can short-term benefits of the filter occlude and exacerbate long-term problems? Filters are likewise political because of their relations to binaries. They are all about binaries, keeping a category in or out. But they are also binary busters. They never work 100 percent of the time, after all, and before long, they start to get gummed up and fail to keep tidy divisions.
Filtration is political for one more, easily overlooked reason. Filters are always artifacts of the social relations of domination from whence they come. The filter and what it separates are not just neutral objects that get deployed, but are themselves distillates of long-standing mechanisms and logics of political authority—for instance, hypermasculinized forms of industrialization, militarization, and governance.

**A Genealogy of Purifiers, Particles, and Puzzling Passions**

Of all the air filters sold in contemporary China as a tangible means for people to fend off pollution, perhaps none are better artifacts of the social relations of domination from whence they come than home air purifiers. Purifiers marketed for home use in contemporary China employ a variety of filtration technologies. These can include UV, thermodynamic, and photocatalytic oxidation technologies. Some even use activated charcoal, which is actually an absorption technology. At the center of most air purifiers sold across the People’s Republic, though, is nothing more than an electric fan pushing/pulling air through a replaceable fibrous tray, usually made up of fiberglass or polyester. It is in these multilayered lattices where particle retention occurs. Retention rates suffuse Chinese-language marketing of air purifiers and, usually, they are communicated in terms of HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air filter), a capacity to trap at least 99.97 percent of particles 0.3 microns or larger.

Although HEPA technology has seen sizable public dissemination since the late twentieth century, its origin story has not. This is a tale wrapped in equal parts secrecy, statecraft, and gender. In the 1940s, the US Army Chemical Corps commissioned HEPA’s creation in service to a highly classified heteronormative domestic scene. The army needed a new filtration technology in order to protect and calm special communities of military scientists—usually male engineers accompanied by wives and sometimes children—who were in fear of exposure to radioactive particles in remote locations where they were tasked with creating and testing the atom bomb (First 1998). How much the army used HEPA filters once devised to actually protect scientists in its remote laboratory outposts and how much the army used them to calm the scientists and their “dependents” is unclear. Both likely occurred. More certain, though, was that HEPA’s original function far exceeded radioactive gatekeeping. It also included propping up a hierarchy of compliance whereby civilians served a state at war; they were differentiated as male and female constituents of that state; and adult men were celebrated as more valuable to the state in their capacities as scientists, women less so in their capacities as caregivers and clerical workers.
At first look, any 1940s US Army lab seems a world apart from contemporary China. But look again, and time and distance start to collapse around a common thread. I began gleaning this when air purifiers marketed as being HEPA grade started to command large showroom space in Chinese department stores after 2010, and people started chatting with me about their purchases, what they hoped their new devices would purify and how they initially felt about them. Consider what Ms. Liu told me:

It was back in the fall of 2013, when reports of PM2.5 levels first started to jump. We had to do something. So, we purchased two Japanese-made air purifiers for our flat. Each cost almost US$900. A big investment. At first, I was so happy. Those machines . . . they were my heroes. (Interview with author, Beijing, June 2018) 4

Historical irony here is vast, but what comes across as a through line in Ms. Liu’s voice is a technosociological performance. In the rear window stand the ghosts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of massacres committed in Nanjing and biological warfare in Northeast Asia. But HEPA marches forward, serving to perform heroic cleansing for dependents of a male state, in this instance the Chinese party-state—a state ruled by men eager to calm citizens and prop up structures of compliance and willing to outsource to technoscience the task of helping families feel protected in a context of growing environmental threat.

Ms. Liu communicates HEPA’s heroism in terms of a specific metric, “PM2.5.” Nearly every air purifier sold in China today is marketed with robust claims about its capacity to safeguard people from PM2.5. PM is an English-language abbreviation for “atmospheric particulate matter,” any microscopic object, solid or liquid, suspended in the atmosphere. PM2.5 stands for particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter (approximately one-thirtieth the average width of a human hair). PM2.5 is unseeable by the human eye, yet after 2010, it quickly became something on the tips of urbanites’ tongues from Beijing to New Delhi. Today, it is part of a lingua franca of not just air-pollution experts worldwide but also many an anxious Asian cosmopolitan.

This index of air’s legibility, PM2.5, did not just fall from the sky into scientific existence or consumer marketing copy. As was the case with HEPA, a hypermasculinist set of geopolitics textured its provenance. PM2.5’s early history, like that of HEPA, is steeped in twentieth-century North America, where male authori-

4. All interviews in this article were conducted and translated by the author. This interview with Ms. Liu, excerpted here and below, was conducted in Beijing in June 2018.
ties spotted a need to provide protection against unpleasant by-products of state-sponsored industrialization and military conflict. Rather than safeguarding the individual scientist and his dependents, it was researchers worrying about air pollution’s effects on population-level well-being who first fixed on PM2.5. Harvard faculty and postdocs, led by Frank Speizer, Benjamin Ferris, and Douglas Dockery, selected PM2.5 as a possibly meaningful and feasible object of investigation—more than a decade before they successfully validated it as such in their landmark “Six Cities” study. That population-based study’s (Dockery et al. 1993) breakout finding was that human exposure to a measurable index of air pollution, PM2.5, tracks statistically with death from lung cancer and cardiopulmonary disease (Feldscher 2014). Among various motivators, this research was spurred by a biomilitary question puzzling the US federal government (David Jones 2019, pers. comm.): in the eventuality of large-scale armed conflict in the Middle East, what would be the downstream health consequences to US households if America needed to burn far more “dirty” coal to make up for lost access to Arab oil? Narrative accounts of how the researchers answered that question border on the herculean, including praise of Ferris. “He frequently combined his climbing ability and respiratory research when he single-handedly carried his 55-pound spirometer—an instrument for measuring lung capacity—to the top floor of Watertown tripledecks in order to test study subjects” (Lauerman 2013: 7).

