

Living with Waste

Becoming “Free” As Waste Pickers in Chinese Cities

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ABSTRACT: The essay examines the meanings of waste in the community formation of waste pickers in today’s Chinese megacities. We show that waste pickers in China echo to a certain extent the precarious and stigmatised labour conditions among those in the global south. But we have found that in China, financial reasons alone were not what pushed migrants to enter the trade. In fact, we have found that waste pickers in Beijing enter the waste business also to experiment with urban citizenship, freedom from the factory regime, entrepreneurship, and household making on the fringe of the nation’s capital. Their strategies of working with waste offer a prism for understanding the wider dimension of social and cultural life in the waste community in a major city of China – what we refer to as “living with waste.” “Living with waste” in this paper is intended as a framework to encompass the everyday effort to work with, experience, and live with waste matter on a daily basis. How do waste pickers talk about their job? Is it just about stigmatisation and suffering? Can it be about business and mobility? How do they feel about raising kids in a waste-collecting courtyard? If dirt is “matter of out of place” (Douglas 1966), how do they deal with impurity and contamination on a daily basis? What kind of efforts do they make to normalise or create boundaries in the undesirable working and living environment? Living with waste, then, is deeply bound with efforts not only to make a livelihood, but also to constantly negotiate one’s position with and draw boundaries from waste within the family and the community, in order to make the job bearable, and even meaningful.

KEYWORDS: Waste pickers, waste labour, rural migrants, peri-urban spaces, China.

“This yard stinks,” Ling whined as she watched her one-year-old baby boy stumbling inside the waste-sorting courtyard in Cold Water Village, located in the outer ring of Beijing, China. As Ling and I talked inside the brick shack in which they lived, the baby boy had fun picking colourful objects from the dirt ground of the yard. He showed them off to his mother and expected approval, but Ling slapped them away and responded with a contemptuous face, “Dirty!” I remember the temporary confusion in the eyes of the baby boy and his quick resumption of the mode of finding treasures at “home” – an open space courtyard of about 10,000 square feet, in which heaps of plastic and glass bottles, books, old clothes and shoes, newspapers and cardboard, plastic bags, foam board and gunnysacks, DVD disks, and electronic cable wire were neatly piled up. Ling and her boy lived with another 11 households in 12 individual brick shacks on one side of the yard. All residents in the yard made a living by collecting and selling recyclable waste. They were some of the waste pickers (*shoufeipinren* 收廢品人) of Beijing city. When asked why she chose to raise her baby in Beijing, Ling smiled, “My neighbours can help babysit him while I find a job.”

In Cold Water Village, there were at least five courtyards of this nature. Surrounding Beijing city centre, at least several hundred similar courtyards for waste sorting and storing purpose can be spotted from a bird-eye view.⁽¹⁾ In Beijing city alone, the estimated number of waste pickers living in such yards was at least 100,000. Some news reports estimated the number to range from 100,000 to 300,000 (*Xinhua* 2014).

The reason that a huge number of waste pickers and waste collecting courtyards cluster around the capital city is obvious. The enormous amount of urban waste generates huge profits for the recycling business. This is especially the case in megacities such as Beijing, which has a population of about 20 million and keeps expanding into new residential and commercial districts. *Xinhua News* reported that the weight of discarded television sets

in Beijing added up to 24,000 tons in the year 2013 alone (Shan 2014). By 2015, the amount of municipal waste produced daily in Beijing city had reached an alarming level of 20,000 tons. This amount of municipal solid waste stretches the city’s landfill capacity, and it takes four incineration facilities operating 24 hours a day to “annihilate” the huge amount of waste.⁽²⁾ At the national level, the production of waste is not discouraged, as it is linked to spectacular economic growth, high industrial output, and increased urban construction and domestic consumption. While megacities are growing, the intense urbanisation of China’s rural areas and small towns implies that millions of rural residents are now joining the journey of consuming and throwing away more. And just as governments at both the rural and urban levels enjoy increased GDP growth, they are also fighting a growing enemy – the fast-accumulating waste of all kinds.

Luckily, or unluckily, the huge amount of waste generated daily in many Chinese cities is “filtered” and thus substantially reduced by an army of waste pickers. “Each trash bin is checked by one hundred eyes daily” (Shan 2014). This popular saying succinctly describes how fierce the battle is over valuable recyclable waste. In Beijing, hundreds of thousands of rural migrants, mostly from Sichuan and Henan provinces, engage in the business of recycling urban waste. Their daily informal and meticulous labour of loading, sorting, and storing waste keeps the capital running its business as usual.

1. See film director Wang Jiuliang’s (王久良) groundbreaking documentary film *垃圾圍城* *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2010). There is a scene in which he uses yellow dots to mark the number of informal and illegal waste collecting courtyards surrounding Beijing city. Wang’s yellow dots in the documentary include a range of garbage dumping sites, including both family-run waste collecting courtyards, which this essay focuses on, and large-scale scrap markets/collection sites where scrap is divided by stall, with each stall specialising in one kind of material.
2. “北京每天產生生活垃圾1.84萬噸 填埋場不堪重負” (Beijing meitian shengchan shenghuo laji 1.84 wandun, tianmaichang bukanzhongfu, Beijing’s household garbage reaches 18.4 thousand tons daily, landfill can barely take it all), *Beijing Morning Post*, 20 October 2014, <http://finance.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2014/1029/c1004-25928120.html> (accessed on 12 November 2017).

