

Social Justice Watch 0321

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你就是你。节日快乐！ [DIANLIN](#)



Ryan Knight @ProudResister



Masculinity is not under attack.
Masculinity is being redefined to not include harassing women or bullying people who are different than you.
Masculinity is being expanded to a more loving space and if you can't handle that then you deserve to be left in the past with your hate.

I'm pro-CHOICE.

That means, **if you want or need an abortion**, I support your decision.

If you **choose adoption**, I support your decision. If you want to **give birth and parent**, I support your decision.

CHOICE looks different for everyone — and everyone **deserves the freedom to decide** for themselves.





Siddharth

@DearthOfSid



Men whine about "feminazis" essentially because equality feels like oppression to the oppressor. They define a "moderate" and an "extremist" feminist to discourage women from identifying as feminists. The "moderate" feminist has to disown the word and prove she doesn't hate men.

1:58 AM · 01 Nov 19 · [Twitter for Android](#)



Jeppe Mulich

@jmulich



Friendly reminder that it's possible to be critical of China's initial coverup of COVID-19 and of the west's inadequate response to the virus at the same time. You don't have to choose one.

[游泳健将女士](#)

“你给足球运动员每个月100万欧元，给科研人员每个月1800欧元，现在你跟科研人员要治疗办法？去找C罗或者梅西找解药……”——西班牙生物学研究学者

.....

这姐牛 🐄🐄🐄

A Spanish biological researcher: You give the footballer one million euros a month and a biological researcher 1,800 euros. You are looking for a treatment now. Go to Cristiano Ronaldo or Messi and they will find you a cure.



头条 @再读十年书

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消息精选

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The assumption that boys are more likely to be adept at math and science than girls has no foundation in the brain, according to a new study. It is the first to look at human neurobiology to try and understand whether supposed gender differences in mathematical ability are grounded in biology.

[Read Full Article](#)

Inverse

A tired stereotype about men and women's brains has been debunked
No, the sexes are not hard-wired to process mathematical information differently, scientists say.

youtu.be/qbnt6nlskcQ

YouTube

再见， 我的新郎_Bridegroom.mp4

<https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/dd0d3b15-ffb2-43f5-9cf9-18168bb6ab0d/mother-of-the-unborn>

www.idfa.nl

Mother of the Unborn | IDFA

Nadine Salib -

2014 -

In Hanan's opinion, "The best thing in the world is God giving you a baby and a kind husband." She has the kind husband, but not yet the baby. This Egyptian woman has been trying to become a mother for 12 years...

<https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/d058d9d9-b3a9-4948-a190-88f53781bef9/red-wedding>

www.idfa.nl

Red Wedding | IDFA

Lida Chan, Guillaume Suon -

2012 -

The exact numbers are unclear, but it is believed that the Khmer Rouge's regime of terror (1975-1979) caused the death of at least 1.7 million Cambodians - almost one-third of the country's population....

<https://www.idfa.nl/en/film/1a883707-48df-4434-a5f5-f0a9e3b57691/slaves-an-animated-documentary>

www.idfa.nl

Slaves - An Animated Documentary | IDFA

Hanna Heilborn, David Aronowitsch -

2008 -

The conversations with two freed children from southern Sudan, who were kidnapped by a government-supported militia and forced into slavery, were recorded on audio in a documentary fashion....

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-when-pride-came-to-town-2018-online>

BFI Player

Watch When Pride Came To Town - BFI Player

After leaving his rural hometown to escape homophobia, Bjørn-Tore returns decades later to participate in its first Pride parade.

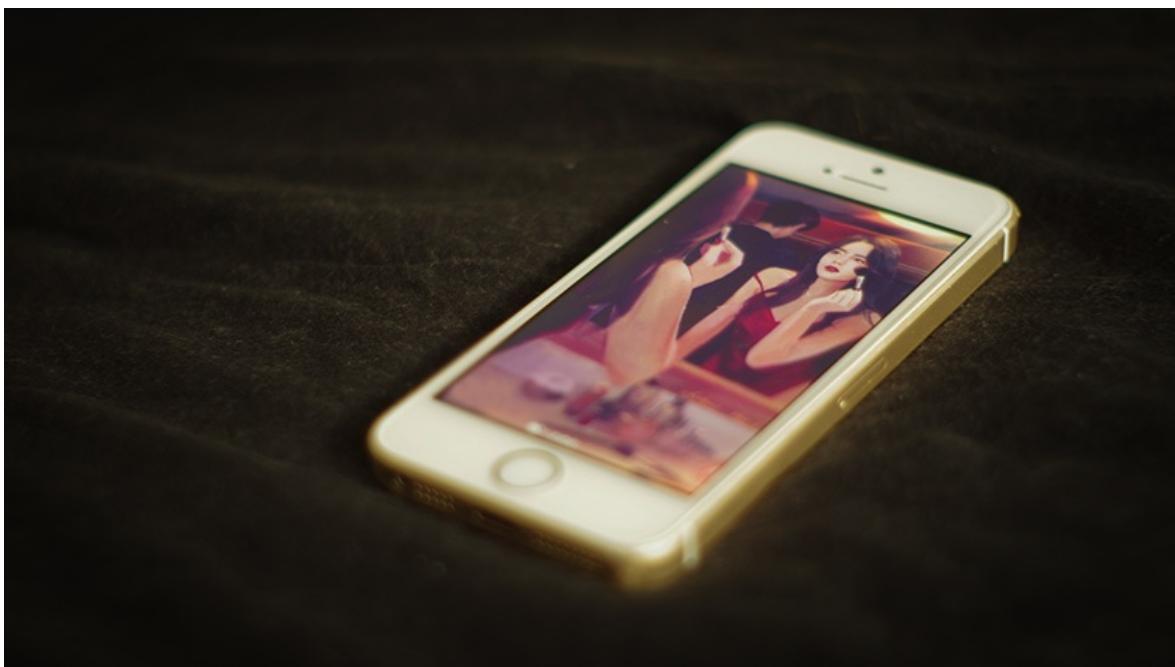
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Fan-Fiction Site Blocked in China After Celeb's Stans Complain

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A Hugo Award-winning fan-fiction website has been banned in China after a celebrity's fans complained, en masse, about its alleged "poronographic content."

Archive of Our Own (AO3), a popular platform for user-generated art and writing, was no longer accessible on the Chinese mainland Saturday. According to domestic media, AO3 was taken offline after fans of 28-year-old celebrity actor Xiao Zhan reported the website to the authorities after they became aware of a novel series published on the platform that portrayed their idol as a trans woman pursuing a romantic relationship with a male high school student.



Created in 2008 by the Organization for Transformative Works, AO3 is a nonprofit open-source repository for fan fiction with a large and active Chinese community. In a statement Saturday night, OTW said it had received inquiries from users on the Chinese mainland who were no longer able to access the site.

“It seems to be due to a disconnection from the (telecom) supplier when the local networks attempt to connect to the overseas network,” the statement said. “We don’t know if this is due to a temporary, unplanned outage of supplier services or a long-term access restriction. Since the connection problem is not caused by the AO3 server, we have no way to resolve it.”

OTW also tweeted Sunday that “Unfortunately, the Archive of Our Own is currently inaccessible in China. We’ve investigated, and it is not due to anything on our end.”

Unfortunately, the Archive of Our Own is currently inaccessible in China. We've investigated, and it is not due to anything on our end. We're keeping Chinese users updated on our Weibo: <https://t.co/B4r3IEj0fU>— AO3 Status (@AO3_Status) February 29, 2020

The web novel series at the heart of the controversy — “Xiazhui” — is an unofficial spinoff of the popular Chinese drama “The Untamed,” starring Xiao and pop star Wang Yibo. The drama was itself adapted from a queer online romance novel.

Despite the LGBT origins of “The Untamed,” the salacious storyline of its literary spinoff appears to have been too much for some to stomach. Last week, fans of the show organized an online campaign to protest the novel series and AO3, saying the stories had defamed their idol and asking people to report both the content and its hosting platform to China’s internet regulators.

The campaign and the ultimate blocking of the website on Saturday have outraged AO3 users as well as those who believe that the existence of writing and other creative content should not hinge on universal approval. Many AO3 users announced they would boycott the actor, Xiao, demanding that brands endorsed by him cancel their agreements and leaving scathing reviews for Xiao’s shows on the IMDb-like platform Douban.

On Sunday, one of the fans who initiated the campaign against AO3 raised the white flag, apologizing for the “terrible impact of my irrationality.” Xiao’s fan group, meanwhile, also apologized for “not acting in a timely manner to stop, guide, and speak out about some fans’ extreme remarks.”

The same day, Xiao’s agency issued an apology, saying it had noticed “the recent controversy about Xiao’s fans” and calling for everyone to “stan

celebrities rationally.”

To understand the online fervor, it’s important to remember that many fans feel responsible for their idols’ reputations, according to Zheng Xiqing, an assistant researcher with the Institute of Literature under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Many fan circles feel that they have to assert their existence and sense of purpose through ‘fighting.’

- **Zheng Xiqing, assistant researcher**

“Many fan circles feel that they have to assert their existence and sense of purpose through ‘fighting’,” said Zheng, who studies fan culture. But the fundamental reason for the tiff between the AO3 supporters and Xiao stans has more to do with reporting mechanisms in China, she told Sixth Tone.

“Why did so many people file complaints?” Zheng said. “People do it because it works — otherwise no one would bother.”

The genres of real-person fiction and queer romance have born witness to the effectiveness of these reporting mechanisms. In late 2018, a court in the eastern Anhui province sentenced an author of gay erotica to 10½ years in prison for “producing, selling, or disseminating pornographic materials.” And last May, a court in the central city of Wuhan fined another writer of queer romance novels 120,000 yuan (then around \$17,500) and sentenced her to four years in prison for “illegal business operations.”

According to Zheng, AO3 is the first nonprofit website to be founded by fans, for fans — many of whom migrated to the site after another popular platform for user-generated writing, LiveJournal, started strictly policing content. “There are no taboos on AO3,” she said, as long as writers tag their posts with warnings and don’t cross a few bottom lines.

The website has policies on tags, ratings, and warnings. The author of “Xiazhui” — the novel series that sparked the flood of complaints against AO3 — had marked her work as intended for mature audiences and included the content tag “underage.”



Many readers who thought of AO3 as a sort of online comfort zone say its sudden disappearance is akin to the destruction of their spiritual home.

Zheng, who has been reading stories on AO3 since 2011, says she would check the website every night before bed. “It’s a kind of psychological comfort, a way of life,” she said.

For these teenagers, reporting content may be just like completing homework assigned by other, more influential fans.

- Li Ying, AO3 reader

Li Ying, a Shanghai-based AO3 reader, has been following fan culture and queer romance novels for over a decade. The 31-year-old told Sixth Tone that she and some fellow readers were worried that the website would be blocked after Xiao Zhan’s fans organized their complaint campaign.

“I think the reporting mechanism is getting easier and easier now — it has become so simple that people don’t even think they’re filing a complaint,” Li

said. “For these teenagers, it may be just like completing homework assigned by other, more influential fans. It’s like they need to contribute in order to claim digital victory for their idols every day.”

Many online seem to share this sentiment, while stressing that the increasingly common phenomenon of reporting anything one dislikes and wishes to have stricken from cyberspace isn’t constructive.

“Why are you people reprimanding those who file complaints? Because you’re not aware that your criticism has no legal basis — the only reason is you have a different point of view,” one user wrote on microblogging platform Weibo. “You don’t understand that creative content deserves freedom, and that other views can coexist on the internet. Instead, you’re just trying to destroy all the content you disagree with.”

Editor: David Paulk.

(Header image: Sixth Tone)

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How to argue with a racist

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Racism can be debunked with facts and science

Stereotypes and myths about race abound, but this does not make them true. Often, these are not even expressed by overt racists.