The Sinicization of PM2.5

If pursuits coded as manly had a role in PM2.5 becoming scientifically legible outside China, such pursuits also helped catalyze it becoming part of Chinese vernacular. At the end of the same decade that saw the breakout “Six Cities” paper published, PM2.5 was subject to investigation in cities of the PRC by some of the same male researchers and their male Chinese graduate students, funded by the governments of China and the United States (Wu et al. 1999; Wei et al. 1999). In the ensuing years, though, it was three other, less academic factors that lit a fire under PM2.5’s Sinicization. Together, these factors elevated PM2.5 from obscure research object to public villain, to the heights of being labeled an enemy of the party-state, indeed to something directly calling into question for a time the legitimacy of China’s all-male leadership.

First off, by the early aughts, many citizens could tangibly see, taste, and feel the worsening air pollution around them and were looking for a way to call it out. Second, in the run-up to the 2008 Summer Olympics, the central government ordered a time-limited, mass mobilization across the northeast branded the “Blue Sky Project.” Besides giving the games smogless backdrops, the Blue Sky Project sensitized
Chinese citizens to international air standards, as much as it clarified for them that parts of the People’s Republic rarely met those standards and that human health is imperiled by air pollution (Xu 2012). Third, reputedly to protect US citizens working in Beijing and their “dependents,” the US Embassy installed a rooftop PM2.5 monitor in 2008 and soon thereafter began tweeting out hourly air-quality-index levels, tweets that conveyed a far worse portrait of Beijing’s air than did intermittent Chinese government reports (Goldberg 2009).

All this raised several thorny questions for citizens of the People’s Republic. Was their state acting in good faith, truthfully letting people know all it knew about the dangers of air? Was government being an honest broker, fulfilling its filial duty in service to families, helping them decide when children, the elderly, and the infirm should be kept indoors? Was the People’s Government less trustworthy than governments abroad or China’s burgeoning cadre of environmental activists (some of whom were, by early 2012, via emerging social media platforms, lambasting state environmental-protection administrations and insisting that stocktaking of PM2.5 be codified as a core component of all future state-issued air-quality reports) (Huang 2015; Xu 2014)? And most significantly, were leaders at the apex of the CCP doing enough to protect public health?

The CCP was literally under a dark cloud, facing perhaps its biggest credibility crisis since 1989, one that directly undermined its very pro-growth post-Mao claim to legitimacy. Initially flat-footed, party patriarchs hatched a response in anticipation of a key inflection point for the regime’s nearly all-male leadership structure. In late 2012, in the very months between Xi Jinping assuming his titles of General Secretary of the Central Committee and President of China, the CCP turned the tables on public relations, establishing nearly five hundred air-quality surveillance stations across over seventy cities. By early 2013, these stations were releasing daily PM2.5 data (Roberts 2015). In this same period, Beijing amended its “Climatic Disaster” alert system, adding PM2.5 as a factor in the system’s measurements, and designating the highest levels of alert with the colors orange and red. Then, in 2014, Xi’s second-in-command, Premier Li Keqiang announced that the party would be launching a War Against Pollution, intoning on live national TV that “we will start by reducing PM10 and PM2.5,” using an “iron fist” to fight smog (K. Li 2014).

The affective response among Chinese denizens to all these events is only just now coming into scholarly focus. Published reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that, since then, mood swings across China have been increasing in association with PM levels (Flanagan 2017). The higher the reported rates of particulates in the air, the more fearful and dour many people become. And gender seems to be a notable
differentiator here, we are informed. One study, analyzing 2014 data drawn from 144 Chinese cities, suggests that not only are people inclined to express negative, unhappy sentiments in concordance with rising PM2.5 rates, but that women are far more likely to do so than men (Zheng et al. 2019). Another national study, analyzing data from 162 counties in twenty-five different provinces between 2010 and 2014, suggests that increased air-pollution levels are far more likely to correspond with symptom reports matching depression and other types of mental illness when it comes to women rather than to men (Zhang, Zhang, and Chen 2017).

**Consumer Electronics to the Rescue**

What should men, women, and their families across China do, in the privacy of their own homes, to protect themselves from the physical and affective effects of PM2.5 exposure? How should homes be fortified in the war against pollution? Consumer-electronics companies and government agencies have pushed those questions—as well as a corresponding answer. Each residence, if capable, should acquire *kongqijinghuaqi*, air purifiers with HEPA filters.

The flood of such devices into the marketplace was dramatic. Large and small, tall and short, round and boxy. Wide swaths of department stores soon showcased these new devices. Although most of the newly marketed purifiers were corporate branded—in some instances government agencies, like the China Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—licensed their imprimatur to be boldly affixed to the machines. And perhaps to no surprise, many households nationwide with access to disposable income decided to buy in. From 2011 to 2017, nationwide unit sales of home air purifiers jumped over 500 percent. During 2013’s smoggiest months, one of the country’s largest online retailers saw unit sales nearly double repeatedly, week to week (Sun, Kahn, and Zheng 2017: 469). By 2017, companies were selling more than US $2.5 billion in purifiers annually (Zhihu.com 2019).

