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That Kuznets Curve seen in the wild [1]

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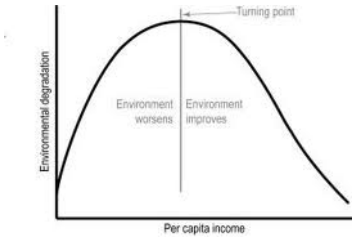

I'm often amused by people breathlessly reporting something that we would expect to be true. You know the sort of thing, capitalists pursue profits and so on. Here it's the idea that China might clean up some of the pollution it emits because people don't like seeing their children choke on the stuff [3].

> Last week, an eight-year-old girl from China's Jiangsu province was diagnosed with lung cancer, which was caused, according to doctors, by the tiny particle PM2.5 in air pollution that is most dangerous to health. This case highlighted the reality of exposure to high levels of pollution for vulnerable groups such as children. Such headlines about the dangers of PM2.5 have become daily occurrences in China after pollution in cities such as Beijing reached unprecedented levels this year, prompting intense media pressure and public outcry that forced the government to introduce a flurry of contingency plans and bold targets to reduce PM2.5 levels by 25% by 2017.

Well, yes, all good stuff but this is exactly what we would expect to happen. It's called the Kuznets Curve. Quite simply, when people are as poor as Maoist economic stupidity can make them be they'll put up with a remarkable amount of pollution around the place if they can only get a bit more to eat, a change of clothes, that sort of thing. But as those basics (all very much part of Maslow's Heirarchy of Needs) start to turn up in some sort of abundance people then start to think that not having junior cough up his lungs every morning might be a good idea too.

So, we end up with more of the resources of a society that is getting richer being devoted to polluting the environment a little less. There's nothing odd, exciting or even exceptional about this: it's just what we would expect to happen. Which is, as I say, an occasion for amusement to me. Dog bites man, kittens arte cute, water is wet and richer countries become cleaner countries. It might be worth a newspaper piece telling us that China seems to be at the peak of the Kuznets Curve (at something like the income levels we were at when we peaked too, remarkably enough) but to portray it as some mind-boggling divergence seems very odd indeed.

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