For many well-intentioned people, experience and cultural history has steered them towards views that aren't supported by human genetics. For example: the assumption that East Asian students are inherently better at maths, black people have natural rhythm, or Jews are good with money. Many of us know someone who thinks along these lines.

Dr Adam Rutherford, a geneticist and BBC presenter, says "Racism is being expressed in public more openly today than at any time I can recall, and it's our duty to contest it with facts."

Here's how to debunk five racist myths with science and facts.

MYTH 1: The DNA of white and black people is completely different



FACT: All humans share almost all of their DNA

The primary pigment in human skin is melanin. It's used to protect us from the sun.

It absorbs the sun's ultra violet rays before they can destroy folate, one of the body's key vitamins.

Many genes are involved in the biochemical pathways that result in melanin production. Natural variation within these genes is the root cause of the spectrum of skin tones that humans have.

So, the biggest genetic difference within the human race is between white people and black people, right? Wrong.

Firstly, all humans share almost all the same DNA - a fact that betrays all of our recent origins from Africa.

Secondly, there is more genetic diversity on the continent of Africa than in the rest of the world put together.

Two people from different tribes in Southern Africa will be more genetically different from each other than a Sri Lankan, a Māori and a Russian.

We might categorise people as white, black or brown, but these visual variations don't accurately reflect the genetic differences - or rather similarities - between us.

MYTH 2: There is such a thing as 'racial purity'



FACT: "Racial purity is pure fantasy"

We think of certain areas, lands or peoples as being isolated - either physically or culturally - and these boundaries as being insurmountable.

But this is neither what history, nor genetics, tell us. In fact, no nation is static.

"People have moved around the world throughout history, and had sex whenever and wherever they could," says Dr Rutherford.

Sometimes these are big moves in short times.

More often, people are largely static over a few generations - and that can feel like a geographical and cultural anchor.

"Nevertheless, every Nazi has Jewish ancestors" says Dr Rutherford, "Every white supremacist has Middle Eastern ancestors. Every racist has African, Indian, East Asian ancestors, as well as everyone else."

"Racial purity is pure fantasy. For humans, there are no pure bloods. Only mongrels enriched by the blood of multitudes," he says.

MYTH 3: 'Germany for the Germans', 'Turkey for the Turks' (and other variations)



A 1972 protest in the UK calling for an end to immigration

Some people experience a lot of angst about migrants and refugees coming to their country, a phenomenon that has been experienced in many places around the world of late.

Among recent examples, the shooting rampage last month that started in a shisha bar in Hanau, Germany, was motivated by a far-right doctrine to expel or murder immigrants.

Those on the far right have long expressed anger in the form of epithets: "Germany for the Germans", "France for the French", "Turkey for the Turks" and "Italy for Italians" have all been used as anti-immigration phrases by far-right groups.

"Go back to where you came from" is an offensive phrase that resonates all over the world.

In truth, countries like Germany, France, Turkey and Italy have had immigration throughout their history. In fact, just about everywhere has.

The British Isles, for instance, have become home to migrants since they separated from the continent around 7,500 years ago.

Before the French took over in 1066, that part of the world had been invaded by Vikings, Angles, Saxons, Huns, and dozens of other smaller tribes and clans.

And even before that, the Romans ruled, which in their turn came from all over

the intercontinental empire, which reached as far as sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

Earlier still, around 4,500 years ago Britain was populated primarily by farmers, who had migrated from Europe across what was continuous terrain between the Netherlands and East Anglia.

On the basis of DNA evidence, we think they may have been olive skinned, with dark hair and brown eyes.

And before them there were hunter-gatherers, who had even darker skin.

So, when political parties or even racists say: "France for the French", or "Italy for the Italians" and talk about "indigenous" people... who do they actually mean?

MYTH 4: A genealogy test can prove someone is 100% white



You carry DNA from only half of your ancestors dating eleven generations back

Genealogy and ancestry fascinate us - and racists in particular.

Websites like Stormfront are frequented by white nationalist, white supremacist, and anti-Semitic members who forward theories for Holocaust-denial and are obsessed with population genetics.

They use mainstream genealogy tests, like those offered by Ancestry DNA, to "prove" they are 100% white or non-Jewish.

However, the logic is flawed.

DNA can tell you some interesting things about family history - and it's very useful for identifying close family like lost siblings or biological parents - but its powers are profoundly limited by fundamental biology.

Over time, descendants start to shed the DNA of their actual ancestors, and the amount that vanishes builds up over the generations to be huge..

You carry DNA from only half of your ancestors dating eleven generations back. So it is possible that you are genetically unrelated to people you are actually descended from as recently as the 18th Century.

"You are descended from multitudes, from all around the world, from people you think you know and from more you know nothing about," says Dr Rutherford, "You will have no meaningful genetic link to many of them."

5. Black people are better at running than white people



Usain Bolt's apparent easy wins seemed to fuel this erroneous idea

The last white man to compete in a 100m final at the Olympics was in 1980.

Since then, black athletes have dominated the modern era of sprinting. This has fuelled a commonly held belief that people of African descent have an advantage at the sport because of their genetic ancestry.

"Maybe there are probabilistic predictions one could make about ethnicity and sporting success based on genetics," says Dr Rutherford, "but they would be weak at best."

In actual fact, the genetics of sporting success are wickedly complex.

There are a myriad of factors in physiology of physicality, including the size of your heart, the efficiency with which you absorb oxygen, and muscular recovery, says Rutherford.

And these are relatively well understood phenomena which do have a genetic basis. But there are other physical traits (such as flexibility and co-ordination) which are less well understood.

On top of that, there's the psychological dimension: determination, concentration, and risk-taking, for example.

We do know that people who are good at explosive-energy sports tend to have a higher proportion of "fast-twitch" muscle cells, that process energy more quickly.

The genetics that underlie this involve a gene called ACTN3.

Studies have shown that elite athletes in power and strength sports are more likely to have copies of the R-type of ACTN3. The research indicates the gene occurs in a higher proportion of African Americans (96%) compared to white Americans (80%).

That does give a slight, population-wide advantage to African Americans to take place in explosive-energy sports - but it doesn't come anywhere close to explaining the difference between the number of African American sprinters and white competitors.

If it just came down to that gene, you might expect to see six black elite sprinters for every five white runners.

Adam says this is a simplistic analysis, but still a good example of how genetics don't align with racial stereotypes in sports.

This piece has been adapted from the BBC radio programme How to argue with a racist, and presented by Dr Adam Rutherford .

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It's Time To Stop Tokenizing Female Medical Staff

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Zhang Bo is an editor at Sixth Tone.

There are currently more than 100,000 female medical professionals working in the central province of Hubei, the heart of the country's COVID-19 epidemic. Together, they account for more than half of the province's health care workers and 90% of its nurses.

In other words, women have made huge contributions to the battle against COVID-19, which has sickened 81,000 and killed 3,200 in the country as of March 16, including dozens of medical workers. Unsurprisingly, their heart-wrenching stories have been covered widely in domestic media, often powerfully. Yet several efforts to valorize female medical workers by the country's "mainstream" media — a constellation of largely state-backed outlets uniquely well-positioned to set the public agenda — have fallen flat, arousing public ire for their reliance on outdated tropes like female suffering or extreme collectivist self-sacrifice.

In one widely criticized example, female hospital workers in the northwestern province of Gansu were filmed crying as they had their heads shaved. In other

cases, outlets came under fire after publishing profiles of women who stayed at their posts despite being eight or even nine months pregnant, or who returned to work less than two weeks after a miscarriage. Taken together, they suggest a growing gap between the values of some hidebound mainstream outlets and the audiences they purport to reach.



China isn't the only country where heroism is repackaged into patriotic content. In times of crisis or difficulty, these stories bring people together, steady popular sentiment, and drum up feelings of national pride or unity. Well-known examples in China range from socialist oiler Wang Jinxi in the 1960s to teachers who died protecting their students during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

This time, the narrative appears to have misfired. While the above-mentioned reports ostensibly shower women with praise, critics have expressed frustration, even anger, with the way they appropriate the female body and repackage women's sacrifices into overarching narratives of national glory — even as

hospital leaders, local institutions, and others ignore or minimize women's everyday needs.

Critics have expressed frustration, even anger, with the way they appropriate the female body and repackage women's sacrifices into overarching narratives of national glory.

- **Zhang Bo, editor**

This shift in public attitudes can partly be traced to a growing awareness among Chinese, and especially young Chinese, of gender issues. Many quickly realized that mainstream reports were blind to the intelligence and skills of the women they profiled while appropriating their bodies to rouse audiences into compassion and action.

Although women have made great strides in modern China, both inside and outside the home, many continue to struggle with stereotypical portrayals of their bodies in media, as well as with their status as the “second sex.” Some outlets in particular fall into the trap of focusing on what makes women different from the male “default” — their physical appearances, their reproductive organs, their roles as mothers — instead of treating them as fully formed individuals.

Just because women’s bodies are celebrated doesn’t always mean they’re appreciated. Female frontline workers have seen many of their needs go unmet. Feminine hygiene products, for example, have been treated as less of a priority, even overlooked altogether, by those in charge of collecting and allocating material aid. Even when some charities expressed a willingness to donate menstrual pads, they were flat-out rejected by male hospital managers.

And in a country where “menstruation” is still considered a dirty word, even paeans to female sacrifice generally steer clear of the subject: In an interview with state broadcaster China Central Television, a nurse at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, near the center of the outbreak, spoke at length about the physical toll of caring for patients. In the process, she mentioned she was on her period.



A screenshot from a CCTV interview with a nurse at Jinyintan Hospital. From @老梅梅梅 on Weibo

“I’m on my period, and I’m having abdominal pains,” she noted. When the segment was later rebroadcast, that particular remark had been edited out.

It’s not all bad news. A number of civilian volunteers and feminine product companies began organizing donation drives since early February, and more regions, including Shanghai and the southwestern province of Guizhou, have begun providing hygiene products to female medical staff. Yet in a still male-dominated society, it’s all too easy for the men making the decisions — the above-mentioned hospital leaders, for example — to mistake their perspectives as universal, while neglecting the legitimate needs of others.

It’s also important to remember that the decision to make a sacrifice should be voluntary, not mandatory. True sacrifice requires an individual to deeply understand the value of their life and the potential risks involved in their actions, and to nevertheless willingly choose to take the risk in question.

The irony is, there’s no need for the media to fabricate drama about women being forced to choose between their lives, families, or bodies and their sense of duty.

- Zhang Bo, editor

That means they cannot have been pressured into doing so. At least until the 1990s, the ideal of collectivist self-sacrifice — unconditionally giving one's life for the greater good — dominated Chinese mainstream discourse. Now, however, we are more likely to question whether the people involved truly had a choice and whether their rational interests were protected.

The nine-months-pregnant nurse; mothers being forced to give up breastfeeding their kids; a woman who returned to work 10 days after her miscarriage — whereas older generations might have unquestioningly accepted these as instances of heroism, young Chinese see individual lives being trivialized. Their selfless contributions and efforts are meant to save people — but why must one life be sacrificed for another?

The irony is, there's no need for the media to fabricate drama about women being forced to choose between their lives, families, or bodies and their sense of duty. All frontline workers — men and women alike — have done more than enough to earn our respect and gratitude. People are already rooting for them to return home safely.

Some seem to grasp this better than others. Much of the media's coverage has been professional, even extraordinary. Last month, the market-oriented Southern Metropolis Daily newspaper was widely praised for its series of close-up portraits of frontline doctors and nurses. By not limiting their focus to men or women, the paper's photographers were free to concentrate on the struggles and scars shared by all frontline health care workers: the bags under their eyes and the deep lines left by days of wearing surgical masks. It felt human rather than inflammatory, but was inspiring all the same.