Understudied to date is how these purifiers have been experienced by “those who share the space of their dwelling” (Ahmed 2010: 244). I have conducted interviews on this topic since 2015, and Professor Hong Wei of Tsinghua University’s department of sociology has also collected reflections through family “Smog Journals” that she has had her students keep. Neither of us can presume that what we have gleaned is representative of all or even a large proportion of owners of air purifiers in China. At best, what we have come to understand constitutes small windows. Rather than running from this epistemology, which sits at the center of my discipline of cultural anthropology, I intend here instead to embrace its interpretive potential. To that end, let’s return now to the reflections of someone introduced earlier, Ms. Liu.
Those machines . . . they were my heroes. One year later, though, I was spurning them. When my husband and son are home and the air outside is bad, they typically turn the purifiers on high. But when I’m home alone, I always keep them switched off . . . I hate them. They just remind me how horrible, how unhealthy our lives have become with all this smog and pollution. It’s like the air-quality apps on my phones . . . I hate looking at them. The information they give . . . makes me so depressed. (Interview with author, Beijing, June 2018)

Why would a woman like Liu turn against what she initially saw as heroic home air purifiers? Is there something about the history of domestic air filtration that would predispose someone like her, married for over a decade, to be particularly susceptible, more so than her husband or son, to what we might call filtration disenchantment? An easy answer would simply follow from the environmental health literature already mentioned (Zheng et al. 2019; Zhang, Zhang, and Chen 2017). That is, when exposed to smog, women are more inclined than their menfolk to report sentiments associated with depression and other mental illness, and those dire sentiments are more likely to leave them feeling disenchan- tanted with air purifiers. I would suggest that we prod further, asking whether in Liu’s comments we could be hearing something else. Rather than, say, an emotional reaction ostensibly inherent in her “female psychology,” might we be hearing something more nuanced and significant in Liu’s words? Might we be hearing friction with a state assemblage that itself has been generative of gender hierarchy, environmental ruin, and promises of filtered remediation? That, in turn, prompts the question, What else is there still to uncover about how, over the years, gender, consumer culture, air pollution, and filtration in China have been coproduced?

To the cigarette mask once more. Among the mask memes that I have collected over the years, many until recently have been ambiguous regarding an identifiable gendered subject. That makes sense given the anonymizing capacity of the respiratory mask, something that has come to make it an important tool of surveillance evasion in mass protests like those occurring in Hong Kong during 2014 and 2019. Cigarette mask memes’ gender ambiguity makes sense for another reason: the off-setting emphases of the cigarette mask’s two constitutive components.

For decades now, cigarette smoking has been highly marked in China by a male/female dyad (Benedict 2018). Statistics bear that out, with epidemiological studies of smoking in China since the 1980s not only categorizing all research subjects as “male” or “female” but also documenting that women are far more inclined to forgo smoking cigarettes than men, with the latest national surveys showing that less
than 3 percent of women are daily smokers whereas over half of men are (Li, Hsia, and Yang 2011).

Moving in the opposite direction symbolically across a male/female dyad has been respiratory masks, at least when deployed for pollution remediation prior to COVID-19. Props, one can generally say, are indispensable to repertoires of gendered performance in daily life around the world; and respiratory masks, almost as much as cigarettes, have been props of gender in China, until recently. Prior to the pandemic not everyone was equally pressured to wear a face mask outside. Whereas some people were encouraged to demonstrate responsible femininity by wearing a respiratory mask when out in public and facing air pollution, others were encouraged to perform masculinity by demurring (Wang et al. 2018). In the wake of the first airpocalypse of 2013, for instance, “real men” (nanzihan) were configured as those willing to “suck it up” and bear the risk when it came to airborne toxins. The currency of that logic was communicated by Xi Jinping himself in February 2014, at a moment when people were buying up respiratory masks at a furious rate across Northeast China. Hours after government air-quality officials had announced the country’s first PM2.5 Orange Alert, President Xi took a rare stroll through a central Beijing neighborhood, surrounded by male courtiers and cameramen, none of them wearing a mask. “Breathing together, sharing the fate,” was the official Xinhua News Agency headline describing Xi’s walk (Xinhua Net 2014).

**Blue Erotics**

In this same period, additional messaging regarding filtration began buffeting domestic spaces, much of it driven by advertising, much of it inflected by gender. “Air pollution is terrible and getting much worse, so outfit your home with air purifiers,” people were repeatedly told. Various home-electronics companies released a marketing barrage, promising consumers a techno-patriarchal sublime. This is a sublime painted not only as a respiratory sanctuary but also as a heteronormative, pronatalist paradise situated within modern architecture and snowy white hues. Here, the purifier stands erect, delivering an erotics of health, happiness, mobility, and protection. Illustrative of this trope has been marketing for Blueair products (fig. 4). Purifier branding and pricing in China today depend heavily on claims of national pedigree, with the most expensive purifiers having purported Scandinavian origins. Chinese-language marketing copy for purifiers made by the Swedish-owned Blueair corporation promise buyers clean air blowing forth a lifestyle associated with prototypical Northern European skin tones and facial features, a lifestyle wherein men stimulate joy while women lean in with pleasure.
Marketers and manufacturers of purifiers have not been without their detractors, it should be noted. Editorial cartoonists have helped visualize some common lines of critique. One line (fig. 5) has been that purifier purveyors are cashing in at the intersection of pollution and inequality, exploiting social stratification and treating as disposable those who have no choice but to labor in pollution, the poor who are expected to trade their health to haul the trappings of the good life for the middle class to and from stores and trash heaps. A second line of critique is that purifiers are technologically unreliable, calling into question whether the machines can deliver on their promises of durability and high rates of filtration.

