China 1936: Another Terror Governed by the Mask and its Absence

Thanks to the Fairbank Center and Harvard China Fund emergency funding, I was able to stay in Cambridge for dissertation research. In the past summer, I finished a paper titled “Poison Gas as a Medium: An Ecological Approach to Vernacular Modernism in 1930s China,” which is part of my dissertation project on ecological imaginations in wartime Chinese modernist literature and arts. In the process of conducting this research, I could not help but notice the eerie resemblance between the historical period I study and the time we currently live in – that they are both haunted by the terror governed by the mask and its absence. This report will focus on the image of gas mask in the particular year of 1936, a liminal historical moment on the eve of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

The employment of poison gas holds special significance for modern warfare in the 20th century, when a German gas regiment launched the first, large-scale operation using chlorine gas against French-Canadian troops during World War I in 1915. In response to the traumatic impact of chemical warfare in World War I, the 1925 Geneva Protocol banned the wartime use of chemical weapons. However, developed countries including Japan continued to produce chemical weapons, which received attention in the Chinese media and generated nationwide panic about the underdevelopment of chemical industry in China as Sino-Japanese conflicts escalated in the 1930s. Their fear later proved to be valid. The historian Walter E. Grunden points out that during World War II while Japan prohibited the use of chemical weapons in the battles against Allied troops, they permitted it in more than 2000 instances in China because the Chinese army did not have the capacity to retaliate in kind. (Grunden, 2017) However, before 1937 when the Japanese army started to employ chemical weapons in Chinese battlefields, the anxieties over an impending chemical warfare were often mediated through journalistic and
artistic representations from World War I Europe. My research shows how popular science media in this liminal historical moment engaged and transformed foreign representations of chemical warfare and creatively responded to its terror. Paradoxically, this unfamiliar terror of the poisoned air is often embodied by the alienating image of gas mask, a protective device. This paradox is reminiscent of the mixed reception of face masks at the beginning of the pandemic in the U.S, which even included attacks against Asian people wearing masks. The speculations of chemical warfare in 1930s China were characterized by a similar uncertainty and ambiguity in popular discourse.

In 1936, a reader who opened the July issue of *The Scientific World* (科學世界), a popular science magazine based in Nanjing, would be struck by a photomontage titled “Virgin Mary from the Future” (未來的聖母) on its first page. The photograph of a woman holding a baby, both wearing gas masks covering the entirety of their faces, is superimposed onto a more conventional portrait of Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. The Christian imagery seems to imply at the European origin of gas warfare during the first world war, ironically linking together the “gospel” of modernity from the West and its disastrous echoes. This photomontage is also a montage of multiple temporalities: the fresh memory of World War I and a grim imminent future of another world war are conjured through the modern medium of photography; the traumatic memories and prospects of modernity are in turn contrasted with an idyllic remote past preserved via a traditional medium. The caption of the photomontage says, “[this image] predicts that during a great war, even the newborns on the home front have to wear gas masks.” Here, the imagination of a possible future is not unlike evoking a recurrent nightmare.
In the same year, *Life Weekly* published a cartoon titled “Gas masks have transformed human beings,” (毒氣罩改造了人類) in which everyone, including those in the family portraits, is wearing a gas mask. The image is both comic and bizarre due to the alienating effect of gas masks. These masks replace the individual identities of human figures with a shared precarity under the modern terror from the air. The Russian German writer Fyodor Stepun, who first served in a Siberian regiment in World War I and later became an army commissar, recollects that in a gas poison attack, he experienced “the terrible unrecognizability of all the people all around, the loneliness of an accursed, tragic masquerade: white rubber skulls, quadratic glass eyes, long green snouts.” (Stepun 1963, 318–19) In *Death of a Hero*, Aldington also compares the looks of soldiers wearing gas masks to “lost souls expiating some horrible sin in a new Inferno.” (Aldington 2013, 279) 1930s popular science artists and writers in China, on the other hand, never saw a gas mask during trench warfare. Instead of associating the gas mask with death, they speculated how the
terror of poison gas would penetrate and transform everyday life and envisioned the distancing effect of the gas mask in a mundane setting.

Figure 2. “Gas Masks have Transformed Human Beings.” (*Life Weekly*, 1936, Volume 1 Issue 12: 5)

Compared to the two disturbing images above, the science fiction story “An Air Defense Exercise” (防空演習) by Li Xiufeng (李秀峰) published in the same year presents a more realistic vision of national defense against chemical weapon attacks. The story revolves around a boy’s inquiries into an imaginary air defense exercise. The boy’s name is Guochou, literally meaning “national enmity.” Guochou’s father is a teacher at a school of air defense, while his sister (named “Guozhen,” national treasure) participated in the exercise as a nurse rescuing gassed patients. Through dialogues between Guochou, Guozhen, and their parents, the story introduces weapons and strategies used in chemical warfare and air raids, highlighting the significance of national defense efforts joined by civilians. As implied by the protagonist’s name, the story not only prepares the audience for modern warfare with a rehearsal on paper, but also establishes an example of affective mobilization that links familial bonding with national salvation. The prospect of national salvation, however, is not all optimistic. Coming back from the exercise, Guozhen
complains about the inaccessibility of gas masks in Shanghai. Her mother can only comfort her by saying that they will have to wait until mass production of gas masks is made possible in China through the joint efforts of public and private research institutes and chemical factories. It is noteworthy that the story is accompanied by journalistic photos from World War I Europe and contemporary Japan where children equipped with advanced gas masks are seen in military exercises. The contrast between the story and its illustrations suggests the bleak reality of China’s backwardness in the chemical weapons arms race with Japan, manifesting senses of inferiority and emergency in the face of a national crisis.

Figure 3. An illustration of “An Air Defense Exercise”: “An Military Exercise for Children in Japan” *(The Scientific World, 1936, Volume 5 Issue 2-3: 282)*

The image of gas mask can be also found in educational and propaganda films. In 1936, Sun Mingjing (孫明京) made a film called *Defense against Poison Gas* (防毒), which was funded by the department of air defense of the temporary government in Chongqing. In this film, the filmmaker himself demonstrates to a group of children how to wear a gas mask and how to make
a makeshift version of a mask. According to Sun, he recruited children actors in order to balance out the intimidating effect of the gas mask. The film traveled to more than 30 places across China, from Shanghai to Chongqing, from Shanxi Province to Guangdong Province, and was warmly welcomed by its local audiences. Like Li’s story, *Defense against Poison Gas* not only informs the popular audience with basic knowledge of chemical warfare, but also channels the anxieties of the intellectuals: at the end of the film, it warns the audience of the danger of being left at the mercy of foreign powers if they do not join in developing China’s science and technology.

![Figure 5. Sun Mingjing demonstrates how to wear a gas mask, *Defense against Poison Gas*, 1936.](image)

Of course, nowadays the threat of chemical warfare has long gone. While old fashioned geopolitical conflicts continue to haunt the world, divisions and destructions are taking new forms and posing new challenges to humanity as a whole, including the racism we have witnessed during the pandemic. As I am writing now in December, mask wearing has long become a social norm in our daily lives. What can we learn from masks? They are meant for protection, yet also invite hostility. They make us individually less identifiable while redefining us by our shared corporeality vulnerable to poison gas, pollution, and virus. It is our decision now to see the mask as a marker of alterity that distinguishes “us” from “them,” or to see it as a symbol of new empathy that is called for by the “new normal.”