Southern Metropolis Daily's series of close-up portraits of frontline doctors and nurses, published Feb. 14, 2020. Zhong Ruijun/Southern Metropolis Daily

I'm not suggesting we don't honor or report on people who are saving lives. Every country creates its own heroes. At this critical moment, however, frontline medical staff need reinforcements and material support, not exaggerated flattery. Instead of trying to canonize them or turn them into comic book superheroes, we should start by improving their working conditions and guaranteeing their basic rights and needs.

Over the past two months, Chinese audiences have repeatedly shown they care for and respect the individual will and authentic humanity of the people they choose to lionize. That's a remarkable development, and I believe it heralds a bright future for society.

Translator: Katherine Tse; editor: Kilian O'Donnell.

(Header image: A nurse attends to welts caused by extended periods of surgical mask wear in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, Feb. 13, 2020. Wan Xiang/Xinhua)

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The Peace Corps Breaks Ties with China

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On the morning of January 17th, shortly before I was scheduled to meet with a hundred and forty Peace Corps volunteers in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, there was an unexpected announcement that the China program was ending. The Peace Corps had first come to the country in 1993, and as a volunteer from the early years I had been asked to speak at an in-service training that the organization was holding in a hotel near where I live. But by the time I arrived nobody was in the mood for nostalgia. The American volunteers, most of whom were in their twenties, looked stunned; some were red-eyed from crying. At the back of the room, more than a dozen Chinese staff members stood with stoic expressions. They had given up some benefits of the Chinese system in order to work for the American agency. From the ceiling, somebody had hung a red propaganda-style banner, which proved that Americans could make their slogans every bit as tone-deaf as the ones in the People's Republic. The banner said "Welcome to IST 2020: Be the Tree You Wish to See in the World."

An American staff member greeted me with a pained look. She said something to the effect that the tree she wished to have seen was a tactful announcement, but Senators Marco Rubio and Rick Scott, of Florida, had declared the closure of the China program on Twitter. "Rubio and Rick Scott wanted to take credit for it," she said angrily.

The Peace Corps has sent more than thirteen hundred volunteers to China, and the agency, which is now active in sixty countries, has always been viewed as removed from political spats. The U.S. had never ended a Peace Corps program because of a diplomatic conflict, but the timing of the decision about China seemed suspicious. The coronavirus had yet to come to widespread attention, and the Senators, who had previously expressed doubts about a Chinese trade deal, tweeted the day after President Trump signed a Phase 1 economic agreement with China.

“For too long, Beijing has fooled organizations such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization,” Rubio wrote. Scott chimed in: “I’m glad the Peace Corps has finally come to its senses and sees Communist China for what it is: the second largest economy in the world and an adversary of the United States.”

Chinese hard-liners also celebrated. In *Guanchazhe*, a conservative publication, a columnist named Pan Gongyu published a commentary, “Farewell, Peace Corps in China, We Won’t See You Off.” The title echoed “Farewell, Leighton Stuart!,” a famous essay that Mao Zedong wrote in August, 1949. That month, the U.S. State Department had issued a white paper that, in more than a thousand tortured pages, tried to explain how America had “lost” China to Mao’s revolutionaries: “This is a frank record of an extremely complicated and most unhappy period in the life of a great country to which the United States has long been attached by ties of closest friendship.”

In his essay, Mao derided American democracy as “another name for the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,” and he celebrated the departure of John Leighton Stuart, the last U.S. Ambassador to China under the Kuomintang government. For years, the isolationist essay was part of the school curriculum, and many Chinese people recognize the ending: “Leighton Stuart has departed and the White Paper has arrived, very good, very good. Both events are worth celebrating.”

In *Guanchazhe*, Pan described the Peace Corps’s “ideological and cultural export” as another chapter in American failure: “After twenty-seven years in China, the U.S. diplomatic offices intended to ‘raise wolves,’ but ended up with a litter of huskies.” He concluded, “The Peace Corps has departed and the U.S.-China Trade Agreement is here, very good, very good. Both events are worth celebrating.”

In the fall of 1996, the Peace Corps sent me to teach English to college students in Fuling, a remote city on the Yangtze River. I was twenty-seven years old, and I was joined by another volunteer, Adam Meier, who was twenty-two. Not long after we arrived, a student named Richard submitted an essay to my writing class titled “Why Americans Are So Casual.” Richard was skinny, shy, and bespectacled. He had grown up in Fuling, and most of his classmates came from the Sichuanese countryside. At the time, China’s population was more than seventy per cent rural, and only eight per cent of students went to college. Adam and I were the first Americans to live in Fuling since the Revolution. In his essay, Richard wrote, in English:

Our foreign language teachers—Peter and Adam—came to teach us this term. It provides a good opportunity of understanding the American way of life. In my opinion, they are more casual than Chinese people. Why do I think so? I’ll give you some facts to explain this.

We were part of a Peace Corps cohort known as China 3. The agency’s groups have always been numbered, perhaps because it implies a sense of mission. The Peace Corps was founded by President John F. Kennedy, in 1961—the year of Saturn 1 and Sputnik 9. In the same way that the Apollo rockets went up in sequence, each Peace Corps cohort was intended to travel to a distant land, build on the work of its predecessors, then return home. And, just like the rockets, the Peace Corps was a Cold War endeavor. It was inspired by “The Ugly American,” a 1958 novel that warned readers that the Soviets were doing a better job of grassroots work in the developing world. The Peace Corps had three goals: to provide useful assistance to “interested countries,” to improve understanding of the United States, and to help Americans understand the rest of the world.

By the time I joined, relatively few volunteers were aware of these Cold War roots. Time had moved on, or maybe it had stopped—this was the era of “The End of History and the Last Man,” the 1992 book by Francis Fukuyama, who declared the triumph of Western liberal democracy. In 1996, the Peace Corps was sending volunteers to Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, and other former Soviet-bloc states that had supposedly transitioned to democracy. China was the only Communist country that accepted volunteers.

Deng Xiaoping had welcomed the Peace Corps as part of his Reform and Opening strategy, but some Chinese officials weren’t convinced that Americans

should be working in remote places like Fuling. They referred to the program by a euphemism—Meizhong Youhao Zhiyuanzhe, or “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers”—because the Chinese translation of “Peace Corps” had been tainted by years of Maoist propaganda. The first three cohorts were small, which made it easier for the government to track us. The curiosity of locals was even more intense. Richard’s essay continued:



"Can you come look under my bed? It seems like a complete waste of storage space."

For example, when Mr. Hessler is having class, he can scratch himself casually without paying attention to what others may say. He dresses up casually, usually with his belt dropping and dangling. But, to tell you the truth, it isn't considered a good manner in China, especially in old people's eyes.

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China 3 consisted of fourteen volunteers, and, before joining, none of us had taken a single class in Chinese language, history, politics, or culture. In those days, Peace Corps applicants didn't choose their destinations. All the China 3 volunteers were white, and had almost no experience in the developing world; one, from Mississippi, had never been on an airplane before. The majority came from the Midwest or the South—Adam was from Wisconsin, and I was a Missourian. For many of us, the Peace Corps represented an inexpensive way to go abroad.

Our students were majoring in English, another project of Reform and Opening.

China was expanding compulsory English education, which created new demand for instructors; after graduation, our students would be assigned to teach in middle and high schools. But their concept of the outside world remained abstract. They had no Internet access, and the Communist Party published all their texts, including a cultural-studies book called “Survey of Britain and America.” A chapter about American history began, naturally enough, with China: “The Indians living in America originated from Asia some 25,000 years ago.” After listing some key details about the European discovery of the New World—“it also opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie”—the text proceeded to the founding of the United States. (“The Constitution of 1787 established the dictatorship of the American bourgeoisie.”) A section about contemporary society claimed that nowadays most New Englanders work in factories. (“They are good at making watches and clocks.”) There was some useful information about American slang. (“For example, ‘draw one’ or ‘shoot one’ means ‘pour a cup of coffee.’ ”) Chapter 4 covered “Social Problems”:

Homosexuality is a rather strange social phenomenon that most people can hardly understand. It widely spreads. One reason for this may be the despair in marriage or love affairs.

The chapter concluded by explaining the primary cause of homosexuality and other social problems:

The most important reason is the capitalist system of America. In this capitalist society, although science and technology is highly advanced, some people are suffering from spiritual hollowness. Thus they start to look for things curious and exciting.

In part to keep the students as far as possible from “Survey of Britain and America,” Adam and I used whatever we could find as teaching materials. We brought photographs of family to class, and we made copies of articles from American magazines. When we received our absentee ballots for the 1996 Presidential election, Adam and I each gave a lecture on the U.S. political system to a section of senior students. At the end, we took out the ballots, allowed the students to inspect them, and voted.

The students became very quiet when I handed them my ballot. We were in a small, unheated room, packed with more than forty simple wooden desks. One by one, the students examined the piece of paper. By the time I retrieved the

ballot and voted for Bill Clinton, the room was so silent, and they were watching with such intensity, that my heart was racing. Not long afterward, a Peace Corps staffer in Chengdu reported that college officials had called and weren't happy about what Adam and I had done. But the college left it at that—such communication was often indirect.

The people who were farthest away seemed the most likely to perceive a threat. Students were thrilled, whereas our Chinese colleagues were curious but guarded. College administrators were warier, but even they were proud to have foreigners on campus. Opponents of the program tended to be at the Chinese provincial or national level.

The American reaction was the opposite. Recently, I talked with William Speidel, a Sinologist who served as the first Peace Corps China director, and he remembered the attitude of State Department officials. "They were overjoyed," he said. "The idea that Peace Corps had a foothold in quote-unquote Communist China was really something."

Speidel commissioned a linguist to design a course in Mandarin, and, in remote places, a hardworking volunteer could gain fluency in only two years, the length of a Peace Corps assignment. Many volunteers had studied pedagogy as undergrads, and often they returned to teach in U.S. classrooms. But there were others whose life paths were radically transformed. They became diplomats, civil servants, businesspeople, or scholars specializing in China. Today, twenty-seven former China volunteers, including Adam, work in the State Department, and there are others at organizations like U.S.A.I.D.

Journalists and writers were also common. Michael Meyer, a China 2 volunteer from Minnesota, went on to write three books about the country. In my cohort, three of us became China correspondents and authors. All told, former volunteers have published at least eleven nonfiction books about China.

I sometimes wondered how the situation looked to Communist intelligence analysts. In 1999, I moved to Beijing while preparing to publish my first book, about my experience in Fuling, and there was a period when I sensed that I was being watched with particular attention. There were strange encounters in my neighborhood, and a couple of former students back in the Fuling region reported being intimidated by security agents who showed up because of their connection with me. In Beijing, at a couple of government-sponsored events,

Foreign Ministry officials sought me out with pointed questions: Why did you study English literature if you planned to go to China? Why did you teach in such an undeveloped place?

They clearly worried that teaching had been a cover for intelligence work, and they seemed baffled by the Peace Corps. The organization didn't attract many people from élite backgrounds, and it paid volunteers about a hundred and twenty dollars a month. Speidel's Chinese staff had been assigned to him by the government, so there was no question that some lines of information ran straight to security, along with the likely phone taps. But nobody from Peace Corps headquarters ever told me what I should or should not teach, and staff visited Fuling only twice in two years. At its best, the Peace Corps was an expression of American confidence: if you sent motivated young people to remote places and left them alone, good things were likely to happen.