These lines of criticism invite affective response, as does the trope of the technological sublime used by advertisers. Emotions that people seem to be prompted to feel range from relief and hope to doubt, guilt, and even anger. These are some of the feelings that Ms. Liu has described to me. So, too, has she expressed feelings of fear, endangerment, captivity, desperation, and hopelessness.

In 2015, when I started collecting accounts from Chinese homeowners regarding their newly purchased purifiers, I felt certain that I was venturing into a domain of material culture fundamentally new to a country that I had been studying since the 1980s. After all, what retailer in 1980s China sold devices singularly designed for purifying unseeable particulate matter? Cloth face masks were for sale in some shops then, to be sure, but the general public was typically encouraged to think of them as things to use episodically in defense against visible dust, like that encountered during Beijing’s spring sandstorms. The expectation that one would buy and use fibrous filters, particularly inside the home (Ban et al. 2017), to cope indefinitely with aerosolized objects measured in microns, is altogether new to public culture in China, right? As it turns out, rather than a narrative of contemporary novelty, another academic conceit is in order.
Filtration Flimflam

To understand technology’s origins, marketing, and adoption, to understand affective responses to the popularization of this or that gizmo, the past must be scrutinized. If not the longue durée (Braudel 2009), then certainly microhistories need to be considered (Levi 2012). Hegel’s “wings of Minerva” are needed to swoop back through the “grey in grey” of the past (Hegel 1952: 12). To that end, in this next section, I journey into the ancestry of the cigarette mask’s most comedic component, something that entered the Chinese marketplace decades ago. What I chronicle is a story of the twentieth century, when the party-state flooded shops across the PRC with a new category of air purifier, a few million a year initially, then tens of billions, and before long trillions. The origin story that I recount is of guoluzui—that is, filter-tipped cigarettes—how they proliferated, and how they came to texture feelings about inhaling the unseeable and inescapable.

This intensely male-coded story starts elsewhere before picking up steam in Mao’s China. The androcentric English-speaking domain of inventors and their patents marks a starting point for a genealogy of the cigarette filter. The first “cigarette
filter” patent uncovered by historians was filed in Britain in 1902 (Harris 2011: iii). North American tobacco companies began experimentally deploying such patents after the Armistice of 1918, when the wake of war ushered in new popular anxieties regarding the deathly effects of gaseous chemicals. Viceroy was the first brand of filter-tipped cigarettes (FTCs) to garner modest market interest. Released to American smokers in 1936, it was marketed with the slogan “Only Viceroy has a thinking man’s filter” (Proctor 2011: 343). FTCs remained largely a novelty for years; that is until new scientific findings were published after World War II regarding tobacco’s toxicity. Then, amid a broader context of ecological ruin fueled by massive North American industrialization, US tobacco firms launched filter-tipped brands like Winston and Kent—going so far as to claim that air breathed through their ignited products was “several times cleaner than the air you normally breathe in an average American city” (340). Smokers with access to these cigarettes bought them and their hype with growing enthusiasm, even more so after 1964, when the US surgeon general announced that smoking causes lung cancer.

By 1970, conversion to filter-tipped products in the United States and much of Western Europe was nearly complete, and the tobacco industry there was going strong, with filtration having become the centerpiece of a fabulously successful risk-reduction deception. By then, the deception of “low tar” and “light” cigarettes had been fully folded into FTC branding, advertised under innumerable labels carefully tailored to a wide spectrum of demographics, including gender. The most successful to date in this flimflam has been Marlboro, which Philip Morris reintroduced in the 1950s as a hypermasculine brand, with copy urging, “be glad you’ve changed to a filter.” Marlboro, like all filter-tipped cigarettes, provides the public no protection from the vast majority of deadly chemicals that tobacco releases when ignited. Filter tips actually do the opposite, increasing human exposure to tobacco toxins, a fact public-health advocates have been slow to disseminate in most countries.5

Pandering to Party Patriarchs

The onset of filter-tipped cigarette manufacturing in China is a newer phenomenon, with the first pilot project only happening in the late 1950s, a decade after the Communist Party came to power and nationalized the country’s cigarette supply

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5. FTCs are more dangerous than the “unfiltered” products that they replace, given that they compel customers to smoke more sticks per day and suck smoke deeper into the lung in order to achieve the desired nicotine dosage (Pauly et al. 2002; Proctor 2011; Stevenson and Proctor 2008).
chain. Experiments in production were prompted by the rising prevalence of FTCs elsewhere, but worked off a decidedly different emotional palette. Rather than anxieties about health risks, catalyzing the introduction of FTCs in China was another emotional terrain: mainland men’s desire for political affirmation. And the pandering started at the top.

The first line of Chinese FTCs was produced as a gift to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Communist revolution. The gift was a limited edition of Chunghwa ("China") cigarettes, produced by the state-owned Shanghai Tobacco Company. Until the 1980s, Chunghwas (filtered or unfiltered) were rarely for sale, reserved for exclusive use by party elites. There was something of an arms race that emerged in China after 1949, with cigarette factories vying for recognition for their ability to balance production of mass-market labels alongside a highly exclusive brand favored by top officials. In this context, in the late 1950s, under the guise of anniversary celebrations, Shanghai Tobacco won authorization from Beijing to have a Hong Kong front company buy a filter-making machine from the German Hauni corporation. Shanghai Tobacco used the machine together with filter tips acquired from a Japanese supplier to create its new line of Chunghwas. Not only were these by all accounts the first filtered cigarettes made in China, but they were also received by none other than Mao and a small number of his brethren at the apex of the polity. The gift proffered was billed as pure patriotism: the finest tobacco that China grew, machine-rolled by government factories, replete with the most modern of smoking devices: the filter tip. What was the payoff? To a certain degree, it was the affect of an elevated psyche, enjoyed by both a small coterie of male government elites and the men who ran the state’s tobacco industry.

