

Abroad in China

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Nearly every morning during the 2016 fall semester, I awoke in my Beijing apartment to the fuchsia glow of a neon sun. Buildings rose from and disappeared into grey patches of an abyss. In the evening, the dancing red lights of Chinese building signs reflected in the air pollution, tinging the dark night in bright color.

While studying abroad in Beijing allowed me to experience an unparalleled blend of traditional and modern cultures, I also found myself subject to much of the resulting dualities and chaos in daily life there.

For over a decade, news headlines concerning China have focused on the country's placement as the world's fastest growing economy. With the international media attention that China received for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, one side effect of this massive economic growth gained increasingly more coverage: air pollution. In August 2007, the New York Times published an article that examined the staggering costs of China's economic expansion. Journalists Joseph Khan and Jim Yardley found that, of the 560 million urbanites of China, only one percent lived in air pollution conditions considered un Hazardous by European Union standards and that, as of 2003, nearly 300,000 people died annually from air-pollution-related illnesses ("As China Roars, Pollution Reaches Deadly Extremes").

In a recent study, Avraham Ebenstein, Maoyang Fan, Michael Greenstone, Guojun He, and Maigeng Zhou (2017) examined the health effects of China's air pollution following the subsidization of coal for indoor heating in northern regions. The study analyzes the impact of sustained exposure to particulate matter (PM) on life expectancy by comparing the northern regions with subsidized coal heating and the southern regions, which have not implemented this heating system. Ebenstein et al. (2017) found that the Huai River Policy (the subsidization of coal heating in northern regions) resulted in a significantly negative drop in life expectancy. The northern regions ultimately had greater PM measurements and consequently lower life expectancies: "PM10 concentrations that are 41.7 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ (95% CI = 16.4–67.0) or 46% higher in the north and reductions in life expectancies of 3.1 years (95% CI = 1.3–4.9) in the north caused by elevated rates of cardiorespiratory mortality."

With the social chaos produced by such harmful environmental and health conditions, the Chinese government has recently made efforts to reestablish a sense of stability. An article published by the South China Morning Post on August 24th, 2017 examines the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection's pledge to reduce PM measurements by fifteen percent this year ("China vows big winter air pollution cuts in northern cities").

As inescapable as these environmental issues are in daily life living in China, I sought individual refuge in my study of the societal impact of China's air pollution struggles. Not only did my learning occur during classroom lectures about Chinese environmental ethics or health concerns, but also in my daily experiences taking precautions against the dangers that air pollution poses. I was gifted with facial masks and instructed on the preparation of helpful herbal teas to combat a sore throat that can often result from walking outside in the Beijing air. In these ways, I found myself acclimating to the dizzying pace of day-to-day life in China. I reflected on the nation's attempts to overcome environmental challenges, and I learned to appreciate the small but constant resilience of my professors, fellow students, and friends. I learned to celebrate the days that Beijing's *dàfēng*, or large wind, pushed aside the visible pollution, but I also learned to admire the hopeful temporality of Beijing's glowing pink sun.

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