

China Is a Work in Progress: Renewable Energy, Science and Technology, Battle against Air Pollution

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Saudi Arabia, rolling dunes, endless desert, little rain. Northern China. Verdant hills, green fields and this time of year, heavy snow. Yet there is less water available in northern China per head of population than in Saudi Arabia.

With a fifth of the world's population, China has about 7 per cent of the planet's fresh water.

Even the quality of what is available is poor. Tap water is undrinkable without being filtered heavily. Industrial waste and the flow of pesticides from fields contribute massively to pollution. At least 10, 000 petrochemical plants dot the banks of the Yangtze River. China has about 88,000 reservoirs but at least 40 percent are in a poor condition.

Things are not much cleaner above ground. Massive strides have been taken to combat air pollution in northern China but it is still a cause for concern. The first two weeks of January have seen more polluted days, where levels of particulate matter 2.5 (often referred to as PM 2.5, because their diameter is 2.5 microns), exceed World Health Organization guidelines, than clear ones. Correct, enough of the science. But PM2.5 levels are a main topic of conversation in Beijing. It is not uncommon for conversations in shops or the train queues to mention PM2.5 levels.

Some context. There are about 25,000 microns in an inch. In other words, they are small, about several thousand could fit on this full stop. They embed themselves in lungs causing a range of lingering respiratory problems that can be fatal.

Air pollution in China claims more lives than smoking. Outdoor air pollution in China causes about 1.2 million premature deaths a year, almost double the 750,000 early deaths caused by smoking. Up to 200, the air quality index for China goes up in increments of 50 with 0-50 classified as excellent. I am writing this in Beijing with the index at 259, classified as heavily polluted.

China, the globe's largest emitter, has installed more renewable energy capacity than any other country but it also opens a coal-fired power station every two weeks.

China is an ancient country getting older. The number of people over 60 is currently about 15 percent of the 1.3 billion population. This is expected to grow to nearly 500 million by mid century.

Then we deal with the 1:2:4 issue. Married workers often have to support a child, two parents and four grandparents. This means living with them in small flats but even if the main breadwinner works far from home, he or she, has to provide.

About half of China's elderly live alone or with grandchildren as the parents have left to seek work. The Spring Festival in February, the largest movement of humans on the planet, will see many return home for their one visit a year.

So concerned are the authorities about the plight of the elderly that a law was passed in 2013 demanding that children visit their parents and not neglect them. That a country that prides itself on filial piety has to pass such a law indicates the seriousness the issue is treated with.

The climbing divorce rate in China means more elderly people are not being cared for by their families.

The rate has seen a marked increase over the last decade, driven largely by working women who feel empowered to start a new life. The government is trying to slow the trend, seeing it as a source of social instability.

Divorces rose rapidly from 1.8 per thousand persons in 2002 to 3.2 per thousand persons in 2017. And marriage rates have plunged. After peaking at 9.9 per thousand persons in 2013, the marriage rate in 2017 was only 7.7 per thousand persons.

"Have you divorced today?" has become a common joke between Chinese people. The issue is compounded by the fact that divorce in China condemns the elderly in-laws to an uncertain future.

Chinese New year starts on February 5. Ironically, this will be the year of the pig. Pork is the most popular dish and the health of the pig stock is of national strategic significance. But swine fever has cast a shadow.

China has approximately 700 million pigs but authorities have warned the country's pork industry this month that covering up cases of African swine fever is a crime.

The animal husbandry and veterinary affairs bureau is stepping up investigations and increasing punishment concerning illegal activity in the pig industry, said a statement published on the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs website.

Deaths of pigs have to be reported and privately slaughtering and selling sick or dead pigs would be classified as a criminal offence, it said. Compensation of 1,200 yuan (\$177) for each pig culled was sufficient incentive for farmers to report the disease, it added.

China is experiencing the worst outbreak of the disease ever, and it has confirmed about 100 cases of swine fever across 23 provinces (out of 34 provincial level administrative units) since August last year. The disease, for which there is no cure or vaccine, is deadly to pigs, although does not harm people.

China is a fascinating, incredible, colorful, safe and often frustrating country to live in. It has enjoyed turbo-charged growth not because it has cheated on trade deals, or pulled the wool over the eyes of the unsuspecting West. Its people work hard and are reaping the benefits of their labor. For many who travel home for the Spring Festival it will be the only break from work they have, including weekends. Its universities are breaking new ground, especially in science and technology. Its streets are safe to walk on. But it does have problems, including pollution, care for the elderly and food safety.

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