Unfiltered cigarettes would, however, remain the norm in China until the late 1980s. What turned the tide, what opened the path for China’s hundreds of government-run cigarette factories to nearly all convert production over to FTCs, was the frail embodiment of the male state. By the early 1970s, Mao teetered on the edge of death and his party sat exhausted and demoralized by years of failed radicalism. Under Deng Xiaoping, the CCP set a new course for the People’s Republic, one that prioritized a more technocratic, market-driven definition of how the state and citizenry should achieve modernity. Many aspects of that course correction are now well known, including how, thirty years later, it has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, while also letting loose industrial devastation of the environment.

Less well appreciated is how Deng’s course correction also unleashed political retrenchment pertaining to gender (Fincher 2016). If, in a world of male/female bina-
rism, women enjoyed advances vis-à-vis men under Mao, considerable aspects of that advancement have now evaporated. Historians like Wang Zheng have carefully studied this retrenchment and have come to attribute it to a “masculinist imperative to restore China’s pre-socialist gender order” (Z. Wang 2016: 260). Her analysis pays close attention to pronouncements of top post-Mao leaders regarding women—in the words of Xi Jinping, for example, that women should “shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of the old and young”—and how that kind of rhetoric has been short-circuiting women’s opportunities for workplace advancement (Xi 2013). Left unexamined in China studies is how popularization of specific technologies, even seemingly obscure ones like filter-tipped cigarettes, came to be a material extension of new, more toxic marketized forms of masculinity after Mao, or how reception to successor technologies has, in turn, come to be entangled in emergent critiques of gender in contemporary China. To foreground that line of inquiry, we need to now finish the task of chronicling FTCs’ proliferation and how that has comprised a key backstory to air purifiers’ reception among some of my ethnographic informants.

An Audience Susceptible to an Intoxicating Symbolic Brew

Male cadres running local People’s governments in provinces across China realized something during the early years of the Deng regime: that to win cash infusions from Beijing in the form of infrastructural investment they had two easy tobacco cards to play. One was the ramshackle state-owned cigarette factories in their provinces; the other, the prestige of filter-tipped cigarettes. An argument that provincial and municipal People’s governments made to the Ministry of Finance was that investments in the production of more modern cigarettes would set off a positive chain reaction. It would stimulate cigarette sales, which would shore up local tax revenues, which would loosen up money for other local market liberalizations. Central to this argument was that old cigarette factories should be overhauled and new ones built with all the equipment needed to produce a technologically distinctive category of tobacco product, the filter-tipped cigarette, in far larger numbers than the domestic industry had ever produced before. Officials from Yunnan province were especially quick to rally Beijing’s support along these lines, and officials from other regions were right behind.

What would have led these industry trailblazers to envision filter-tipped prod-

6. Thirty years ago, Chinese women earned almost 80 percent of what men made. By 2010, the average income of women in Chinese cities had fallen to 67 percent of that of men, and the same measure had fallen to 56 percent in the countryside (Qin 2019).
ucts as being an especially promising approach to light a fire under cigarette smokers across the country? It was not because of pent-up demand for a supposedly safer smoking experience among Chinese citizens. Given their monitoring of scientific evidence published outside China, some industry insiders in China would have known substantially about tobacco’s toxicity by the 1970s. But that knowledge would not be systematically blanketed across China for decades, and would not be subject to industry counter-messaging until well into the twenty-first century.

Instead, other rationales would have been operable in emboldening industry leaders. One was likely their confidence that a new industry-wide product category like filter-tipped cigarettes would, with little marketing effort, deliver an intoxicating symbolic brew of science and prestige to an audience hankering after decades of Maoist isolation for all things “modern,” all things “Western.” Something else that would have propelled the industry was how it understood that target audience as uniquely capable, given the extant patriarchal gender order, to arrogate growing family resources to buy more cigarettes, in service to nicotine’s powerful addictive forces. Another understood propellant for FTCs’ uptake was likely the gendered architecture that is the all-powerful escalator of political mobility in the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party. Being a man in the People’s Republic has consistently meant that you are far more likely to rise through the ranks of the party than if you are a woman. And, one of the many trappings of exalted party status until the 1980s, again, was access to the finest brands of cigarettes that the Chinese tobacco industry had to offer. Indeed, it had become something of a public secret among smokers by then that Mao’s favorite brand in his sunset years was filter-tipped Chunghwas and that Deng Xiaoping’s preferred smoke was Pandas, a brand with extra-long filters, designed for his exclusive use.

**Branding and Pricing**

Smoking of FTCs was not restricted to Communist Party members, however, certainly not after the 1980s began. People of all backgrounds—especially if they were “male”—were encouraged to adopt them as supplies increased. The tobacco industry facilitated adoption through astute attention to branding, pricing, and consumer behavior. Local factories created hundreds of new labels, symbolically targeting a clientele differentiated by region, occupation, and educational achievement. At first, the words denoting *filtration*, themselves, were given top billing on these cigarette labels (fig. 6).

