



Air

The Pearl of the Orient, a shopping paradise, a wired city. This is how others call Hong Kong. The territory has long been praised for her lively ambiance, splendid restaurants with Michelin stars, panoramic views of the skyline, as well as lifestyle brands with which Hong Kong manifests herself as a sprawling, affluent metropolis. But lying under this glimmering facade is a crisis often swept under the carpet. It pains those who are plagued by endless coughs and asthmatic attacks – the hallmarks of air pollution. Carefully disguised, the dusty air particles become a haze enveloping our booming metropolis while gradually choking our citizens who are too occupied fighting for a better future to pay attention to the wheezing breaths and tickling throats, not even when air pollution takes a toll on their health. Worse still, the government does not seem to give it a glance either.

This is what we call “home”.

If you walk along the streets, you cannot help but hear rumbling double-decker buses, other spluttering engines and coughing pedestrians. But if you stand still and take in a deep breath, you will feel your overworked lungs choking on exhaust fumes. Only then will you be able to grasp the true story of Hong Kong that is not on any tourist brochures; only then will you be able to understand the deadly price Hong Kong is paying for the economic progress that makes us proud: the deteriorating health of 7 million citizens. It is a time bomb for the health care sector.

Any idea we will be able to escape this is only a flight of fancy. No one is spared the consequences. The government often says the pollution level in Hong Kong is not as serious as major cities in China, which are chronically engulfed in hazardous smogs that have catastrophic impacts on air and road travel, not to mention the country’s economy. Hong Kong’s air pollution is no big deal compared to that of China, we want to believe. Moreover, according to the data released by the Clean Air Network, countries like India, Chile and Mexico rank above Hong Kong in pollution levels. It seems to lull us into a state of complacency.

But if you look at the size of the population as well as the area of those countries, you will soon realize that, thanks to the “canyon effect” caused by cars and buildings packed like sardines, air pollution blankets Hong Kong on more days than most. According to the SCMP, one in four residents in Hong Kong has considered leaving the city to escape the air pollution. A recent survey conducted by ECA International for Asian Expatriates reported that Hong Kong’s livability ranking

has fallen 16 spots to 33rd, one of the steepest slides in the survey. Worsening air pollution is the cause pinpointed by its regional director.

Many of us ask why this is happening. Due to the extravagant lifestyles of many Hong Kong people, whose environmental awareness is tenuous, local vehicle emission remains the biggest contributor to air pollution, leading to a canyon effect that traps the particulates. Emissions from idling diesel vehicles, like trucks, buses and public light buses, produce large amounts of particulates and nitrogen oxides. According to a paper published by Civic Exchange in 2010, motor vehicles were responsible for 30 percent of total suspended particles and 22 percent of nitrogen oxide emissions in the air. These staggering figures point to the fact that buses careening about local streets have inefficient and toxic engines.

The effects of the deteriorating air quality are irreversible. According to the Centre for Health Protection, the potential health effects of air pollution range from physiological changes inside the body to unmistakable symptoms, such as nose and throat irritation, shortness of breath, coughing and chest tightness. Toxic gases, like carbon monoxide, nitrogen monoxide, especially lead, impair the development of children's brains. Unwittingly, we have been sowing the seeds for today's air pollution and tomorrow's public health crisis. Stuck in a bottle, we have become insulated and failed to set a roadmap out of this man-made trap.

The government has come up with a few policy statements previously to stave off the collapse of our economy. But we cannot afford to paint a rosy picture of future economic prosperity while sacrificing our children's health. The government has introduced the new Air Quality Health Index to replace the Air Pollution Index, which had been in use for nearly two decades. The new index directly connects the level of pollution to its ill effects on health so the public, especially susceptible groups, can take precautionary measures and people with respiratory ailments can be better informed. Also, the new benchmarks set by WHO provide more timely and useful air pollution information to the public. This system is believed to be a more potent tool in measuring the air pollution level and hence a more effective measure. But no matter which system we use, air pollution is inflicting huge social costs on our community in terms of additional healthcare expenses, reduced productivity and worsened quality of life. Who should pay for the tangible and intangible loss of our society?

As individuals, we feel helpless to get ourselves out of this vicious circle, but we CAN make a difference. By switching off idling engines or reducing electricity wastage, by being watchdogs and reporting polluting vehicles or smoky shipping vessels, by actively participating in anti-air pollution campaigns or even lobbying politicians, we can actually make a difference and make our city a less polluted place. Remember Hong Kong is our "home".

Her future, as well as ours, is in our hands, and it is time for us to make a difference. If not now, when? If not us, then who?

Cheung Chun Lam (5B, 2014-15)

(Chun Lam's essay was inspired by photographer Tommy Fung's works, which feature a smoking city locked in a glass bottle. The photos were entries for the WYNG Masters Award photography competition in 2013, which theme was "AIR" or air quality. Here is the web link:

<http://www.wyngmastersaward.hk/index.php/en/master-archive-en/master-archive-2013-en/master-archive-2013-gallery-en>)