



Hong Kong in a Bottle

“Love is in the air but the air is highly polluted.” ~ Amit Abraham

An exemplar of free market economy, a cultural hub for all and a metropolis that never gets dark with its magnificent city lights, Hong Kong has long made us proud. But it seems that the glow of the Pearl of the Orient is dimmed. Dimmed, by a hazy mist blurring the skyline that slowly suffocates you and me.

Our city, lost behind an unyielding curtain of smog.

While we are so happily painting a rosy picture of our society, with its prosperity, autonomy and respect for rights and freedoms, a downside of the city is ignored, a situation that is growing more deadly by the minute because of our unawareness; the problem of air pollution.

The quality of air in Hong Kong is worrisome. According to government statistics, Hong Kong’s air pollution is between “medium” to “serious”, with increasing readings of “serious”. In January 2015, over six monitoring stations registered readings of 10+, the highest level on the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI). On another scale, the Real-Time Air Quality Index, it was measured 216, meaning “very unhealthy”.

What gives rise to such abhorrent pollution?

The air pollution problem we face can be divided into local street-level pollution and the regional smog problem. Firstly, the street-level pollution is mostly related to the use of vehicles. Hong Kong has the highest road density in the world with 530,000 cars on the road. With a total road length of only 1,900 kilometres, there are approximately 280 vehicles per kilometre. To make matters worse, only taxis and public light buses have made the switch from diesel fuel to LPG, while over a quarter of vehicles are still using the more polluting diesel. The highly packed skyscrapers also make it difficult for air pollutants to disperse and a large amount of suspended particulates accumulate on the roadside instead. The heavy reliance on coal to generate electricity as well as construction works is another source of pollutants. Secondly, the regional smog problem is believed to be a significant contributing factor to the deteriorating air quality. The pollutants emitted every day from the thousands of factories in the Pearl River Delta are carried by wind to us.

The severity of the problem is not to be underestimated. It is easy to overlook the impacts of air pollution as it often leads to chronic or non-specific health hazards such as weakened immunity rather than acute conditions. However, poor air quality has a profound impact on our society, including the individuals, the government and the economy. A study by the University of Hong Kong in 2013 reveals alarming truths: Air pollution is to blame for over 3000 premature deaths, 150,000 being hospitalized and an economic loss hitting \$39.4 billion per year due to loss in productivity and medical bills. Professor Anthony Hedley who headed the study, commented on the problem as "...the biggest threat to Hong Kong's sustainable health". Cases of cancers, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases reached an all-time high, accounting for over half of the total deaths in 2013 because of the toxic cocktail we breathed in every day. Hong Kong's competitiveness as a global financial centre is also threatened, with businesses relocating to alternative cities because of our poor air quality.

Air pollution has always been an issue of utmost severity, no matter in Hong Kong or its global counterparts. Sadly, while cities like New York, Tokyo and London have kicked off acts to clean the air, Hong Kong is slow on the uptake and lags behind tremendously.

All is not lost, however. Improving air quality is indeed a difficult shot, but far from impossible. In the meantime, it is essential to recognize that each and every resident bears the brunt of this heinous fruit, as it is not a problem for a few, but for all. Combined efforts from all concerned are of vital importance in fighting for a blue sky.

Sacrificing environmental protection for economic development was always considered to be a reasonable bargain. It is high time that we acknowledged the importance of sustainable development, which the United Nations defines as "...*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". It boils down to a balance among economic, social and environmental concerns. When initiating a new project, environmental damage must be taken into account. Take the construction of the Third Runway as an example. Questionable economic benefits aside, the huge cost to the environment includes irretrievable loss of over 650 hectares of sea habitats and of course, massive increase in carbon emission due to construction works as well as additional air traffic. In such cases, compromise between the economy and the environment must be made.

Cooperation is another must. As air pollutants from Zhujiang Delta constitute much of our polluted air, the two governments of Hong Kong and Guangdong should come hand in hand, united under the common goal for a better tomorrow. Together they should bring the abysmal air quality back under control. Stricter pollution standards and better monitoring networks should be set up.

Finally, education is a key that never goes amiss. Air pollution is a problem that we neglect to our cost and public awareness must be raised. The potential hazards should be engraved upon our minds. More importantly, the public should understand that it can make a difference. Everyday acts

and small choices, such as taking public transportation and consuming greener products, can and do add up to a great step forward.

Then perhaps, the dream of a clean home is no longer a dream.

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(Phoebe'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>)