Even more significant, perhaps, were the prices that different FTCs commanded. During the very years that filter-tipped cigarettes became the industry standard,
factories expanded the price points between their most expensive labels and their cheapest ones, typically creating ladders within their most successful brands. Just as there are many variants of Marlboros sold today around the world (Reds, Golds, 27s, Edge, etc.), cigarette factories in China have come to create variants within brands. A key contrast with this foreign analogue is pricing. Little difference exists between the price of the most expensive label of Marlboro and the cheapest. By contrast, at the end of the twentieth century as much as a tenfold price span opened up within ladders of Chinese FTCs. This helped fuel FTC adoption by lighting a fire under consumer habits long common to the Chinese cigarette market: competitive yet homosocial gifting of cigarettes between male smokers and the use of cigarettes as symbolic semaphore of social status (Hessler 2010: 232; Kohrman 2008). What label of FTC you smoke, what label of FTC you gift, became vitally important in the performance of manhood.

MK: Do you remember when you began buying filter-tipped cigarettes?

Ma Luzi: Sure, I started smoking them in the 1980s. . . . My first boss smoked. He would give me a cigarette to smoke. Of course, I had to smoke. And the expectation was that I would have cigarettes of my own to give him. Cigarette gifting, that’s how it all got started. He smoked a filter-tipped brand. So,
it would have been insulting if I gave him cigarettes without a filter. At first, I smoked a cheaper brand when I was alone and only gifted filter-tipped cigarettes. But as time went by, I made a little more money and so I wanted to smoke something better.

**MK:** Is it important that all the cigarettes for sale come with filters?

**Ma Luzi:** I guess so. Better that they have them than not. I’ll take all the protection that I can get. But in one way, they have become a problem. They are what’s left over when I smoke and my wife doesn’t want me to smoke, especially at home. I used to smoke at home but not anymore. She gets angry when she comes across any sign that I’ve been smoking at home. (Interview with author, July 2017)

By the early aughts, twenty years after Mr. Ma began using filter-tipped cigarettes, something else regarding tobacco was inexorably on the rise across China. Cigarettes were increasingly being coded as dangerous. Pack design did not escape this coding. In 1991, the National People’s Congress began requiring that cigarette packs sold in China have printed on their sides tar levels and the words *xiyanyouhai-jiankan* (smoking is harmful to health). Then, keeping pace with international standards, Beijing required packs to also include along one side metrics of how much nicotine and carbon monoxide each stick ostensibly generates.

### Not in My Home: Public Health Tries to Radicalize Wives

Around the same time that these warnings and disclosures began appearing, public-health advocates across China began using gender to communicate the perils of tobacco smoke. Health advocates in the 1990s launched campaigns portraying cigarette smoke as dangerous for everyone, but especially for women. This was not an altogether new strategy for tobacco control in China. But tactics had changed. The work of flagging that tobacco smoke was dangerous for women was now redirected to a newly categorized hazard: “environmental pollution” (*huanjingwuran*) emanating from lit tobacco in other people’s hands. Public-health campaigns instructed

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7. In the 1920s many women across urban China had embraced the habit of smoking cigarettes. This was heavily discouraged by Christian missionaries as well as some Chinese anti-imperialist critics. After Mao came to power, in 1949, the Communist Party even more intensely damned the practice of female tobacco use, depicting cigarette smoking in particular as highly transgressive, with consequences for women’s social standing, as dangerous to their feminine propriety (Benedict 2011).
women to fear this kind of environmental pollution, and by the aughts, this was being emphasized anew in the language of “secondhand” smoke.

Campaigns targeting secondhand smoke did not stop at stimulating women to fear despoiled air. They also displaced onto women the impossible moral responsibility of having to police domestic air, to interdict processes of putrefaction, processes emanating from a decidedly male-coded state and expelled into households by menfolk. Not surprisingly, the patriarch started to feel somewhat browbeaten by mothers, wives, and daughters; men felt newly chided for smoking cigarettes and increasingly pressured to refrain or step outside whenever feeling the urge to light up at home. By 2000, especially among the more educated, the home had become something of a tobacco tempest. More and more women were no longer willing to sit idly by as their men filled their domiciles with environmental pollution. Women had been enlisted into the role of enforcer in a new public-health project, and many experimented vigorously with that role.

But, men would often cry, what of the filters on the end of cigarettes? As much as tobacco marketing in China had evolved by then to play up filter tips being protective to smokers, as indexed by tar levels, public health campaigns targeting secondhand smoke were designed to incite a very different effect on women’s views of cigarette filters. Campaigners against secondhand smoke either gave no credence to cigarette filters or called them out for what they were, a ruse. As a consequence, for many women, filters attached to a consumer product inundating their lives offered no security. At best the filters were inseparable extensions of new dangers that they, as responsible females, were duly charged with ridding from their homes. At worst, they were reminders of the limits of their own agency, of the dangers that they could not prevent.

**Ms. Zhang Ting:** No smoking in the house. That’s what I tell my old man. . . . After we married and moved in together, he began smoking more and more. Every few days, it would be my job to empty his ashtrays. Now that I know how dangerous smoking is, I have become much braver telling him what he can’t do. No more smoking in the house. No more dirty butts piling up on our tea table. Second-hand smoke, third-hand smoke. I know all about that.

