

THE CHINESE WAY

by Sabrina Mondschein

Sometimes all that Sabrina Mondschein wants is a long, hot shower or a room filled with light on a dreary winter day. But her Chinese roommates refuse to partake in such extravagances.

CHINA

This rural area passes below a plane east of Beijing. Though beautiful, the mountains are almost entirely obscured by smog.



xi'an, china

I am 24 years old and I am losing my hair. My friends and family helped me find out why, and we discovered that, coupled with a limited diet and a little stress, Xi'an's pollution has taken an immediate toll on my body. I had moved to Xi'an after college to study Chinese and start my journalism career. I found three Chinese college students looking for a fourth roommate and thought the \$50 in monthly rent would make for a cheap language immersion experience.

I did not expect the pollution to so dramatically affect me. But even more surprising was that in the thick of incessant smog and an unnerving pattern of smoking and littering, I would witness some of the greatest and most longstanding efforts toward sustainable living.

Lessons on sustainability in Xi'an, really? The context could not be more mind-boggling. It started with a debate I had

An abundance of items, from cookware to hardware, is available for sale on the streets of Xi'an.

with my roommates, late into the night, over the electricity bill.

Beyond the daily exchange of laughter and smiles in Xi'an is evidence of an all-but-forgotten environment in rapid decay. It is easy to look past the withered faces of the elderly out for their morning exercise, the fruit vendors' playful attempts to catch my eye on my walk to class, the children playing near the preschool. Grocery bags, Styrofoam containers from takeout meals, little plastic milk bags and withered vegetables lie amongst piles of dirt and debris blown from nearby construction sites. The construction gives rise to shiny new malls and apartment complexes, and then moves on to the next block. In restaurants, Internet cafes, offices, even elevators, chain-smoking men create an insidious and omnipresent smog, matched only by the pollution outdoors.

Xi'an is a coal-burning city, and there are no fewer than three smokestacks sitting directly outside my window. They puff fumes into our apartment, coating everything in a film of black dust. This is not the "bad" part of town; almost everyone has a window looking out onto smoke stacks. No one can escape the dust, and that is a problem in most cities in China, including Shanghai and Beijing. I can now recognize the smell of coal burning anywhere, and when the slightest whiff comes through the house I rush to close all the windows and curtains. My roommates say they are Chinese and therefore do not notice the smell.

Locals are not entirely oblivious to the



pollution, however. In winter, most people wear a *kou zhao*, a facemask, because the air is colder and that much more polluted from coal-burning ovens used for heating. Those from outside the city reminisce about the fresh air back home. Comments on the pollution replace chitchat about the weather. "Did you go out yesterday? It was so foggy!" goes the euphemism.

My Chinese friends and neighbors react to smog the same way they would likely react to fog: annoyance, but never anger. Alarmism seems foreign. I never saw Greenpeace in Xi'an, and I never met angry students with long dissertations on the evils that industry has brought to China's old provincial capital. They will say the air is bad, but shrug it off. "What can we do?" they ask. Then they will go on to talk about China's economic development or Xi'an's distinguished history.

I initially took their shrugs as a sign of apathy. When we had to pay the electricity bill, however, my roommates were all but apathetic. We use a prepaid card for electricity, much like a calling card. When the money on the card runs out, there is no electricity. We then run down to the management office, card in hand, to top off. This means that when the electricity goes out in the middle of the night, or on a holiday, there is no chance of turning it back on.

For us, that also means no showers. As in many places in China, a giant electric water heater sits above the showerhead. After it warms up for 20 minutes, we switch on an electrical pump that brings water up to our seventh-floor apartment. Without electric-

A vendor sits next to a *wei qi* board, balanced on top of a carton of pears. Men line the streets playing this game. Two hunch over the board while a group of onlookers stands over them and comments loudly on each move. Men often wear suits, even when they're out hiking for the day: suits don't hold the same connotations of formality as they do in the West.

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ity only a dribble of cold water comes out.

We try to avoid this fiasco, but the card system isn't an exact science. This was made clear when my roommate, Michelle, came into my room for the second time that week, to collect the roughly 10rmb (\$1.30) we each contributed to the electricity bill. For the second time that week none of us could shower. "How about paying 100rmb (\$12) this time?" I offered. Although my three roommates have distinct personalities, tastes and views, in this situation their reactions were the same: they collectively gasped. One hundred was way too much, and they couldn't match that.

I offered to pay the whole bill, since I refused to use fluorescent lighting, played music any time I was home and took lon-

In the open market across from Shaanxi Normal University's main gates, a woman sells mushrooms and peppers. There are also bottles of vinegar and oil in the back. Everything is sold for pennies, and by the jin, roughly one pound.



ger showers. I was, after all, the big consuming American in the group. But they refused. They tried to explain that this was *our* apartment, and we all share it. We cannot separate the bill to see how much one person uses, so we all have to pay together. Furthermore, they argued, if we put too much money on the card we would get careless and forget to turn off the lights.

Their solution was to use less electricity: take out the lights in the living room, since we only watch TV there, and shower less. After little more debate, we agreed that for now I could pay up to about 25rmb (\$3.25) in electricity, and we could discuss the arrangement again later. I was satisfied with our decision, but bewildered by their thinking.

During the following months I began to understand their logic: it embodied thriftiness to the highest degree. They saved every plastic bag, mended even the most inexpensive clothes or pots before buying new ones and adamantly avoided taxis, even in the rain and cold. Two would sit at one desk to study so they could share the light from one lamp. We spent hours cleaning the apartment each week to save the 20rmb (\$2.60) it would cost to pay a cleaning lady. I bought Pledge and they chose not to use it. "We don't really think it's good for us," was all they said.

