SELLING AIR:
A MARKET RESPONSE TO AIR POLLUTION IN CHINA?

China and the Environment Blog

When I was in Hong Kong in early December 2011, I met with the young environmental advocates from the group, the Clean Air Network CAN). CAN has been engaged in community education through the use of community-based air monitoring instruments, similar in some respects to the parallel work that has been happening in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the United States and around the world in highly polluted communities. CAN has also utilized clever social media strategies that have included a video clip of the actor Daniel Wu promoting the bottling and sale of clean air. The video, produced prior to my trip in 2011, is humorous and engaging, and most importantly, through its ironic theme of bottling and selling “clean air,” it underlines the serious nature of the air quality issue and the need for a vigorous public policy approach.

What a difference two years makes! Just literally days after I left Hong Kong and China, Beijing experienced, in December 2011, a horrific air pollution episode that lasted several days and was called “Crazy Bad.” A Beijing-based environmental NGO, Green Beagle, introduced its version of community-based monitoring by training community residents how to apply their cell phones and other devices to read the air pollution levels in different parts of the city. For the next couple of years, one after another sequence of dangerous air pollution levels occurred, not just in Beijing but in nearly every major Tier 1 and Tier 2 city in China, far exceeding the safe levels identified by the World Health Organization, including for PM 2.5 (small particles), that could lead to serious health problems.

Residents in these cities first responded by wearing gas masks, and, in several cities, began to protest about specific facilities that were contributing to the problem. Newspaper articles on the subject have been continuous. Foreign companies doing business in China began providing air pollution salary compensation packages for their employees. Wealthy residents in some of the
most polluted cities began to relocate to some of the less polluting smaller cities.

Now we have the latest “market” response – selling clean air! In China’s southwest province of Guizhou, the chief of the provincial tourism bureau spoke about a plan to commercialize bottles of fresh air, initially to sell to tourists but then as a product for all residents which could be a money maker. An article in several papers, including the Daily Mail in the UK, said that China President Xi Jingping had even raised the idea at a March meeting of the National People’s Congress about the government manufacturing bottles of oxygen.

Even though it hadn’t intended to do so, the Clean Air Network spoof of 2011 has now become the market’s response (and conceivably one aspect of a government response) to an issue that threatens development and marketization approaches not only in China and Hong Kong but here in the U.S. and other countries as well. It’s an outcome that the Clean Air Network hadn’t intended but one that should only intensify the work of air pollution activists in Hong Kong and China, in the U.S., and around the world.