**Ms. Shen Xiaowen:** My husband tells me that I shouldn’t ban him from smoking in the house, because they all have filters and he buys more expensive cigarettes. But I know they are still dangerous. And women are even more at threat than men. I’ve heard of so many women who’ve contracted lung cancer and died. They never smoked. So how did they get lung cancer? Being
around so many cigarettes. More expensive cigarettes, filtered cigarettes . . . [are healthier]. . . . I don't believe any of that. But [sighs] unless I'm willing to get divorced, there is nothing that I can do. (Interview with author, July 2017)

**Filtration and the Fraught Household**

To recap, over a period of thirty-five years, while overseeing broad industrial growth and a befouling of the country, branches of China’s party-state (A) supercharged a business strategy of coterminous filtration, cigarette consumption, and masculinity, and (B) promoted a highly gendered tobacco-control campaign, playing up women’s precarity. More than half of all men were seduced by this filtration flimflam, catapulting China’s State Tobacco Monopoly Administration into the largest cigarette producer in the world, with domestic sales of cigarettes nationwide surging seventeenfold between 1980 and 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics n.d.). Among women, few were using tobacco before the rise of filter-tipped cigarettes, and few do today. Some holding particularly harsh views of cigarettes have told me that they still like the smell of tobacco, because it reminds them of meaningful ties with men in their lives (father, grandfather, husband). But for many women in the aughts, particularly the better educated, filter-tipped cigarettes and the detritus of “butts” have come to be either synonymous with airborne dangers that they had, through tense negotiations with their menfolk, already purged from their homes, or constant smelly reminders of how they were stuck with men who were more inclined to place personal pleasure over responsible care of others. In short, many households inhabited by smokers had become more stressful dwellings by 2010.

Lauren Berlant (2011: 3), in her book *Cruel Optimism*, investigates affective stories about the “dissolution of optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy”; she tracks “dramas of” adjustment to the transformation of what had seemed foundational into those binding kinds of optimistic relation she calls ‘cruel.’” It is interesting to note the timing of the dissemination in China of filter-tipped cigarettes and, then, highly gendered tobacco-control discourse, for it notably paralleled a rising instantiation there of cruel optimism, of radical domestic disenchantment—that is, divorce. Divorce rates in the PRC doubled between 1979 and 1986, and then more than tripled between 1990 and 2011 (Lu and Wang 2014; Platte 1988). Of course, it would be foolish to attribute surging divorce rates to cigarettes and their filters. But if nothing else, the rising rates of divorce point to the degree to which relationships between husbands and wives
have become increasingly subject to disagreement and dissolution, and how fantasies of the good life that are so foundational to conjugation have been under tremendous strain in recent years.\(^8\)

**Repackaging**

It is into that fraught context that large-scale marketing of home air purifiers arrived in 2013. Since then, I have heard numerous stories of men petitioning their spouses, long irritated with cigarettes in the home, to consider the purchase of an air purifier as achieving two functions: (A) cleaning the home of toxins introduced by outside air pollution and (B) cleaning the home of toxins introduced by cigarette smoke.

This was hardly by happenstance. When Beijing began broadcasting daily PM2.5 reports in 2013, home air purifiers were not new technologies to all smokers. A decade earlier, outfits like Shenzhen’s Shenrui Corporation had already converted industrial air-filtration equipment into some of the first home air purifiers sold in China (fig. 7). These devices were initially marketed not as heroes helping families combat atmospheric pollutants hanging over cityscapes, but as “Tobacco Fog Purifiers,” capable of helping households “thoroughly purify secondhand smoke” (also see G. Zhang 2007).

Such secondhand-smoke marketing copy proved to be sticky. When the term *airpocalypse* entered the Chinese zeitgeist and home air purifiers suddenly became must-have purchases for many urbanites battling “smog” (*wumai*), the original tobacco-related marketing copy was not simply scrapped, but instead folded into a new approach. Thereafter, purifiers were advertised as capable of filtering out pollutants generated from a variety of sources, including automobiles, kitchen stoves, and cigarettes. Today, advertisements for nearly all home air purifiers sold in China continue to include secondhand tobacco smoke in their lists of what the devices effectively filter.

The point that I’m making here is that husbands and wives were prompted, in

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8. For more anthropological analysis of marital dissolution and post-Mao divorce, see Yunxiang Yan (2013).
part by marketers, to experience the adoption of air-purification technology after 2013 as an extension of existing tensions in their households. For many husbands, the new air-purifier hoopla of the period was easily read as a “green light” to continue or recommence smoking at home. Acquisition of a purifier promised a fresh filtration fantasy enabling them to once again feel that they were pursuing the good life, enjoying cigarettes in responsible ways. For wives, it was all too easy to feel, before long, that any newly purchased purifier was a Trojan horse.

**Mr. Luo Zhi:** We bought an air purifier because the PM2.5 levels were becoming so high. That was the right thing to do. But once I had the machine in the house and had a chance to read through all the literature that came with it, I realized that I could smoke cigarettes again in the house. The machines purify air of pollutants, and that includes what’s in cigarette smoke. That fact just made my wife angry. She thought she’d convinced me to no longer smoke at home. With the purchase of the air purifier, she came to feel that I was trying to trick her. I told her that the purifier wasn’t a trick. I was just being realistic and practical. I have tried to quit. I don’t really want to smoke if I could stop, but I can’t. And I hate having to always go outside to smoke. The air purifier is a safe solution. (Interview by author, June 2018)

A core tension in Luo Zhi’s comments—between filtration as safe technological remediation to aerosolized toxins and filter as trickery—is exactly one that has increasingly underwritten tobacco-industry and tobacco-control rhetoric around the world for the last twenty years or more. And by 2015, through their media campaigns, major institutions like China’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Xinhua 2012) and the World Health Organization were openly jumbling this tension together with that of “smog” discourse.