Quiet and unobtrusive, they were nevertheless resolute in their views and acted them out wholeheartedly each day. To them, each yuan spent was hard-earned money from their parents. They did not feel they had the right to spend it freely, and they didn't have much of it to begin with.

The sense of ownership my roommates felt over our home coupled with their sense of debt to their parents astounded, humbled and at times upset my consumption-based senses. Sometimes I just wanted a long, hot shower or a room filled with light on a dreary winter day, but no one had ever made me so acutely aware of the costs. And my roommates hadn't even picketed outside my room.



SHAN KHAN

economy first?

China's massive economic growth has been a mixed blessing. The government now finds itself in a difficult position, caught between furthering economic development and slowing industry down in the interests of the environment. This conflict between immediate economic gratification and long-term sustainable development is one that the entire world must face—and sooner, rather than later.

In 1978 The Communist Party of China (CPC) revealed a new policy of economic reform that aimed to privatize and modernize Chinese industry. CPC leader Deng Xiaoping asserted that for China, "development is of overriding importance." This economic reform has proven to be astonishingly successful: China has seen a 10-fold increase in GDP since 1978. But as the country's 1.3 billion citizens are beginning to discover, this economic explosion has not come about without consequences. China must now deal with looming environmental challenges, including air pollution, poor water quality and land erosion.

Turn for the Worse

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency asserts that China is now the largest CO2 emitter in the world, surpassing the United States by eight percent. China's coal-fueled industries have caused acid rain in Seoul, South Korea and Tokyo—and even air pollution over Los Angeles!

A disputed World Bank report claims that 760,000 people die each year in China as a result of poor environmental conditions. Two-thirds of people living in urban areas are breathing in polluted air, while 300 million rural residents do not have access to clean drinking water. Studies show that cancer is

now the country's leading cause of death. Meanwhile, as a result of rapid urbanization and deforestation, the Gobi desert is growing at a rate of 950 square miles per year, giving rise to destructive dust storms that cause health problems and disrupt daily life.

Interestingly, while coal-fueled industries have earned China big money, the environmental consequences are now *costing* big money: according to the World Bank, 10 percent of China's gross domestic product is lost to pollution, both because of sick workers and factory shutdowns.

Cleaning Up

With the 2008 Beijing Olympics approaching, China has taken an active interest in improving environmental conditions, particularly air quality. In 2006, the 11th Five-Year Plan was approved, which seeks to reduce energy consumption by 20 percent per unit GDP. The government is closing illegal coalmines and factories that do not meet environmental standards and working on developing clean power alternatives.

Officials have proposed the "Green Wall of China," which entails planting nine million acres of forest, from Beijing to Mongolia, in an effort to stave off the airborne soil and recreate arable land. The "Green Wall" is modeled after the 1935 Shelterbelt Project of the American Midwest, in which trees were planted in an effort to control the Dust Bowl. Whether or not these initiatives will be successful remains to be seen, but they are steps in the right direction.

—G.P.

Sources: *New York Times*; Reuters; International Herald Tribune; Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency; The World Bank; BBC News; Wired; CIA World Factbook.



At night, an elderly couple sifts through the garbage dump at the end of a lane of little restaurants adjoining the open market.

They had a strong sense of their role within their family, but also within the home we had created for ourselves. They each contributed to the bills and the hours we cleaned. Their bonds with their parents seemed to be at the forefront of their minds; they often brought it up in conversation, and so did the stream of friends that came to visit us. “This is the Chinese way,” I would often hear. This was their honor code as they defined it, which made me question how “Chinese” I would ever try to be, and what that would mean in the context of my daily life.

Of course, living in another country forces you to reexamine and redefine yourself, but this time I was beginning to learn that our definitions determine how we affect our world, no matter whom or where we are. Poonam Arora, a woman working at the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at Columbia University in New

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York, provided an uncannily apt perspective on my life in Xi’an. During a phone conversation, she explained that it wasn’t always about the individual versus society, or “What’s better for me?” versus “What’s better for the world?” The question we ask before we act is instead, “What does a person like me do in a situation like this?” From what I understood, this is the crux around which people base most decisions.

“It’s interesting to see how when people have a sense of social connection, they will look at the dilemma in front of them [and] they’ll see it as an opportunity for gain and doing the right thing,” Poonam told me. “The conflict of ‘me versus them’ almost does not exist. It becomes a non-dilemma.”

Looking back, I don’t ever remember my roommates complaining. When the weather was turning and one of my roommates, Liyang, couldn’t afford a coat, she smiled and told us not to worry; she could

just wear more layers. I didn’t hear an undertone of bitterness, and her attitude astounded me. She was just doing her part.

My roommates’ motivation might not have been to protect the world’s ecosystem, but they were helping “their environment”: their family and friends, even when those people were thousands of miles away. Our bonds to each other and the acute awareness that every action affects those in our environment, no matter where they are on the globe, are the strongest and perhaps *only* way to make our efforts sustainable.

Wild protests and gloom-and-doom messages have their place in the realms of politics and media, but what really makes us change? I had seen the protests and felt the verifiable anger of friends around the world who sincerely cared about making a difference. But no one affected my behavior and my outlook more than my room-

mates, starting with the debate over the electricity bill.

An old friend from college put it perfectly: “This kind of accidental environmentalism needs to be integrated with ... a little bit of pro-action. Meanwhile, we can stand to learn a few things about careful consumption ourselves. Just because we have the ability to spend profligately doesn’t mean we should.”

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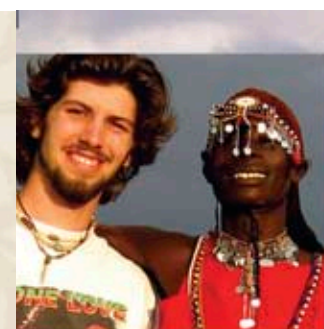
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