

OBITUARIES

Chinese families fearing pollution build clean air ‘bubbles’ at home

BY ALEXANDRA HARNEY
REUTERS

SHANGHAI — Liu Nan-feng has five air purifiers, two air quality monitors and a water purification system in his Beijing apartment. He buys organic. But still he worries for his 2-year-old daughter's health.

“I feel safe at home, but when we go out to the mall, the indoor and outdoor air are the same,” the 34-year-old screenwriter said. “It feels hopeless.”

China's persistent pollution and regular product safety scandals are driving an increasing number of consumers to build bubbles of clean air, purified water and safe products at home and in their cars.

Beijing's city government has twice this month issued pollution “red alerts,” the first time it has triggered its most severe smog warning.

While there is no official data on their numbers, market analysts say Liu's tastes reflect the concerns of a large and growing group of well-heeled urban consumers.

Foreign and domestic companies are starting to take notice of what could be called “bubble families,” a demographic whose emergence has been fueled by new technologies and the rapid spread of e-commerce.

Though air quality data has been available for years from the Chinese government — as well as the U.S. embassy and consulates around the country — public awareness of environmental threats is on the rise, especially since the February online release of journalist Chai Jing's environmental documentary “Under the Dome.”



KIM KYUNG-HOON | REUTERS

Jiang Zhen's family, wearing protective masks, ride bicycles as they head to a children's boarding school on the second day after China's capital Beijing issued its second ever “red alert” for air pollution on Sunday.

Websites such as Alibaba's Taobao.com have made it easier to find products from overseas that are perceived as safer.

For Xue Peng, a 32-year-old chemical engineer in Shanghai, his wife's pregnancy three years ago changed everything. “I had a life I needed to protect. It was my responsibility to give him a safe environment,” he said.

Xue spent about 30,000 yuan (\$4,627) on two air purifiers from Philips and Swedish company Blueair and another 20,000 yuan on a water purification system from U.S. firm Ecowater. He limited his toy purchases to big, trusted names such as Lego and Fisher Price.

“Parenthood is a huge catalyst for consumption and upgrading of certain products,” said Elisabeth

de Gramont, Shanghai-based vice president at Jigsaw Communispace, a consumer research group. Among upper middle class parents in China's bigger cities, buying toys and skin care products for children from overseas is common, she said.

Min Yoo, managing director for China and Korea at market research firm YouGov, said that the group of Chinese consumers concerned about the environment and willing to spend money to protect themselves included “not just the white-collar cosmopolitan Chinese.”

“It also includes the 50-, 60-year-old local Chinese living in a city who has never been outside China, whose adult children would buy these products,” he said.

The growing public concerns have presented companies with an opportunity.

Bosch, the German electronics group, recently began selling an in-car air purifier and a small air quality monitor developed in China for the Chinese market.

Xiaomi, the homegrown electronics brand best known for its affordable phones, has launched a new line of air and water filters and monitors. During a November promotion, it sold more than 42,800 air purifiers. By mid-December, it had sold out of its newest model, released only on Nov. 24.

Origins Technology, a Beijing start-up, sold out of its 499 yuan Laser Egg handheld air quality monitors during this month's smog wave. There is now a waitlist for the product.

Actor Nicolas Cage to return stolen dinosaur skull

BY JOSEPH AX
REUTERS

NEW YORK — It appears Hollywood actor Nicolas Cage is the mystery owner who agreed last week to forfeit a rare stolen dinosaur skull to U.S. authorities so it can be returned to the Mongolian government.

The office of Preet Bharara, the U.S. attorney in Manhattan, filed a civil forfeiture complaint on Wednesday to take possession of the skull, which will be repatriated to Mongolia.

The lawsuit and a press release from Bharara's office did not specifically name Cage as the owner. But the lawsuit described the skull as having been bought at auction from a Beverly Hills gallery, I.M. Chait, in March 2007 for \$276,000.

The details match those of Cage's purchase, which made headlines after the Hollywood star encountered financial difficulties in subsequent years.

Authorities would not confirm the identity of the owner, and a lawyer and a publicist for Cage did not respond to requests for comment.

The “National Treasure” actor is not accused of wrongdoing, and authorities said the owner voluntarily agreed to turn over the skull after learning of the circumstances.

Cage outbid fellow movie star Leonardo DiCaprio for the skull, according to prior news reports.

The I.M. Chait gallery had previously purchased and sold an illegally smuggled

duck-billed dinosaur skeleton from convicted paleontologist Eric Prokopi, whom Manhattan U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara called a “one-man black market in prehistoric fossils.”

The Chait gallery has not been accused of wrongdoing. A representative did not return a request for comment on Monday.

It was unclear whether the Nicolas Cage skull was specifically connected to Prokopi, who pleaded guilty in December 2012 to smuggling a nearly complete Tyrannosaurus bataar skeleton out of Mongolia's Gobi desert and was later sentenced to three months in prison.

As part of his guilty plea, Prokopi helped prosecutors recover at least 17 other dinosaur fossils.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Martin Bell, who prosecuted Prokopi, was also the lead government lawyer in the Cage case, according to court records.

The Tyrannosaurus bataar, like its more famous relative Tyrannosaurus rex, was a carnivore that lived approximately 70 million years ago. Its remains have been discovered only in Mongolia, which criminalized the export of dinosaur fossils in 1924.

Since 2012, Bharara's office has recovered more than a dozen Mongolian fossils, including three full Tyrannosaurus bataar skeletons.

“Each of these fossils represents a culturally and scientifically important artifact looted from its rightful owner,” Bharara said in a statement last week.

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