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**What are the key characteristics of societies centred on fossil fuel extraction?**

Fossil fuel has long been the main source of energy for societies all around the world. However, for societies that are built around fossil fuel extraction, such as Shangxi in China and FortMcMurray in Canada, conditions do not seem favourable for building a sustainable and healthy community. These two communities are highly dependent on the oil industry. The government often works alongside with the oil industry to maximize profit for both parties. The industry’s interest before environmental and social issues, which creates a bubble economy because of its monolithic development. Even though workers have apparent health issues from working in the mines, the government continues to encourage future generation to join the industry. Destruction of the natural habitat and urban pollution is often neglected. Hence, I will be elaborating on these political, economic, social, and environmental issues in Shangxi in China and FortMcMurrey in Canada. This will allow me to identify the key characteristics of societies centred on fossil fuel extraction.

I will be conducting my research based on two documentaries, which focuses on how fossil fuel extraction affects their individual communities. They are *Journey to the end of coal – an Interactive Documentary[[1]](#footnote-1)* about Shangxi in China and *Fort McMoney – an Interactive Documentary[[2]](#footnote-2)* about Fort McMurray in Canada. These two communities are very distinct cases; Shangxi in China is located in a developing country, while Fort McMurray is in a developed country. The different political envrionments leads to a very different treatment for human rights, democracy and freedom. Therefore, the two communities will be accessed with these conditions at play.

In both societies, there are signs of bribing and collaboration between the government and oil companies. Mr Chang who works in Qijiangou mines claims although accidents daily happen in the mines, they get reopened or are operated illegally. There are inspectors from the government that visits once in a while. They are here to check if the mine is safe to operate. However, the oil companies will always send someone to have dinner with them. So even if the mine was closed after an accident, they will get reopened after the inspectors come. Similarly, Jim Rogers in Fort McMurray claims oil companies often bribe politicians to maximize the profit for both sides. They try to find loop holes in the system in order to pay less tax. Ken Chapman, a lobbyist for the oil companies such as Syncrude and Suncor, even overtly states if oil prices goes down, so do the royalties. Royalties is an amount of money each company has to pay for renting the environment and extracting the resources. Either way, the oil industry is benefiting because they only have to pay for a set percentage. Collaboration between the government and oil industry shapes the monolithic economy for both of the societies.

Other than collaboration between two parties, the oil industry’s development is often placed as a priority rather than social problems. From Mr Chang’s description, we know that oil companies wants the workers to continue operation in dangerous conditions despite the recurring accidents. Wu Yujong, a survivor of a recent accident claims that “people’s lives don’t matter” here in Qijiangou mines. Labour unions do not exist, if he complains to the government or to the oil companies, he could risk being sent to labor camps. Hao Laowu, a miner in Datong experiences similar mistreatment when his salary got cut by half. The oil companies wanted to maximize profit. Therefore, they take wages off from workers in order to make it more efficient. Guo Erbao, also expressed they have no access to clean water or food. Most people in the community have some sort of respitory disease. On the other hand, health conditions are not as serious in Fort McMurray. Most officials claim the society do not place the oil refinery industry as a priority. However, the worker’s drug issues and a large homelessness population seem to reflect otherwise. Carl Vadlock, a bottle picker on the street claims he knows people working in the mining camps. They often spend their wages on drugs such as “crack” to relieve stress from working for long hours in harsh environments. The problem has worsened to a point where workers are randomly tested for drugs. Ken Chapman acknowledges the existence of the problem, and states they are constantly working on eliminating drugs from work camps. By placing the oil industry as a priority, health conditions of workers and even the entire community is jeporedized.