Recently, I reminisced about the era with somebody from Fuling who is well connected in the Communist Party. He confided that the Fuling volunteers were supposed to be sent to Wanxian, another Yangtze city, whose name was eventually changed to Wanzhou. But officials were concerned that the city was too close to the construction site of the Three Gorges Dam, where Americans might learn sensitive information. So they pushed us a hundred and thirty miles upstream. Of course, I ended up writing about the dam anyway. And, after the Peace Corps finally got into Wanzhou, the organization posted a China 7 volunteer named Jake Hooker there. Despite having no Chinese background, Hooker learned the language to a remarkable level, and he proved that it didn't matter who got sent downriver. In 2008, as a reporter for the *Times*, Hooker won a Pulitzer Prize for exposing how rural Chinese factories were exporting toxic ingredients for use in pharmaceutical products.

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In 1998, during my last year as a volunteer, I didn't notice two national developments that later proved to be significant. One was the system of Internet restrictions that became known in English as the Great Firewall. The other was a speech delivered by President Jiang Zemin, at Peking University, on May 4, 1998. Jiang's words were hardly dynamic ("the future of the motherland is infinitely glorious"), but, more than twenty years later, if you say "Project 985," many educated Chinese people recognize the reference to the year and the month of Jiang's speech. The President called for the development of world-class

universities, and this endeavor joined Project 211—the Chinese fetish for mission-oriented numerology exceeds even that of the Peace Corps. These programs involved university expansion and improvement, and they reflected a strategy that was hard for Americans to grasp: the idea that education and restriction could proceed in tandem.

During the period that followed, the country's over-all growth was so intense that Peace Corps cohorts could be represented by micro-histories. The year that China 8 arrived, the country joined the World Trade Organization. By China 12, the Three Gorges Dam had been completed. China 14 was the Beijing Olympics. Between China 1 and China 16, the G.D.P. increased more than tenfold. When I taught in Fuling, the college had about two thousand students; by China 10, there were twenty thousand, on a brand-new campus.

In the classroom, even smaller histories showed how the system worked at the lowest level. One of my students, a poor boy who grew up on a farm, where his family planted potatoes, corn, and tobacco, took the English name Mo. Mo's father had a third-grade education and his mother never attended school, but a village schoolteacher inspired Mo, who became the only boy from his class to test into college. In Fuling, he joined the Communist Party, and every summer he returned home to haul sixty-pound sacks of tobacco to market. When some of Mo's classmates started giving themselves English surnames, he asked Adam and me for advice, which was how he became Mo Money. (Another China 3 micro-history was the series of prominent deaths that occurred in the span of six months and that, at least in my mind, are forever connected: Tupac Shakur, Deng Xiaoping, and Biggie Smalls.)

After graduation, Mo Money accepted a teaching job in his rural home town. Among the students was his younger brother. It was the community version of education by the bootstraps: somebody escapes the village to attend college, then returns and pulls up the others. For three years, Mo taught his brother and more than forty classmates, and his brother tested into the Fuling college, too. He entered as China 8 arrived. Of the four children in Mo Money's family, three graduated from college, and all are now middle class.

When this happens at scale across a population of more than a billion, the effects are staggering. Mo currently teaches in a school in Chongqing, and recently I asked him what percentage of his graduating students from last year made it to university. "Every one of them," he said. In terms of national statistics, the

college-entrance figure—seven per cent for Mo’s year—is now forty-eight per cent.

The Peace Corps China groups started to expand with China 4, which was also the first cohort to include an African-American volunteer. There were significantly more women than men that year, and that became the general pattern. In 2014, the Peace Corps started allowing applicants to specify which country or region they wanted to work in, and China became a coveted assignment. Yung-Mei Haloski, a China 4 volunteer who later worked in recruitment and placement for the Peace Corps, told me that China was seen as a top priority. “I was always directed that the people who had the most skills should go to China,” she said.

By China 17, the Peace Corps was sending between seventy and eighty volunteers per year, and the program had expanded into undeveloped parts of Gansu and Guizhou provinces. But some volunteers went to Sichuanese cities that had become much more connected and sophisticated. Chengdu acquired the nickname Gaydu, because of a relative tolerance for gay culture that would have been unimaginable during the days of “Survey of Britain and America.” (“It widely spreads.”) With China 21, the Peace Corps sent a same-sex married couple for the first time.

PREVIOUSLY ON... THAT Book You've
BEEN READING FOR THREE MONTHS



Will McPhail

Cartoon by Will McPhail

In August, 2018, Jody Olsen, the Peace Corps director appointed by President Trump, came to China to celebrate the program's twenty-fifth anniversary. The Peace Corps hoped to move into even more remote places, and Olsen and Stephen Claborne, the head of the China program, met with officials in Beijing. The Chinese politely rejected the request. "The message was that they were happy with it the way it was," Claborne told me recently.

The Chinese strategy never changed: education and restriction continued in

parallel, like opposite lanes of the same highway. Today's citizens are often more tolerant and aware, but the Great Firewall is also more sophisticated than ever. Many topics of civic interest, ranging from the Hong Kong protests to concentration camps that sequester Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, are highly censored. Even as the government became more comfortable with the Peace Corps, it restricted other organizations, and a 2017 law made it increasingly difficult for foreign N.G.O.s to operate. If you connect all the micro-histories—each individual improvement in material and educational circumstance—they still don't add up to political change. Mo Money remains a member of the Communist Party.

In 2018, during a visit to Fuling, I happened to run into my first-year student Richard. Like Mo, Richard has prospered as a high-school teacher. During our conversation, he quickly brought up the lecture about absentee ballots. "That made a deep impression," he said. "I've always thought about that."

Recently, a couple of other former students also mentioned the incident in positive terms, which surprised me. I had thought of it as a clumsy attempt by two young teachers to deal with a frustrating political environment. Even now, I can't tell exactly what lessons the students took away. I occasionally send survey questions to the people I taught, and in 2017 I asked if China should become a multiparty democracy. Out of thirty respondents, twenty-two said no. "China is going well this way," one former student wrote. Others were more cynical. "We already have one corrupt party, it will be much worse if we have more," one man wrote. Another student remarked, "We have seen America with multi-party, but you have elected the worst president in human's history."

Rick Scott began demanding an end to Peace Corps China in the summer of 2019. "What the Peace Corps shouldn't be doing is propping up our adversaries with U.S. tax dollars," the Senator said, in a statement. Such criticism had also been made in 2011, by Mike Coffman, a Republican congressman from Colorado. Scott introduced a bill that would cancel programs "in hostile countries, like China," and place the Peace Corps under the oversight of the State Department.

The agency has always functioned independently within the executive branch, in part to prevent programs from being manipulated as direct tools of foreign policy. No other senators signed on to Scott's bill, but he continued to attack the Peace Corps and China. His criticism of both seemed to be recent. Before

entering politics, Scott reportedly amassed a fortune of more than two hundred million dollars as an entrepreneur in the health-care industry. In two terms as governor of Florida, from 2011 to 2019, Scott welcomed Chinese investors to the state, and he chaired Enterprise Florida, a pro-business consortium that has offices in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing. A blind trust held by the Governor included stocks with ties to Chinese companies.

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Once Scott entered the Senate, though, he became a vocal opponent of China. In response to the Senator's pressure, Claborne, the head of the China program, received an unusual request from Peace Corps headquarters. Scott wanted to analyze Peace Corps China in business terms, examining the return on investment. "He was looking for things like how many volunteers came back and started businesses and created wealth because of their work in China," Claborne told me.

Claborne worried that somebody with little understanding of the Peace Corps was being allowed to redefine how it should be valued. He also believed that Scott's point that China is now a developed nation was irrelevant. Nothing in the Peace Corps mission statement specifies that partner countries must be poor, and the agency often looks closely at the Human Development Index, which considers a range of factors, including access to education. But the Peace Corps asked Claborne to assemble materials about return on investment, which he assumed were passed on to Scott. The Senator declared himself unsatisfied, and the Peace Corps never responded publicly.

The director, Olsen, had a long history with the agency, including time as a volunteer in Tunisia, in the nineteen-sixties. Some members of the Peace Corps community had feared that the Trump Administration would bring in an outsider to dismantle the agency, so Olsen's appointment was greeted with relief. But, when the China program was attacked, Olsen stayed silent.

The pressure on the Peace Corps was connected to a growing anti-China sentiment. In some ways, it's reminiscent of the era of "Farewell, Leighton Stuart!"—a frustration that China has not followed a path that Americans would prefer. Many China specialists are concerned that the U.S. is overreacting. James Millward, a Georgetown University historian who is a vocal critic of China's treatment of Uighurs, told me that he opposed cutting off the Peace Corps and

other forms of engagement. He believes that the Magnitsky Act, which allows the U.S. to sanction human-rights violators, should be applied to Chinese organizations and individuals who are active in the concentration camps. “It’s a measure that should be more directly associated with what is going on in Xinjiang, rather than keeping people from teaching English in Chengdu,” he said.

But the issue was settled quickly, behind closed doors. In November, the National Security Council held a meeting about Peace Corps China, chaired by Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national-security adviser. Pottinger is a former journalist in Beijing who subsequently joined the Marines, and he is known for his hawkish views on China. A senior official who served on the N.S.C. during the Obama Administration told me that it’s unheard of for a deputy-level meeting to be held about a specific volunteer program. Peace Corps China cost \$4.2 million in 2018, less than the State Department spent on the International Pacific Halibut Commission. “If you are deputy national-security adviser, you should have much more important issues on your plate,” the official said. “Think about what’s happening in November. Shouldn’t he be meeting on Iran?”

The following month, Olsen submitted a letter to the Office of Management and Budget announcing that Peace Corps China would be closed. Olsen’s letter noted that budgetary funds would be freed up for use in other places, mentioning three possible sites that don’t currently have volunteers: the Solomon Islands, Vietnam, and Greenland. There has been speculation that these countries were named in order to appeal to various geopolitical interests within the Administration. The Solomon Islands would satisfy those hoping to counter China’s influence in the Pacific, and a new program in Vietnam would fulfill the old idea of battling Communism. And Greenland because—well, because Greenland.

The day that the closure was announced, I had dinner with one of the Peace Corps’s Chinese staff members. The government no longer assigned people to these positions, and many of the thirty-plus staffers had applied hoping for better relations between China and the United States. They had largely given up the opportunity for social-security benefits in order to work for the American agency, whose status meant that some staff had difficulty applying for mortgages and credit cards. The woman I dined with asked me not to use her name, because the Peace Corps hadn’t yet negotiated severance packages.

The agency had informed staff and volunteers that China would be “graduating”—it was now so developed that it no longer needed Peace Corps teachers. But, the woman asked me, “if that was the case, why were they trying to expand so recently?” She added, “It’s like a divorce by one side,” noting that the news came less than a week before the lunar New Year holiday. Back in the U.S., the Peace Corps had already invited scores of new volunteers to serve in the next China cohort; now those applicants had to be reassigned. Helen Lowman, a former Peace Corps regional director who organized the graduation of programs in Romania and Bulgaria in the past decade, told me that she had never heard of such an abrupt and chaotic decision to phase out a country. “I probably talked to the host-country government for three years before we actually closed,” she said.

After dinner with the staff member, I met some volunteers at a hip bar called Commune. Such Communist chic wasn’t part of the Chengdu landscape when I served, although other things remained recognizable as the Peace Corps experience. A couple of volunteers quietly brought their own beer in bags. For China 25, the monthly stipend was less than three hundred dollars.

An African-American woman named Khloe Benton told me that she had been posted to a site in Gansu that had few foreign residents. “It’s been hard,” she said. “People follow me around, and they say things.” But she believed that it was important for locals to meet a person of color. The Peace Corps had told volunteers that they would finish out their terms, and they tried to cheer one another up.

“You know why they lied to us,” another woman said, referring to the political pressure. “They didn’t have a choice.”

