

Is carbon dioxide really the monster driving climate change? If not, maybe we should prepare for a colder world, writes **Willie Soon**

Hot air

In my 20-plus years of studying carbon dioxide and global warming, I have found that hypothetical scares often come before any realities or factual presentations. Horror stories about rising seas inundating land, cities and wildlife, super typhoons and hurricanes, and epic "mega droughts" lasting a decade or longer are all promoted as devastating results of global warming caused by the rising levels of carbon dioxide, according to reports and scientists associated with the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

But will any of these scary scenarios about the carbon dioxide monster prove true for Hong Kong?

My recent seminar at the University of Hong Kong's Department of Earth Sciences offered this simple answer: No. Objective science informs us that the so-called "consensus viewpoints" offered by the IPCC – about man-made carbon dioxide being the dominant factor in climate change – is primarily a political conclusion, and not likely a scientifically accurate one.

The natural and human history of Hong Kong was captured by former British foreign secretary Lord Palmerston around 1841. He described the area as "a barren

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island with hardly a house upon it!" That was of course explainable by the massive tree-cutting that began during the Song dynasty a millennium ago. It explains why the history of land use changes must surely be a decisive factor in determining the recorded evolution of meteorological and climatic conditions in Hong Kong, before urban greenhouse effects could have played any role.

There is another reason to support a minimal climatic role from atmospheric carbon dioxide. If carbon dioxide is the dominant driver of temperature, why has warming ceased over at least the past decade? Carbon dioxide levels have risen steadily, and yet average planetary temperatures have been stable or even declining since 1995.

Extremist views serve only to increase public panic about climate change – and

the media's, IPCC's and political establishment's unwillingness to address the real science only leads to spurious claims that "the science is settled".

If global temperatures cease to rise, when they are supposedly affected by rapidly rising atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations, then something more important than carbon dioxide must be driving climate change.

This is also why many peer-reviewed papers on past climatic records (as exemplified by the work of professors Zhonghui Liu and Jason Ali at HKU's Department of Earth Sciences) tell us convincingly that weather and climate varied naturally in the past and will probably do so in the future, without any ties to atmospheric carbon dioxide levels.

In recent years, the world's attention has indeed been drawn to the reality and danger of changing climate. Scientists well understand that climatic records comprise alternating periods of warming and cooling all over our earth. Yet, we have rarely considered how modern civilisation would best deal with the challenges of an emerging cooling trend.

There is no excuse for this neglect. Our knowledge about centuries of climate changes clearly indicates that significant cooling can happen on a time frame of a few decades. Several natural drivers of climate have been enumerated that could drive cooling on these time frames and, today, global climate observations seem to be on a razor's edge between indications of warming and harbingers of cooling.

Thomas Jefferson once remarked: "I have no doubt but that cold is the source of more suffering to all animal nature than hunger, thirst, sickness and all the other pains of life and death itself put together." Closer to home, the transition from the Ming to Qing dynasty, a chaotic time owing to crop failures and periods of civil unrest, was likely to be related to a cooling climate.

As geographer and historian David Zhang and his HKU colleagues recently noted, "during cold phases, China suffered more often from frequent wars, population decline and dynastic change".

Another study of the 1,000-year history of typhoon landfalls in Guangdong, by climate scientists from Chinese University of Hong Kong and Louisiana State University, tells us that the two periods of 1660-1680 and 1850-1880 saw the most devastating typhoons.

It is not surprising to find that these two most active typhoon periods also correspond to the coldest and driest periods in northern and central China, as it is often the relatively colder, dryer times that cause the strongest contrasting meteorological conditions in the land, ocean and atmosphere, leading to frequent

and damaging typhoons. Therefore, hypothetical scares proposed by global warming scenarios caused by carbon dioxide must raise more serious questions.

What if Hong Kong's climate turns cold within the next 100 years?

How would the proposed 33 per cent carbon dioxide emissions reduction by 2020 benefit Hong Kong citizens, if it results in soaring energy costs but has no effect on climate?

Why should anyone continue to blindly demonise a life-supporting molecule: carbon dioxide?

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Shalini Mahtani

Boardroom blitz

Fifty per cent of Hong Kong's workforce was female in 2008, up from 46 per cent in 1998. Women are also increasingly taking on senior roles, with 29 per cent in manager and administrator positions in 2008, up from 22 per cent a decade earlier. Women also outnumber their male peers in higher education, taking up 54 per cent of grants funded by the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong.

These trends are positive – more women in the workforce, management and higher education, translates into more female consumers and investors in Hong Kong than ever before.

In this context, focusing on the interests, needs and priorities of women is clearly critical. Consider, first, the workplace. Shortage of talent is a constant mantra in the corporate world. Yet many companies are failing to capitalise and nurture the talents and skills of their female workforce. If they want to attract the best, they would be wise to focus on the lack of workplace flexibility and opportunities for women.

Then, they should consider the fact that empowered women are also consumers; they make purchasing decisions every day. Companies that ignore the "power of the purse" risk losing out on a huge percentage of the market. And, finally, the listed companies in Hong Kong should remember that women are investors, too; they are increasingly making their voices heard.

Because women make up a critical stakeholder group representing staff, consumers and investors, it is imperative to include their voice in corporate strategic decision-making. This means including women with the right skills on the boards of companies. This should be common sense.

Yet, according to a report by Community Business published last December, women hold only 9 per cent of all directorships in the 42 leading companies listed on the Hang Seng Index. And 33 per cent of these companies have no women on their boards at all.

It would appear that Hong Kong companies are not concerned about gender diversity within their boards, according to interviews with female board directors conducted by Community Business.

Hong Kong companies need more commitment to gender diversity on their boards

Women are also being overlooked for positions on the board because companies do not know where to find this talent pool. Within Hong Kong, men tend to pick fellow men for board positions, using personal networks, from which women are generally excluded. Women may choose to leave the workforce at a senior level because they have to care for elderly parents, in-laws or children.

Regardless of these factors, the fundamental problem is that businesses do not see the benefit of gender diversity on their boards.

Greater diversity of thought is clearly good for business. According to a 2008 study of Fortune 500 companies, more women on the board signified a broader and deeper talent pool, led to a greater proportion of female corporate officers and resulted in a better financial performance.

Hong Kong companies need to show much more commitment to gender diversity on their boards. One way to achieve this would be to make the nomination process as inclusive as possible; nomination committees could be required to consider both male and female candidates with the right skills.

According to international research, for companies to really benefit from gender diversity on their boards, women should make up at least 15 per cent of members. At this point, women need not be "fearful" of being on the board, but can gain strength in numbers. Otherwise, there is a danger that a lone woman board member will assimilate with her male peers, negating some of the effects of diversity.

Hong Kong's leading companies understand business. Let's hope that they can also grasp in time the link between gender diversity – particularly at the board level – and corporate success.

Shalini Mahtani is founder and adviser of Community Business. "Women on Boards: Hang Seng Index 2009" can be found on www.communitybusiness.org. This article is part of a monthly series on women and gender issues, developed in collaboration with The Women's Foundation