If health conditions do not make the situation bad enough, people seem to be stuck in working for oil industries generation after generation. In Shangxi, most people are too poor to leave the area because of the low wages. Their fathers are often also coal miners, while their children might be stuck in the same community. Guo Erbao claims his father also worked in the coal mines. However, his situation is much worse than his father’s time because wages are lower and his occupation is not as respected as it used to be. Other than that, he is not earning enough to allow his daughter to live somewhere else. Although his daughter might not work in the coal industry, her health could be largely affected by the poor conditions of the community. In Fort McMurray, their only post secondary education institution is dedicated to training people to join their oil refinery industry. This means people who are working in the industry already, their children could very likely end up in the same job with the social atmosphere and education. According to Jim Rogers, people who stay in Fort McMurray are “enslaved by the oil industry”. The lack of opportunities created by low wages in the oil industry, social atmosphere as well as education creates a generation of people who are likely to follow their parent’s foot steps into the oil industry. This further contributes to the monolithic development of both societies’ economy.

Since the government is placing importance on fossil fuel industries, the environment around both communities are polluted heavily to a point where it is no longer habitable. The destruction is particularly noticable in rural areas. In Lifen, Mr Bao showed us Fen river. The water in the picture shows the water is black and the sky is grey. He claims to water used to be clear and the environment was very nice. There were fishes swimming around and people would go swim in the river. After the coal mining industry developed in the area, the habitat were destroyed. Not only did marine life disappear, people are too scared to swim in this water because they are afraid they would get sick from it. In Canada, there has been similar pollutions, which affected First Nations people’s lives greatly. Stephen Harper, the 22nd prime minister of Canada addressed there were oil spills in Alberta on national television. Moreover, Melina Laboucan Massimo who is a member of house of representatives as well as part of First Nations community in Northern Alberta stated these oil spills is causing them burning eyes, nausea, and fatique. Furthermore, there is a lack of accumulative assessment in the area to address the problem. Natural environment pollution is therefore, neglected in both fossil fuel driven societies.

Other than the pollution in natural habitats, there were pollution in urban areas as well. In Linfen, Mrs Qi showed how horrible their living conditions were. She was a 60-year-old senior who was caught picking up coal on the streets dropped by trucks that are transporting materials from mines to the plant. She states she uses the coal to cook and warm her home. When she was asked about the pollution in the area, she denies its existence and claims if there was a problem, environmental bureaus would have came here. Despite her denial, the pictures showed the area was a slum. The roads were dark and wet, soaked in what seems to be a mixture of dirt and coal. The sky was grey and there were smoke all around the area. There are others who are suffering in the community as well, such as Guo Erbao whom I mentioned earlier. They have no access to water and food is collected on the same mountain where the mines are. Clearly, people in China are living in horrible urban areas. As for Fort McMurray, the conditions are not as bad. Most of the urban areas are relatively clean and organized. However, there is a weird smell in downtown that people have noticed. Carl Vadlock believes it is some sort of toxic waste released by the oil refinery industry, while Ken Chapman claims it is not toxic. However, Chapman was not able to identify what the gas was, but insisted it was not harmful to the human body. On the other hand, there is a large homeless population because of the high cost of living in Fort McMurray. There are no measures to deal with this group of displaced personale. In both societies, the urban environment is polluted and disrupted in their own ways.

From investigating Shangxi and Fort McMurray, I was able to identify many similarities between both societies. Governments often work with fossil fuel extraction industries and could be bribed to establish policies favourable towards both parties. The industry is placed as a priority, therefore many social and environmental issues arise such as health of workers, generations of people stuck in the same industry, and disrupting both natural and urban environments. This leads to a overall monolithic bubble economy, which could be popped once the resources runs out. The government should take a more balanced approach to create a sustainable community.

1. Bollendorff, Samuel. "Interactive Documentary Archive." Interactive Documentary Journey to the End of Coal Comments. 2008. Accessed April 05, 2016. http://www.interactivedocumentary.net/2008/09/16/journey-to-the-end-of-coal/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Fort McMoney." Fort McMoney. Accessed April 05, 2016. http://fortmcmoney.com/#/fortmcmoney. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)