Eleven days later, the coronavirus caused the evacuation of all China volunteers. The same thing had happened with SARS, in 2003, but the Peace Corps had returned the following year. This time, the program was finished—the last micro-history belonged to China 25. The volunteers had spent a little more than six months in the country.

One official in the State Department told me there were rumors that the White House had threatened the Peace Corps with budget cuts if it didn’t end the China program. When I asked Rick Scott, he said that he didn’t know how the Administration had made the decision, although he described his meetings with

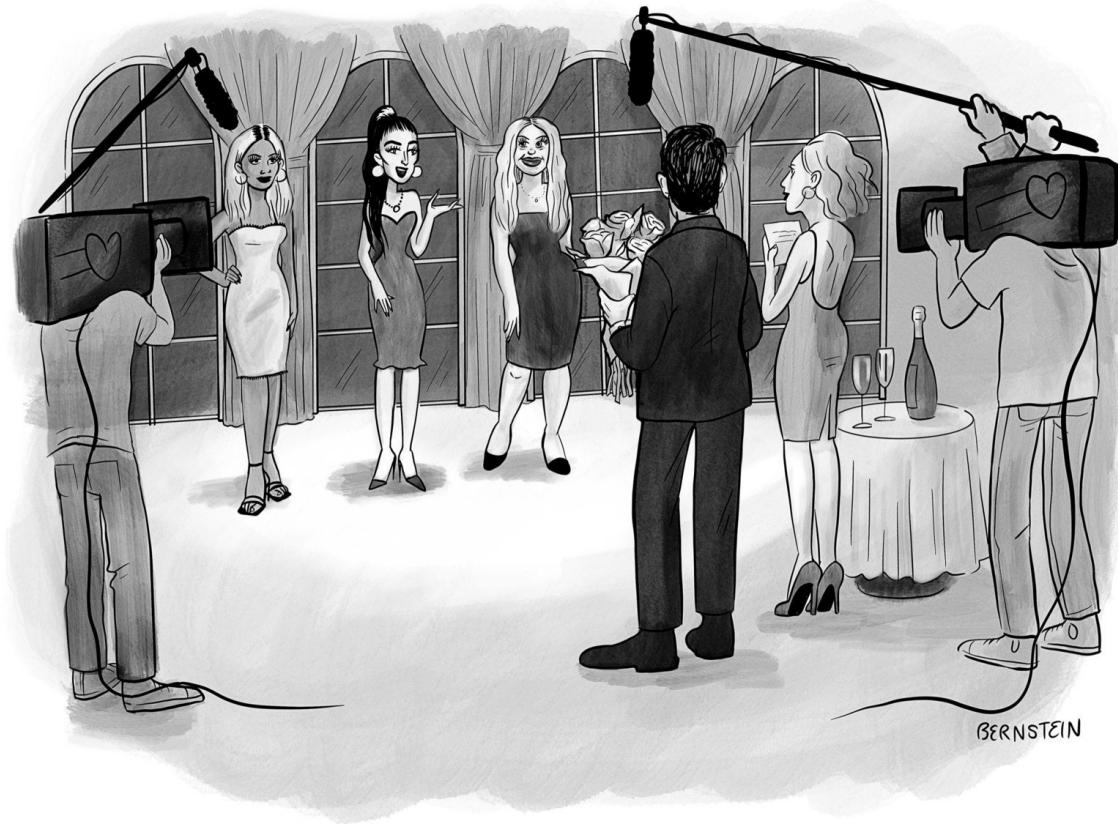
Jody Olsen and other Peace Corps officials. “I said, ‘What I’ve been told is that the volunteers who are there, they don’t coördinate anything with the State Department, they don’t promote American values, they don’t promote capitalism,’ ” Scott said. I asked if he had received the materials about return on investment, and whether they included such information as the number of volunteers who became diplomats.

“I asked the Peace Corps about that,” Scott said. “They didn’t know of one person who had ever gone to the State Department from the Peace Corps.”

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I said that twenty-seven former China volunteers now work in the State Department, and asked if this knowledge might have changed his mind. “I’d have to get more information,” he said, adding that the Peace Corps hadn’t been forthcoming. I had no way of checking this, because the Peace Corps and Olsen ignored multiple requests for an interview.

It occurred to me that this would have been a good follow-up lesson to our Fuling lectures about American democracy. In the nineties, we had known that the Chinese could cancel the program at any time. It had seemed a small miracle that local colleges were somehow able to communicate to high-level conservatives that Peace Corps teachers were worth the risk.



“These days, it’s nearly impossible to meet a hot sociopath the old-fashioned way.”

Twenty years later, though, the Americans had discussed nothing openly, and Peace Corps administrators must have been either so frightened or so incompetent that they hadn’t defended themselves. The ideas that inspired “The Ugly American”—the importance of grassroots and local knowledge—had been abandoned. During our conversation, Scott acknowledged that he and his staff had not spoken with any current or former China volunteers.

The old confidence had also vanished. It seemed part of a larger American trend: every foreign contact was a threat, every exchange was zero-sum. Instead of trusting themselves and their best models, people regressed to the paranoia of those with closed systems. In the *Washington Examiner*, a conservative magazine, Tom Rogan celebrated the end of Peace Corps China. When Rogan mentioned the Chinese Ministry of State Security, he probably had no idea how much he sounded like a ministry hack:

We must thus ask how many of the more than 1,300 previous volunteers in China may have been recruited by the MSS during their time there. The

number is likely very small, but unlikely to be zero. How many of those volunteers then returned home to take up employment in the State Department or another U.S. government agency?

In January, I visited Fuling with my family, and one afternoon we went to the former campus. It had been abandoned after the expanded college opened, up the Yangtze. Last year, developers started tearing down the old campus in order to construct high-rise apartments.

The classroom building was already gone, but my former apartment still stood. The library was also intact, although its doors were chained shut and many windows were broken. In front of the ruined building, a faded red banner proclaimed another tone-deaf slogan:

Build Nationwide Civilized City and National Hygienic Area
I Am Aware, I Participate, I Support, I Am Satisfied

While we were there, a man called out my Chinese name. He introduced himself as a former colleague who was also visiting the campus before it was demolished. Suddenly, I recognized him—in the old days, he sometimes came to my apartment late at night to borrow banned books. In front of the shuttered library, he said, “I remember reading about the Cultural Revolution.” I asked if the authorities had warned him about associating with the Americans, and he smiled shyly. “It wasn’t that direct,” he said. “But we were careful.”

I hadn’t known him or his colleagues as well as I knew our students. In my first book, I mentioned the surreptitious visits from the man and a few others. I described them as “shadowy figures who seemed to be groping for something that couldn’t be found in Fuling.”

Twenty years later, much remained in the shadows. I didn’t know what the teacher had gained from the banned books, or how my students were changed by our classes. But, as time passed, I was impressed by how much people remembered. “We were all poor at that time, we were eager to learn,” a student named Andi wrote recently, mentioning some school supplies that Adam had loaned her class. The accumulation of these small moments added up to something larger, but it wasn’t a formal accounting. That was a teacher’s confidence—confidence in his material, but also confidence in his students. They could make their own decisions about how they applied their lessons.

One evening, I spoke by telephone with Gabriel Exposito, a twenty-two-year-old who was among the last people to receive invitations to Peace Corps China. Exposito grew up in Havana, where one of his school memories involved a visit by a group of Americans. The children were instructed to avoid the foreigners, who made a donation that was spirited away by Communist officials. Exposito's father eventually fled to Florida, where he found work as a nurse. He brought his son over from Cuba at the age of eleven. Exposito graduated cum laude from Florida State University, and when he applied to the Peace Corps he requested China.

"I know what a Communist education is like," Exposito told me. "I was the student who wasn't allowed to ask the hard questions. I saw the foreigners and couldn't interact with them. I wanted to be on the other side of that."

He was shocked to learn by tweet of the China program's closure, and as a Floridian he called the offices of Senators Rubio and Scott to complain. He told staffers, "I agree with you—the Communist Party is a hostile entity. But we are breaking down the image they build of the American people."

He requested a reassignment to a former Communist state, and the Peace Corps offered Mongolia, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Moldova. Exposito chose Moldova. "I thought, This is a former Soviet republic that's next to Ukraine," he said. "It's an area that's often forgotten about." He had started studying Russian, and he hoped to eventually become either a scholar or a diplomat; I wished him the best of luck. He would have been perfect for China 26. ♦

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The True Face of China's Plastic Surgery Clinics

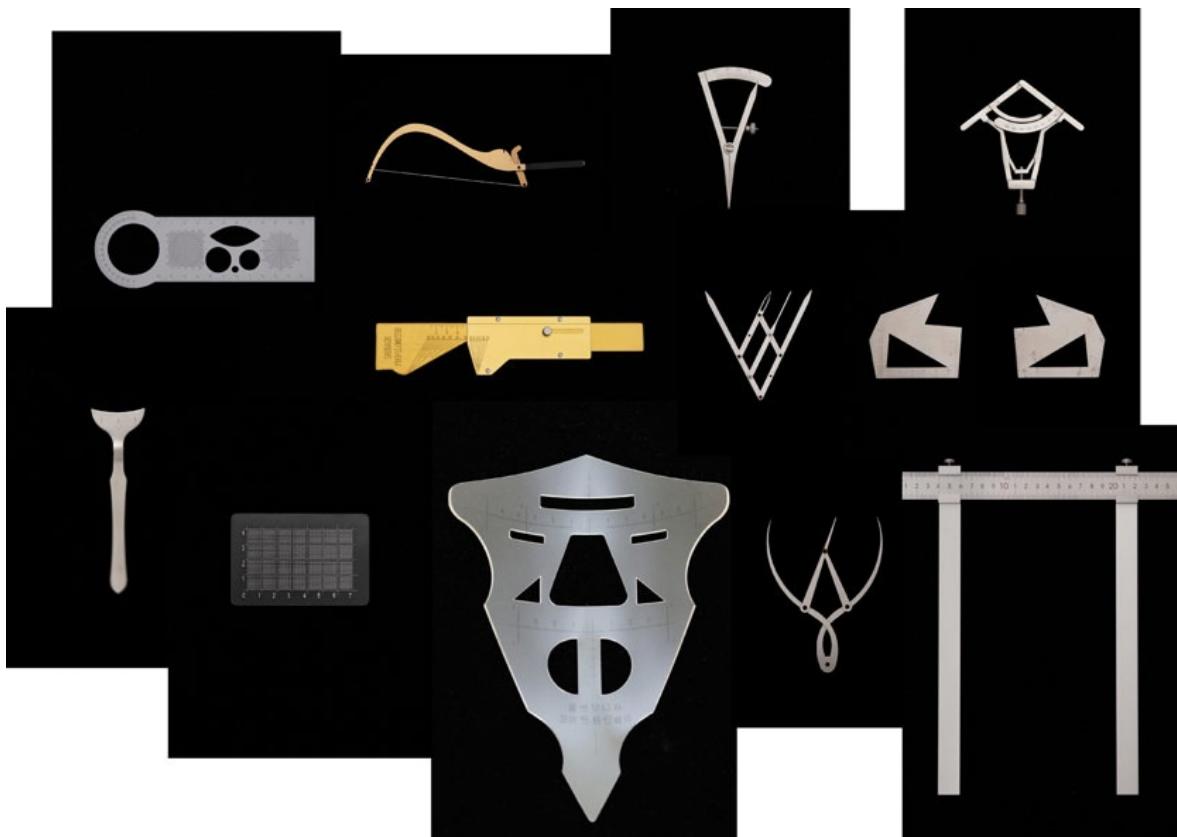
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Five identical photographs of a young woman fill the screen. Each one is covered with scribbles and annotations scrawled in black and red ink, highlighting her facial imperfections.

Small circles cluster around her jawline in several images, while dotted lines run down her nose in another. In all five, the doctor has traced new contours for her eyes.

