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Local Op Ed

In recent news, the Chinese will be arriving in the afterlife naked. Yes, you heard right, naked, the Chinese government has recently banned the burning of the recently deceased’s clothing in Beijing. The Chinese have a long standing tradition of burning the cloths of their loved ones after death, in order to ensure that they arrive in the after life with clothing to wear. Unfortunately, for the recently deceased, Beijing has temporarily banned the burning of anything in it’s streets, as well as mandating breaks for government workers, public schools, and construction work in order to keep people safe from the toxic smog and reduce particulate matter in the air.

The sources of Beijing’s mess are countless, they have largely unregulated coal burning energy grid, increasing numbers of families that can afford an automobile, and rampant over population. When you place enough energy consumers in a small area, no matter how environmentally conscious the government is, there will be pollution, and it has to go somewhere. In the case of most Chinese cities, the only place for pollution to go is the streets because there is no clean air for it to diffuse into.

The citizens of Beijing are already feeling the consequences of this pollution. Beijing is plagued by concentrations of PM 2.5 particles (particles small enough in diameter to enter the blood stream through the lungs and cause cancer and respiratory diseases) that are sometimes as high as 300 micrograms per cubic meter which is 12 times what the World Health Organization recognizes as a healthy concentration of 25. China is the only country in the world that has annual fatalities that can be directly attributed to air quality. Smog, however, is not the only consequence that plagues Beijing, inhabitance have had to contend with rising food prices as crop failures result from smog literally blotting out the sun.

In the case of Beijing, the government is not interested in the moral responsibility of a healthy environment and rather only makes changes in environmental policy when it feels the public eye of the western world.

The Chinese government initiates clean up efforts in anticipation of major events like the Olympics, the Beijing marathon, or hosting APEC. While these clean up efforts are impressive in scale and execution they are temporary face-lifts that entail measures such as halting construction, shutting down power plants and prohibiting any forms of outdoor combustion. These are not sustainable solutions and do absolutely nothing to address the causes of pollution at large.

The solutions necessary are already in practice. Most Scandinavian and even European countries have implemented environmental regulations on their carbon and particulate emissions; even America is joining the ranks of environmentally conscious nations with a new set of regulations on the burning of coal that stand to reduce America’s carbon emissions by 30% from 2005 levels by 2030. There are cleaner sources of energy like natural gas, oil, nuclear, or even renewable sources of energy like wind power that are economically viable to displace coal as China’s main source of power. The real solution to Beijing’s toxic smog is not how they go about reducing it but that they do something, anything to combat the source rather than the symptoms.

One of the biggest obstacles in Beijing’s clean up stems from ancient Chinese culture. When westerners travel to China on business, they are often instructed not to be blunt, correct someone in public, or assign blame to anyone. It is also not uncommon for a Chinese person to give wrong directions rather than to admit that they do not know how to get somewhere. This behavior is very foreign to us, but in Asia it is a staple of life, it’s known as saving face. In most of Asia “face” is a more complicated outlet than just one’s ego. It encompasses your personal reputation, your socioeconomic and academic backgrounds, age and connections with other individuals. The Chinese are hyper sensitive to the loss of “face” and will almost always lie or cheat in order to preserve their own or even the “face” of others.

Unfortunately this social construct obstructs the collection of data and the creation of policy, because addressing climate change and pollution would entail the Chinese government accepting responsibility for their shortcomings, an act that would result in a massive loss of face. As we learn from an early age, the first step in fixing a problem is admitting that there is one. In order for Beijing to once again have clear skies, China must accept responsibility for its pollution on a global scale.