

China's carbon footprint grows with the good life

November 26 2015, by Bill Savadove



Chen Jian, 33, son of peach farmers, poses for a photo in Shanghai

The son of peach farmers, Chen Jian relishes the fruits of his middle class life, driving to work and flying on holiday, epitomising how China's carbon footprint has grown alongside the prosperity of its nearly 1.4 billion people.

Chen, 33, grew up without television in a village on the outskirts of

Shanghai. Now he drives his own Chevy Lova to work as a manager at a foreign company and enjoys jet travel to Southeast Asia during his vacations.

"Our family's economic foundation was poor," Chen said, sipping sparkling mineral water at a luxury hotel in downtown Shanghai and adding that he can do any job on the farm. "I am a rural child, I am not embarrassed to say it."

China's ruling Communist Party bases its claim to legitimacy on delivering better lives to the world's most populous country, and since it embraced the market it has overseen a boom that created a burgeoning [middle class](#), now 300 million strong.

Average incomes remain far below those of the United States, but China—now the world's second largest economy—is already the biggest international market for both cars and smartphones. It is also the worst polluter on the planet, pouring an estimated nine to 10 billion tonnes of climate-warming carbon dioxide into the air in 2013.

Its economic miracle is built on the smoke-belching factories which create jobs and churn out goods for global markets, and China's ability to reduce its emissions is a major concern ahead of a crucial climate conference starting in Paris later this month.

Just 18 percent of people surveyed in China believe climate change is a "very serious" problem, while only 15 percent believe the phenomenon will harm them during their lifetime, according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center.

Freedom to drive

Chen used to need two and a half hours by bus to visit the family farm

from his home in central Shanghai. Now the car journey takes just 45 minutes on new roads, and public transport holds no appeal.

He is planning on buying another vehicle, and his work colleagues suggest he should choose one of German luxury brand Mercedes-Benz's cars, "because it's my style", he said.

"If I rode a bike to work, it would be too far," he added. "Driving a car is a kind of freedom, my time can be very flexible."



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China has more than 260 million vehicles on the road, with another 23 million auto sales last year adding to its emissions output.

But Chen intends his next car to be electric, while keeping his Chevy for his wife.

At least eight Chinese cities have slapped limits on car numbers because of congestion and pollution including Shanghai, which auctions car plates at high prices but awards them free to electric vehicles—providing a powerful economic incentive to go green.

"Shanghai air is bad. A major part is factories, but cars are also a big problem," Chen said.

Like a good Bordeaux

Chinese factories, run on state-subsidised electricity largely from [coal-fired power plants](#), are the bigger problem. The Asian country is the world's biggest coal user and producer and newly released official statistics showed it had under-reported its coal consumption for years.

Chen claims his mattress-making company's three plants in China have near-zero emissions, though he acknowledges other firms are not so clean.

"Our factories are completely different from local companies," Chen said.

To control pollution, China plans to expand an experimental emission trading scheme from a handful of cities to nationwide, under which companies that produce more than their mandated share of emissions must buy unused quotas from others.



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But the rollout has already been pushed back to 2017 from earlier expectations of next year, and there has been scepticism about national implementation and enforcement.

Chen blames global warming for threatening his parents' income, which depends on the luscious peaches which weigh down the branches of dozens of trees at their orchard in Nanhui.

"There is some impact from global warming," he said. "Because of the weather, the overall quality is lower because there is more rain.

"It's like Bordeaux wine, there are good years and bad years—honey peaches are the same."

Chen and his wife harbour a dream of returning to the farm to live more simply, and with a reduced [carbon footprint](#), but those plans could themselves fall victim to climate change.

Low-lying Shanghai is considered to be among the world's mega-cities most at risk from rising sea levels, and the farm is near the coast—raising the prospect of the Chen family peach trees one day drowning in salt water.

But Chen is unconcerned.

"Rising sea levels is a universal risk and it's not only about Shanghai. If our place is flooded, then many other places in the world would also be flooded," he said.

"There is no point in worrying about this now."

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