The marked-up photographs are part of “Make Me Beautiful” — an ongoing project by visual artist Lu Yufan that explores the power China’s cosmetic surgery industry holds over young women.

Since 2018, the 28-year-old has gone for consultations at more than 10 different plastic surgery clinics in Beijing, northern city Tianjin, and South Korea. Each time, she documents her experience in forensic detail — but never books a procedure.



“I already know what parts of my face don’t conform to the aesthetic standards set by the majority,” Lu tells Sixth Tone. “My decision to consult doctors comes from a need to prove my self-estimation is correct.”

Lu says the project helps her unravel her conflicted feelings toward cosmetic surgery, which has grown enormously popular among Chinese of her generation.

Chinese cosmetic surgery clinics performed over 16 million procedures in 2017, up 26% year-over-year, and China is now estimated to be the world’s largest market for plastic surgery. According to SoYoung, an online platform for cosmetic surgery, more than half its customers are under 26, and 90% are female.

The artist says she has also felt an urge to go under the knife for a long time. She first began feeling dissatisfied with her appearance in middle school, when looks were everything.



“At that time, the boys would rank the girls by appearance,” says Lu. “I remember someone pointing at me and declaring I was at the bottom of the list.”

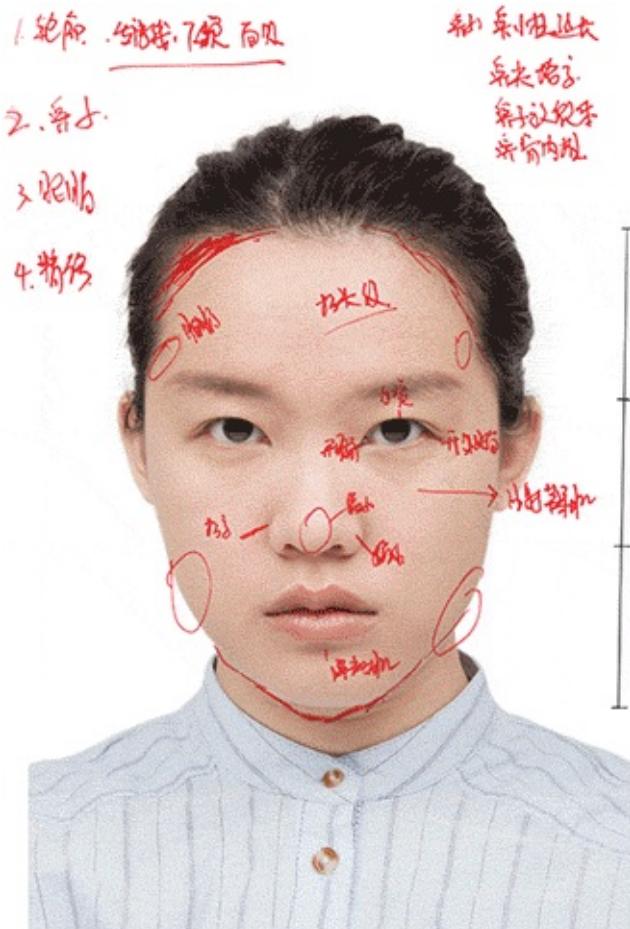
In the ’00s, Chinese TV networks ran multiple reality shows based around young women undergoing cosmetic procedures. Lu recalls hearing about one popular show called “Angels Love to Be Pretty.”

In each episode, several women received free plastic surgery. Then, a studio audience voted for the contestant with the most-improved appearance. This kind of show was later banned in China, but it left a deep impression on Lu.

After Lu graduated from high school in 2010, many of her classmates went to get their noses, eyes, and jawlines done. Around 10% of her peers have had some form of cosmetic surgery, she estimates.

At the start of “Make Me Beautiful,” Lu was tempted to join them. She first began visiting clinics out of curiosity, wondering whether she’d be willing to get some work done if she could afford it.

“I’m lacking in confidence in many aspects, so I thought cosmetic surgery was a way to solve my problems ,” says Lu.



A GIF shows the artist with her perfect face, as calculated by a Korean researcher, from the project “Make Me Beautiful,” 2018. Courtesy of Lu Yufan

As she expected, nearly every consultant gave her the same advice: Add a crease to her eyelids to make her eyes appear larger; raise the bridge of her nose to make it more prominent; reshape her jawline to make it narrower and longer; and have wrinkle-removal treatments to make her look younger.

The angular set of facial features — often known as an “internet celebrity face” in China, because so many online influencers have surgery to achieve this look — has been the dominant beauty trend for years. Often, Lu says, the consultants wouldn’t even ask her any questions about what she wanted, instead immediately doodling all over her photo.

The experience of listening to the “condescending” advice of the clinicians, all pointing out the same flaws in her appearance, initially made Lu want the procedures even more, she tells Sixth Tone.

“It’s a process that intensifies the idea that you’re not pretty enough,” says Lu. “After you receive very specific advice, you have a clear picture of where the problems are.”

But as she continued interacting with the clinics, Lu says she began to notice a darker side to the industry. Several businesses downplayed safety risks and pushed her to have more expensive treatments, according to Lu.









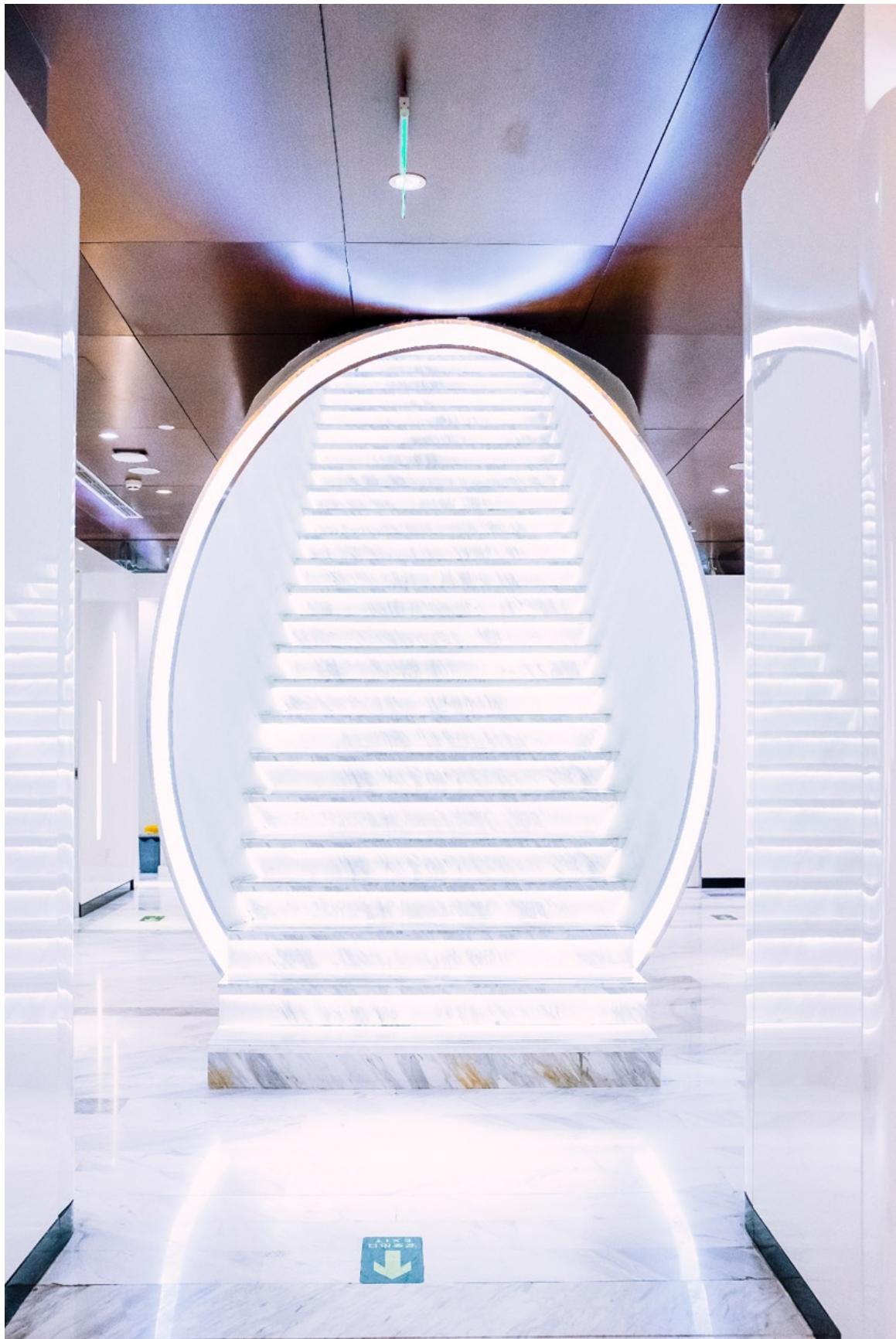












There are two main methods for making noses more prominent: a surgical operation or injections of hyaluronic acid. Consultants continually talked up the former, pricier option, Lu says.

“It (the consultants’ advice) was no longer coming from an aesthetic point of view,” says Lu.

The cosmetic surgery industry is often poorly regulated in China, and Lu says her consultations also opened her eyes to the lack of consumer protections.

“The consultants proposing various plans to me would never mention whether any of them had risks,” says Lu. “Take hyaluronic acid, for example. There are domestic and imported products, with many different brands. But when recommending an option, the consultants didn’t explain things in detail.

“I also know people who didn’t sign a contract until the day of the operation, and some people didn’t have time to read the contract carefully before signing,” Lu adds.



From left to right, “Young and Immature Style,” “‘Anego’ Style,” “Internet Celebrity Style,” and “High-Level Style,” from the “Archive of the Diagnoses” series, from the project “Make Me Beautiful,” 2018. Courtesy of Lu Yufan

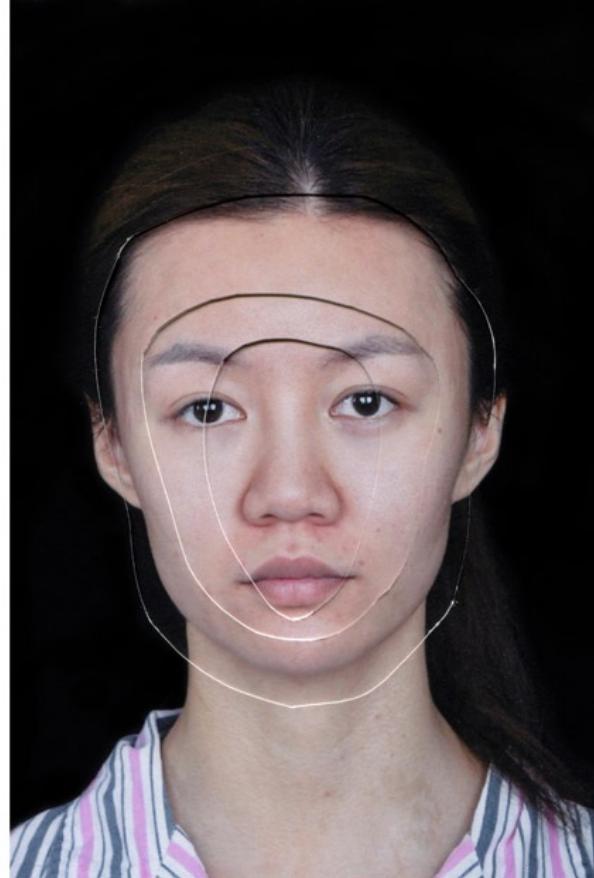
For Lu, the recent shift in beauty standards in China — with younger influencers abandoning an “internet celebrity face” in favor of more diverse styles — underlines the fact that plastic surgery is ultimately just a fashion trend, with faces coming in and out of style like flare jeans or crop tops.