Images like figure 8 posit commonalities between smoking and smog, and they notably attribute the woe of elevated PM2.5 levels to gendered social relations.
What about the filters superimposed here, though? What are they communicating? They seem to be more open to viewers’ interpretation. Are the filters, looming large in the middle of the visual, to be read as remedies to PM2.5 exposure? Or are they to be read instead as contributors to a highly gender-coded problem of putrefaction?

Either way, media like this helps us understand, perhaps, why some PRC households, in which tobacco has been materially absent over the years, have also been subject to air-purifier disenchantment. Consider Ms. Liu’s circumstance for one last time in this article. Her husband is an engineering professor who has not smoked since college, and thus did not press her to let him smoke cigarettes anew in their household after they purchased two expensive air purifiers. But that did not prevent her disenchantment with the devices.

**Ms. Liu:** As I said, I was happy with them at first. I believed in them. But they just make me feel like a caged bird now. Am I to just stay home all the time? What solution is that? It just makes me so mad. It just makes me so sad . . . that I have to sit in my home and worry about all the pollution flowing into it. I didn’t make the decision to build all those factories, to sell all those cars. Government officials and their pals did that. They are the ones who have promised us a bright future, but made all our lives so bad. And frankly, I’m now unconvinced purifiers make much of a difference. I have read lots . . . [information] saying that purifiers don’t really help much. That’s another difference between me and my husband—I feel there are so many now—which is kind of strange. (Interview with author, June 2018)

**Prof. Zhang (Ms. Liu’s husband):** We have to do whatever we can to find modern technologies to fix modern problems. We can’t go backward. There are technological solutions for this big problem, I’m sure of it. Important technological solutions will have to be made at the level of all this pollution’s production. Clean, green energy. That’s the future. But until then, this is the best solution. Whatever purifiers and filters everyday people can get access to . . . they should use them. I didn’t wear a face mask before, but I do now. Whatever filters everyday people can get access to . . . they should use them. (Interview with author, July 2018)
Conclusion: Performing Ethics of Otherwiseness

Looking back through the pre-pandemic genealogies outlined in this article, through all the “grey in grey,” I have come to read Ms. Liu and Prof. Zhang’s words as part of a gendered dialogue brewing in the homes of China for some years now. This dialogue has emerged at the interface of intimate spaces of dwelling and broader material and political environments. It has emerged as people, marked by categories of difference—including male/female—have been confronting feverish episodes in longer-term processes of ecological ruin and endangerment, processes generated by large-scale, gender-coded forces of modernity, including industrialization and state developmentalism. Enabling and feeding off these processes have been promises of personal and scientific remediation in the form of the filter. Deploy this filter and you’ll be okay, you’ll be safe, at least in your home. While many across the country have bought in, not everyone has in the same way, nor with the same gusto or fidelity. And some have even been incited to think and feel otherwise.

Such otherwiseness has found expression in a variety of media, including satirical memes, cartoons, and marital discord. It has also popped up here and there in some deliberative art. I conclude here with two examples.

One is Wedding Dress, by Kong Ning. Walking past major national landmarks of Beijing on profoundly smoggy days, Kong wears a white dress (complete with a ten-meter-long train) that she has made out of nearly a thousand face masks (fig. 9). Kong’s work telegraphs a decidedly gendered environmentalism, one casting decision-making that has led to the defiling of skies across the PRC as generated by misguided and mostly male profit seeking (cf. Lora-Wainwright 2017). Hers is an environmentalism born of the most intimate of spaces, marriage and the home, and the most public of spaces, the nation. This is a critique satirizing citizens like Prof. Zhang who are addicted to a fantasy conflating a good and a filtered life, a fantasy built on the promise of technological innovation and remediation. This is an environmentalism mocking filtration technologies as worthy ways for families to keep plowing ahead.

Another example of art as otherwiseness comes from Wen Fang (fig. 10). No longer hiding beyond the anonymity of a mere meme, Wen deploys the cigarette mask to broadcast to a global audience her views regarding “health, air pollution, and climate change.” For her arts consortium, Maskbook, the cigarette mask is more than a symbol of pollution or the folly of filtration. It is also a foundational “canvas for creation,” one of any number of “antipollution masks” anyone can make as a “means of action.” And, rather than be chained to a male/female binary in which its
efforts could be pigeonholed as, say, an “environmentalism for women,” Maskbook describes itself as being “a universal project, inclusive and accessible to all,” a project that has carried out over a hundred “mask-making workshops” in more than twenty countries, a project that has solicited over 2,500 “masked portraits” from participants in over forty nations (Art of Change 21 n.d.).

Kong Ning and Wen Fang are reminders that it is often via creative ventures—inclusive of memes, performance art, videos, and other media—that long-emergent ethics can become newly visible, pulling the eye out of the political haze into an alternative future, into a novel “celebration of life,” as the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2017: 261) has it. Ethics of this sort are a “reflection on the conditions under which living beings and their milieus of becomings can be understood and made otherwise” (261). They are forward-facing ideas and objects that skewer stately filtration fantasies to “enhance oneself and one’s fellow life forms” (261).

Matthew Kohrman’s research and writing bring anthropological methods to bear on the ways health, culture, and politics are interrelated. Focusing on the People’s Republic of China, he engages various intellectual terrains, such as governmentality, gender theory, political economy, critical science studies, narrativity, and embodiment.
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