



## **“Stardust” in the Skyline – Air Pollution & Urbanization**

*“I durst not laugh for fear of opening my lips and receiving the bad air.”*

*~ William Shakespeare*

Close your eyes, lift your head and take a deep breath. Can you smell clean air as fresh as juicy lemons; as pleasant as blooming lilacs? Unfortunately, breathing in pure air seems to be a luxury for the seven million citizens in Hong Kong.

As the 9<sup>th</sup> largest trading entity in the world, the Pearl of the Orient has successfully transformed from a productive industrialized manufacturing city to a illustrious international financial centre. Yet, whilst the economy continued to prosper, with the high GDP of US\$287.9 billion in 2014, rapid urbanization and industrialization have become the main culprit of causing environmental degradation.

Hong Kong has long been complimented for her fascinating view of Victoria Harbour as well as spectacular cityscapes. At night, a dazzling galaxy of light is shimmers around us. Yet, during daytime, this Asia’s world city is covered with “stardust”. The atmospheric contaminants make our skyline gloomy grey with hazy smoke everywhere. Most Hong Kong people, if not all, are confined in the concrete jungle, surrounded by skyscrapers and street canyons with poor ventilation, and their lungs are absorbing vehicular emissions non-stop. Nowhere to escape.

If you try to walk around the densely populated districts of Mongkok and Causeway Bay for just a few minutes during the hot wet summer, you can definitely feel how torturous the heat wave is. It seems that staying indoors with air-conditioning is the only way out to avoid getting breathless. Yet, seldom do us realize that our selfishness and greed for comfort is actually the culprit for making the city as hot as the Sahara Desert.

In Hong Kong, the burning of non-renewable fossil fuels by power plants, marine vessels and industries greatly contribute to smog, leading to low visibility for over 1000 hours per year. In the meantime, in order to accommodate the need of commuters and facilitate the flow of goods, motor cars, container trucks and airplanes generate a lot of suspended particulates and nitrogen dioxide. Worse still, the unlimited use of electrical devices such as air-conditioners and refrigerators creates greenhouse gases at the speed of light, causing high street-level pollution. Globally, industries generate toxic gases, causing acid rain, damaging wildlife habitats and reducing agricultural

production by billions of dollars each year. Such practices over-burden ecosystems at the same time, intensifying global warming. The disastrous effects are irreversible.

Air pollution has become an ever-alarming world issue in modern times. Not only is air pollution considered a gigantic environmental risk by the United Nations, it also jeopardizes human health overtly. According to the World Health Organization, seven million people died in 2012 due to air pollution. These deaths were mainly caused by heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and lung cancer, all pollution-related. Research by three universities and a think-tank estimates that air pollution is costing Hong Kong about HK\$21.2 billion a year in terms of hospital admissions, resulting in significant loss of productivity. In 2011, a survey suggested that the worsening air quality was making three out of four companies operating in Hong Kong hard to retain overseas employees. Tourists also hesitate to travel to Hong Kong despite the scrumptious food and cultural attractions. Hong Kong's long-term competitiveness is likely to be weakened and then her position as the gateway to China's market might be replaced by the neighbouring Singapore, whose air quality is much better. Indeed, air pollution is no longer only an environmental problem, the adverse chain impacts created have already developed into a social, economic or even political crisis.

Isn't it so ironic that no matter how much we earn, eventually we have to pay back? Air pollution comes with the progress of urban metabolism and consumerism. It seems that this is unavoidable to every country, ranging from western to eastern ones. Whatever a country's stage of development, sacrificing our vulnerable planet to fulfil the desire for economic growth is unjustifiable.

As a saying goes, "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." Sustainability has been highly emphasized in recent years as it enables the continuation of our species. If we just focus on maximizing economic benefits at present, this will undoubtedly compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Is increasing GDP more important than conserving our precious crystal blue skyline?

It is high time that different stakeholders joined hands to alleviate the deep-rooted air pollution problem. Lately, the Hong Kong government has gained ground by launching incentive programmes, like retrofitting old diesel vehicles with particulate reduction devices as well as reducing the registration tax for environmentally-friendly vehicles. To further improve the air quality, the government should work with the Guangdong Provincial Authorities to tackle the severe smog problem in the Zhujiang Delta. Stricter environmental control is the best antidote to lower the Air Quality Health Index. Encouraging the use of natural gas for electricity generation and exploring renewable energy, for instance, wind power and solar power, are feasible too. Natural systems cannot be separated from humanity. If the government can act as an advocate and collaborate with the business sector and commoners to go green, the problem can probably be

ameliorated.

Canned oxygen in mint or grapefruit flavour is now available in Japan's 7-11 stores. Trendy colourful anti-pollution masks have gone viral in Beijing. What will be the next innovative high-tech product invented for the reason of contamination? I just cannot imagine what our future generations' lives will be like if we keep abusing our fragile earth and selfishly emitting "stardust". Frankly, no technology can replace the beauty of nature; nevertheless, it is never too late for us to change from now on.

Wong Kin Man (5C, 2014-15)

*(Kin Man'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> )