“When doctors are capable and willing to turn your appearance into whatever you want, they somehow lose medical authority,” says Lu. “It’s almost like entering a supermarket or a shopping mall and all the shelves are filled with various faces and features.”

After nearly two years working on “Make Me Beautiful,” Lu admits her attitude toward cosmetic surgery remains conflicted. Though the experience has made her more aware of how the industry can manipulate young women, she also understands why many of her peers have chosen to alter their appearances.

“I agree with the feminist critique on cosmetic surgery, as it caters to the disciplinary powers that turn women into docile bodies,” says Lu. “However, it can also be argued that each woman has the right to decide her appearance.”

进入镜子里的自己都会哭。

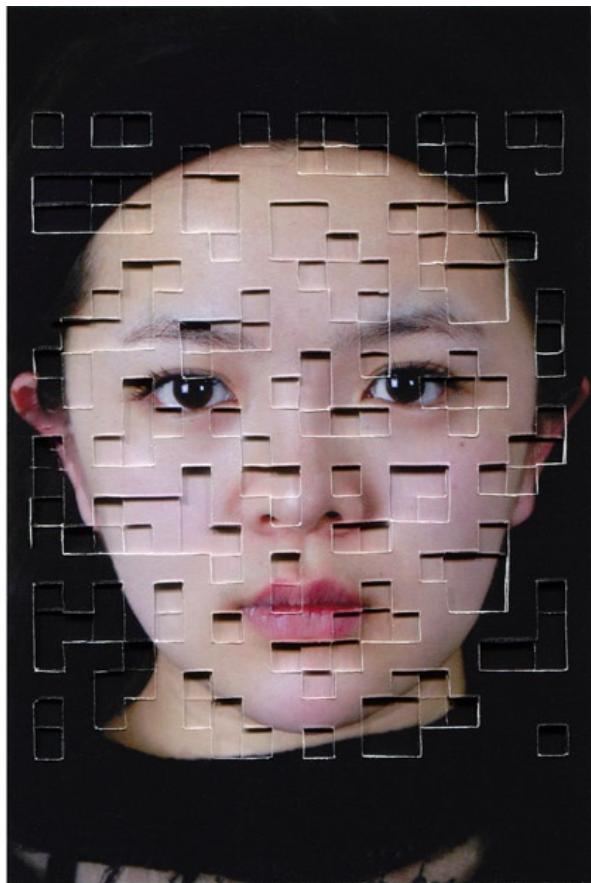


第一次被叫女神
第一次被男神级别的男人追
第一次喜欢上拍照
第一次觉得这段感情值得这么重
第一次知道原来的距离对人对事物的待遇是不一样的
第一次不会有人再觉得丑或者讨厌我
第一次和朋友说说自己今天不太如意
第一次敢于发表对于旅行地的观点而不被别人说三道四。

明明很瘦一粒 那被大家以为有肉有饭
性冷的一点 就会被很喜欢迎



看看现在的我，还有什么是不值得的呢？



和大部分人不一样，我对整容的欲望从小学四年级就开始了。

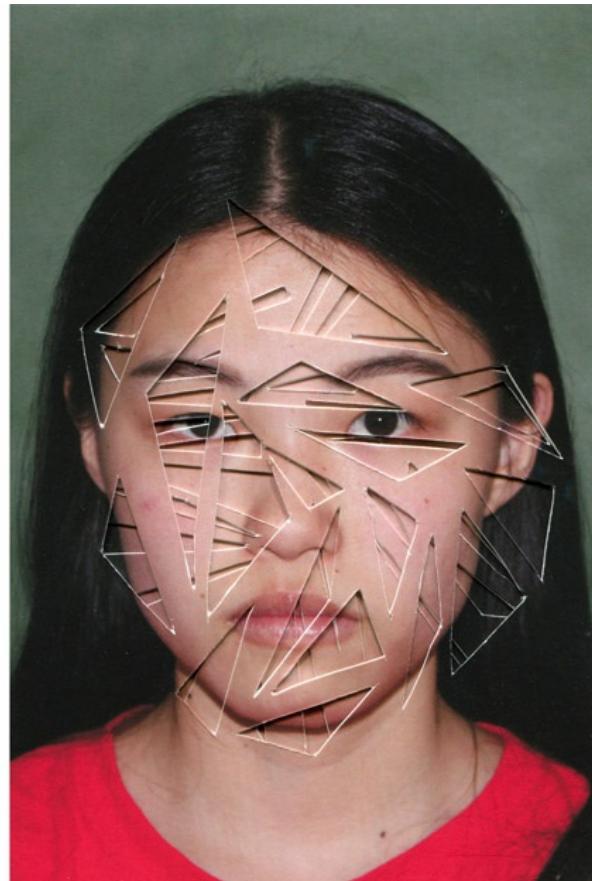
听起来很奇怪，可那个时候小的、还没有练习表演的孩子就这样开始练习，一步一步计划着将来需要创伤的地方。

然后，直到高中毕业，
我都没有在任何一张合照中留下影子。

做完手术的第一个晚上，我因为对麻药过敏吐了很久，整个人难受得快要虚脱了，却才终于有勇气拿起那半年里抵制的化妆照片，遮住面部的缝痕窟窿。

幼小的我有着内双和肿眼泡，可怜地抬起头的鼻子和一如既往标准化的鹅蛋脸，带着自卑和愁苦无奈的表情，小心翼翼地把嘴唇向镜头。

丑（完），永别！



不真的手颤了。
我的想告诉你们。
有多疼。
以下午我流泪不停肿胀。
醒来是12点。
我不记得自己是怎么从手术室被扶回病房的。
醒来是个漆黑的中国圆舞曲陪在我身边。
麻醉师，让我想吐。
因为麻药的原因，喉咙疼痛嘶哑。
让我大喊让医生，禁食禁水。
所以，身上，到手术结束。我已经禁24个小时禁食禁水了。
喉咙疼痛嘶哑，想喝水。
后来翻来覆去
我不停地吸吐出麻醉药物。
依然禁食禁水。
医生说你已经睡了。
医生的话震耳欲聋。
医生身上沾着一身血迹。
医生不敢动。
晚上在病房里，只有我和一个韩国护士。
护士拿着手机，手机亮不出声音。
一直拨打电话。
护士在心里骂了自己不知道多少遍。
护士没有痛哭，她的笑容都因内罪。
护士害怕。语言不通，护士有安全感。
护士怕疼，头痛、恶心一直躺在床上呻吟。
护士更疼，护士姐姐也穿着手术服待病人。
我们都在默默地流泪。



原味
对看者镜子里的自己也会想
看到底是谁呢？



我做过十三次整容
变成了世人眼中的美女
所有人对我的态度瞬间不一样了
我很是在做梦一样
我活在一个假的人生里
每天过得像受害者脆弱的女子第一次
也有人骂我丑整容鬼
骂我的脸是假的
我靠脸得到的尊重，包括爱情。
都是假的。

可是这次如何呢？至少我得到了尊严。
没有好的外貌，
别人连看都不看，内心的失败都不会有
对不起，走向这个以貌取人的社会妥协了。



带给了很多时间。
换了身份证。



Some of the biggest problems with cosmetic surgery are ultimately driven by sexism and inequality, rather than industry malpractice, according to Lu. She points to the Chinese online influencer agencies that reportedly force young women to have surgery to get a contract.

“It (cosmetic surgery) is an outcome of a social reality,” says Lu. “For anyone who needs this job, she’ll accept changing her original appearance into an ‘internet celebrity face.’ It may harm her authenticity and uniqueness, but it’ll bring her economic benefits.”

Lu also says she understands how deeply many women internalize the patriarchal values they are exposed to from a young age. Despite being critical of the cosmetic surgery industry, the artist confesses she sometimes still yearns to book a procedure.

Yet Lu’s experience has made her feel more empowered. She’s given up wearing expensive makeup and clothes and is trying to find fulfillment in her artwork.

“It’s not that I’m no longer controlled by consumer culture,” says Lu. “The control is still there, but I’ve gradually learned to live with it.”

Editors: Dominic Morgan and Shi Yangkun.

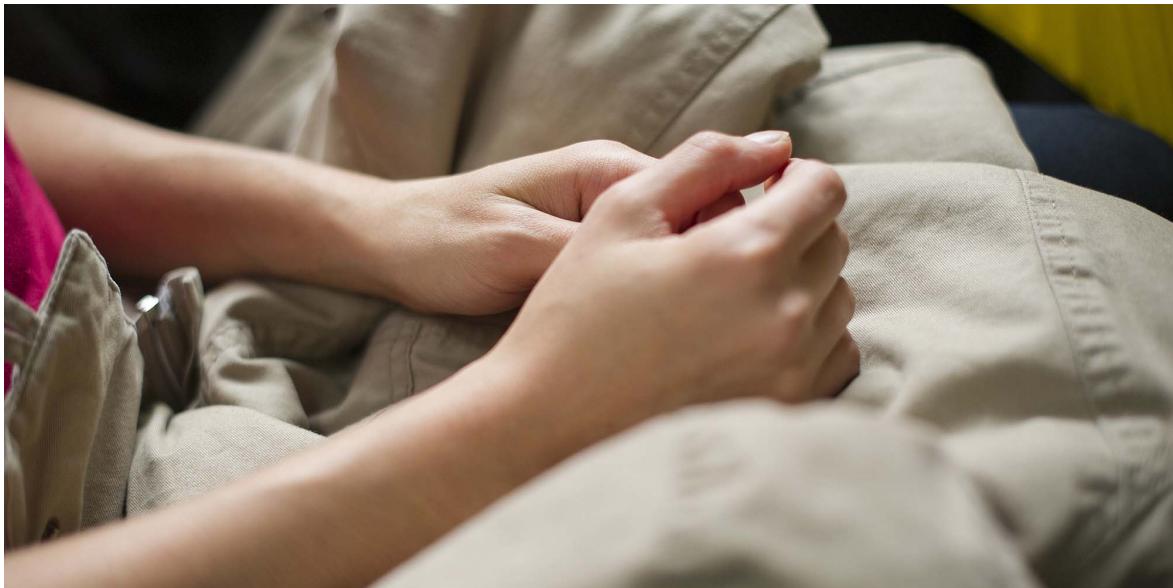
(Header image: From left to right, “Diagnosis 1,” “Diagnosis 3,” and “Diagnosis 4,” from the photo project “Make Me Beautiful,” 2018. Courtesy of Lu Yufan)

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When China's Matchmaking Services Are a Tinderbox for Violence

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When China's Matchmaking Services Are a Tinderbox for Violence

Protected by ironclad contracts, high-end "hongniang" can be less than sympathetic to their clients when dates go awry.

China's matchmaking companies say they'll help clients find the love of their life. But for some women using such services, all they've found is trauma.

Zhang Ji is a 30-year-old user of Wo Zhu Liangyuan — a matchmaking agency whose name roughly translates to "I take control of my own marriage destiny." After visiting the company's office in Shanghai to meet a recommended match, surnamed Shen, he invited her to his apartment. That's where Zhang said he raped her, according to a post last week on microblogging platform Weibo.

Zhang told Sixth Tone that she reported the rape to Wo Zhu Liangyuan the next day, but the company's response disappointed her. According to chat screenshots included in Zhang's post, a Wo Zhu Liangyuan manager surnamed Wang suggested that Zhang "move on."

Don't tell boys about this. They'll definitely look down on you, whether they're friends or colleagues.- Wang, Wo Zhu Liangyuan manager

"My dear, don't think about that," the manager's message said. It was followed by a photo of another recommended match. "Check out this guy — he's not bad. He's good-looking, and that's your type, right?" Wang said. "There are so many good boys out there, so don't think about it (the rape)."

The matchmaker also discouraged her from reporting the encounter to police and sharing her experience with others, Zhang said.

“Don’t tell boys about this. They’ll definitely look down on you, whether they’re friends or colleagues,” read another message from Wang. “If I were you, I definitely wouldn’t tell third parties about this.”

Zhang went to the police anyway. But four days had passed since the alleged rape, and the police declined to file a report, citing insufficient evidence. Sixth Tone’s calls to Shen’s mobile number went unanswered Tuesday.



A portrait of Zhang Ji. Courtesy of Zhang

A portrait of Zhang Ji. Courtesy of Zhang

A public relations manager for Wo Zhu Liangyuan surnamed Gao told Sixth Tone that the company is not at fault in Zhang’s case, as the matchmaker had advised her not to go to the man’s apartment because of the signals it might send.

“The only thing we can guarantee is the authenticity of our members’ information, such as their annual income. The rest, we cannot guarantee,” Gao

said. He added that while the company does not check its users' police records, it requires them to sign a "guarantee" that they will not do anything illegal during dates.

The only thing we can guarantee is the authenticity of our members' information, such as their annual income.- Gao, Wo Zhu Liangyuan PR manager

When asked about the matchmaker's response to Zhang's report that she had been raped, Gao said: "A woman says she was raped — that's going to be bad for her reputation, right?"

In recent years, matchmaking agencies have boomed in China, showering high-end clients with promises of "top-quality" matches — men and women with homes, well-paying jobs, or elite education backgrounds. Membership fees can be anywhere from several thousand to even millions of yuan.

Unlike dating websites such as Momo and Tantan — China's equivalents to Tinder — matchmaking businesses are hands-on when it comes to managing their clients' relationships. According to Wo Zhu Liangyuan's website, its matchmakers, or *hongniang*, are all trained in "the study of marriage, love, and psychology," and can "increase their clients' capacity to love and be loved."

But not all matchmakers give constructive relationship advice.



Antidepressants Zhang Ji was prescribed after the alleged rape.
Courtesy of Zhang

Antidepressants Zhang Ji was prescribed after the alleged rape. Courtesy of Zhang

Xiaobai, a 33-year-old woman living in Shanghai, told Sixth Tone that she, too, has been harassed during a date arranged by another matchmaker service, Yi Jia Yuan. And when she told the company about her experience, she, too, was irritated by the matchmaker's response.

Last autumn, Xiaobai went on a date arranged by Yi Jia Yuan after paying nearly 20,000 yuan (\$2,850) for a three-month membership with the company.

"He was staring at my legs and kept touching my arms. I felt quite uncomfortable," said Xiaobai, who asked to use a pseudonym to protect her privacy. "Later, he suggested we take a deserted stairwell, claiming it was a shortcut. Then he said he wanted to hug me and shoved me against the wall."

Terrified and angry, Xiaobai said she escaped into the mall with the man in pursuit. After the ordeal, Xiaobai called the matchmaker who had paired them

together.

“She told me I was too conservative, and said the man was just showing affection for me,” Xiaobai said, adding that the matchmaker seemed to doubt her story because, she said, no one had complained about the man before.

The responsibilities of the matchmaking company are so few that even car-hailing services have stricter vetting practices for their drivers.- Wan Miaoyan, lawyer

“The matchmaker didn’t try to protect me at all. She called the man and asked him about what I had told her, which made me very afraid that he would try and take revenge on me,” said Xiaobai. She said that rather than call the man and potentially endangering her further, the matchmaker could have contacted other women who had gone on dates with him previously to ask if they had seen warning signs.

“Matchmakers only care about their clients getting together — and the resulting ‘successful match bonuses’ — rather than what the woman actually wants,” Xiaobai said.

Matchmaking companies have come under fire in recent years for fraud and catfishing, with at least a few cases ending in death. In 2017, China’s central government called for dating websites to use real-name registration and vet information users were entering in their profiles.

However, such regulations offer little comfort to women who are raped or experience other sexual misconduct after turning to matchmaking platforms. “After all, a person’s financial situation has nothing to do with their morality,” Xiaobai said.

In 2016, a woman in eastern China’s Shandong province went to police after her matchmaker-arranged date allegedly tried to rape her — and was shocked to learn that the man had previously served four years in prison for sexual assault.



A man and woman chat on a blind date in Shanghai, Oct. 31, 2015.
Zhang Xinyan for Sixth Tone

A man and woman chat on a blind date in Shanghai, Oct. 31, 2015. Zhang Xinyan for Sixth Tone

Wan Miaoyan, a lawyer specializing in women's rights who is providing Zhang with legal counsel, told Sixth Tone that, from a purely legal standpoint, the matchmaking company holds little if any liability when clients experience violence or harassment.

"Matchmaking companies often use brokerage contracts — a type of contract in which one party just acts as an agent and has little obligation to the other party," Wan said. She explained that Zhang's contract with Wo Zhu Liangyuan clearly states that the matchmaking company is not responsible for any client conflicts involving money or sexual behavior.

"The responsibilities of the matchmaking company are so few that even online car-hailing services have stricter vetting practices for their drivers' information," Wan said.

Wan added that women who use matchmaking services may be especially

vulnerable, as their eagerness to find a partner could make them less discerning of potential partners, as well as the matchmaking services they use.

“Many people take advantage of women’s apprehension and anxiety about marriage to do immoral or even illegal things,” Wan said. “Matchmaking companies are often accomplices in dating violence.”

Compared with being assaulted by a stranger, dating violence — as Wan categorizes the trauma experienced by Zhang and others — presents a greater challenge for victims seeking justice, as it tends to require more evidence to prove that whatever happened wasn’t consensual.

After failing to receive justice from both the matchmaking company and the police, Zhang has changed her profile picture on Weibo to the blond protagonist from the Netflix miniseries “Unbelievable,” based on a Pulitzer Prize-winning report about a woman whose rape story was doubted and dismissed. Though the show’s protagonist is eventually vindicated, justice for Zhang is still far away.

Editor: David Paulk.

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Why Telling People They Don't Need Masks Backfired

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To help manage the shortage, the authorities sent a message that made them untrustworthy.

When news of a mysterious viral pneumonia linked to a seafood market in Wuhan, China, reached the outside world in early January, one of my first reactions was to order a modest supply of masks. Just a few weeks later, there wasn't a mask to be bought in stores, or online for a reasonable price — just widespread price gouging. Many health experts, no doubt motivated by the sensible and urgent aim of preserving the remaining masks for health care workers, started telling people that they didn't need masks or that they wouldn't know how to wear them.

As the pandemic rages on, there will be many difficult messages for the public.

Unfortunately, the top-down conversation around masks has become a case study in how not to communicate with the public, especially now that the traditional gatekeepers like media and health authorities have much less control. The message became counterproductive and may have encouraged even more hoarding because it seemed as though authorities were shaping the message around managing the scarcity rather than confronting the reality of the situation.

First, many health experts, including the surgeon general of the United States, told the public simultaneously that masks weren't necessary for protecting the general public and that health care workers needed the dwindling supply. This contradiction confuses an ordinary listener. How do these masks magically protect the wearers only and only if they work in a particular field?

Second, there were attempts to bolster the first message, that ordinary people didn't need masks, by telling people that masks, especially medical-grade respirator masks (such as the N95 masks), needed proper fitting and that ordinary people without such fitting wouldn't benefit. This message was also deeply counterproductive. Many people also wash their hands wrong, but we don't respond to that by telling them not to bother. Instead, we provide instructions; we post signs in bathrooms; we help people sing songs that time their hand-washing. Telling people they can't possibly figure out how to wear a mask properly isn't a winning message. Besides, when you tell people that something works only if done right, they think they will be the person who does it right, even if everyone else doesn't.

Third, of course masks work — maybe not perfectly and not all to the same degree, but they provide some protection. Their use has always been advised as part of the standard response to being around infected people, especially for people who may be vulnerable. World Health Organization officials wear masks during their news briefings. That was the reason I had bought a few in early January — I had been conducting research in Hong Kong, which has a lot of contact with mainland China, and expected to go back. I had studied and taught about the sociology of pandemics and knew from the SARS experience in 2003 that health officials in many high-risk Asian countries had advised wearing masks.

It is of course true that masks don't work perfectly, that they don't replace hand-washing and social distancing, and that they work better if they fit properly. And of course, surgical masks (the disposable type that surgeons wear) don't filter

out small viral particles the way medical-grade respirator masks rated N95 and above do. However, even surgical masks protect a bit more than not wearing masks at all. We know from flu research that mask-wearing can help decrease transmission rates along with frequent hand-washing and social-distancing. Now that we are facing a respirator mask shortage, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is recommending that surgical masks are “an acceptable alternative” for health care workers — again, obviously because some protection, even if imperfect, is better than none. In the face of this, publicly presenting an absolute answer — “You don’t need them” — for something that requires a qualified response just makes people trust authorities even less.

Fourth, the W.H.O. and the C.D.C. told the public to wear masks if they were sick. However, there is increasing evidence of asymptomatic transmission, especially through younger people who have milder cases and don’t know they are sick but are still infectious. Since the W.H.O. and the C.D.C. do say that masks lessen the chances that infected people will infect others, then everyone should use masks. If the public is told that only the sick people are to wear masks, then those who do wear them will be stigmatized and people may well avoid wearing them if it screams “I’m sick.” Further, it’s very difficult to be tested for Covid-19 in the United States. How are people supposed to know for sure when to mask up?

Fifth, places like Hong Kong and Taiwan that jumped to action early with social distancing and universal mask wearing have the pandemic under much greater control, despite having significant travel from mainland China. Hong Kong health officials credit universal mask wearing as part of the solution and recommend universal mask wearing. In fact, Taiwan responded to the coronavirus by immediately ramping up mask production.

Sixth, masks are an important signal that it’s not business as usual as well as an act of solidarity. Pandemics require us to change our behavior — our socialization, hygiene, work and more — collectively, and knowing our fellow citizens are on board is important for all efforts.

Finally, providing top-down guidance with such obvious contradictions backfires exactly because lack of trust is what fuels hoarding and misinformation. It used to be said that back in the Soviet Union, if there was a line, you first got in line and then figured out what the line was for — people knew that there were going to be shortages and that the authorities often lied, so

they hoarded. And when people feel as though they may not be getting the full truth from the authorities, snake-oil sellers and price gougers have an easier time.

Given that there is indeed a mask shortage and that medical workers absolutely do need these masks more, what should the authorities have said? The full painful truth. Despite warnings from experts for decades, especially after the near miss of SARS, we still weren't prepared for this pandemic, and we did not ramp up domestic production when we could, and now there's a mask shortage — and that's disastrous because our front line health care workers deserve the best protection. Besides, if they fall ill, we will all be doomed.

If anything, a call for people who hoarded masks to donate some of them to their local medical workers would probably work better than telling people that they don't need them or that they won't manage to make them work. "Look, more masks would be great. We are doing our best to ramp up production. Till then, if our medical workers fall ill, we will all be worse off. Please donate any excess — maybe more than two weeks' worth per person — to your hospital" sounds corny, but it's the truth. Two weeks is a reasonable standard because the C.D.C. and the W.H.O. still recommend wearing masks if you're taking care of someone with a milder illness self-isolating at home, something that will increasingly be necessary as hospitals get overwhelmed.

Research shows that during disasters, people can show strikingly altruistic behavior, but interventions by authorities can backfire if they fuel mistrust or treat the public as an adversary rather than people who will step up if treated with respect. Given that even homemade masks may work better than no masks, wearing them might be something to direct people to do while they stay at home more, as we all should.

We will no doubt face many challenges as the pandemic moves through our societies, and people will need to cooperate. The sooner we create the conditions under which such cooperation can bloom, the better off we all will be.

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