Existing socio-economic studies have seen waste picking and waste pickers as products of rural-urban migration and survival strategies among uneducated rural migrants (Hayami *et al.* 2006; Medina 2007; Adama 2014). These studies have revealed important structural political economic factors that have shaped the phenomenon of urban waste picking and the ways waste pickers become targets of economic exploitation and social stigma. More recently, scholars on waste have started to see waste matter or wasted objects not merely as inert backgrounds upon which waste pickers act but as forming underlying configurations of capital, labour, and social relations (Star 1999; Bennett 2005; Latour 2005; Coole and Frost 2010). The perspective of seeing waste as an “actant” deepens understanding of waste picking and waste pickers beyond knowing them as mere class and migration victims. Scholars in waste studies have found that waste materials often generate considerable profit, new social relations, and economies as they circulate between different regimes (Thompson 1979; Hetherington 2004; Reno 2009; Alexander and Reno 2012). Waste has now become a site of investigation to understand the relations between humans and non-humans (Hawkins and Muecke 2003; Hawkins 2006; Gille 2010), and between migrants’ lives and urban spaces (Nguyen 2016). It is also a major socio-cultural space to understand the underclass’s struggle with structural violence (Millar 2014).

This essay joins an on-going discussion of the value of waste in the formation of capital, labour, and cities (Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Gidwani 2015; Gidwani and Margingati 2016). It contributes to existing work to better understand the meaning of waste in the community formation of waste pickers in today’s Chinese megacities. We show that waste pickers in China echo to a certain extent the precarious and stigmatised labour condition among those in the global south. But we have found that in China financial reasons alone were not what pushed migrants to enter the field. In fact, we have found that waste pickers in Beijing enter the waste business also to experiment with urban citizenship, freedom from the factory regime, entrepreneurship, and household making on the fringe of the nation’s capital. Their strategies of working with waste offers a prism for understanding the wider dimension of social and cultural life in the waste community of a major city of China – what we refer to as “living with waste.”

“Living with waste” in this paper is intended as a framework to encompass the effort to work with, experience, and live with waste matter on a daily basis. The essay illustrates waste pickers’ efforts to make sense of their condition of having to living with waste in various ways. It is not only about picking waste for survival but also about the search for a freer, more exciting, and entrepreneurial life. How do waste pickers talk about their job? Is it just about stigmatisation and suffering? Can it be about business and mobility? How do they feel about raising kids in a waste collecting courtyard? If dirt is “matter of out of place” (Douglas 1966), how do they deal with impurity and contamination on a daily basis? What kind of effort do they make to normalise or create boundaries in an undesirable working and living environment? Living with waste, then, is deeply bound to efforts not only to make a livelihood, but also to constantly negotiate one’s position with and draw boundaries from waste within the family and the community, in order to make the job bearable, and even meaningful.

A brief history of waste in Beijing

Waste has always played a role in the path of modernity in China. Reselling and reusing discarded objects was a major and informal street culture at

night in Beijing during the 1920s. Discarded objects were linked to urban residents’ love for antiques, citizen identity, and an emerging consumption modernity during the Republican era of early twentieth century Beijing (Dong 2003). After 1949, China came under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. The waste regime during Mao Zedong’s time was perhaps similar to the “metallic regime” Zsuzsa Gille found in Hungary from 1948–1974, in which the state directly mobilised citizens to collect and redistribute waste materials for national production under the planned economy (Gille 2010). At the time of high command and industrial economy, workers and residents were motivated to give scraps to state-managed recycling depots and then to large reprocessing factories. Under the national command economy, the older network of private markets and second-hand trading dissolved into larger and centralised collectivised craft shops. At the neighbourhood and street level in Beijing, the socialist government organised existing recycling traders, hawkers, and peddlers to form the Beijing Municipal Scrap Recycling Company (BBRC) (*Beijingshi feipin huishou gongsi* 北京市废品回收公司), which was then turned into a city-wide recycling network (Goldstein 2006: 270–1). In a period of scarce resources and little consumption, people conserved and mended most material objects. Still they actively took scraps that could not be reused to the recycling depots, not only to get back some petty cash (rare in a ration system and economy), but also for gaining credit for “contributing to the nationalist economic production.” Socialist nationalist ideology thus linked individual recycling practices to nationalist commitment, proletariat class consciousness, and anti-capitalist ideology (Goldstein 2006: 273–4; Gille 2010: 1056).

Since the economic reforms that started in the late 1970s, China has changed from a society that focused on heavy industrial and agricultural production to one that emphasises consumption. With the withering of the ration system, urban residents have found it much less attractive to haul recyclable waste to a neighbourhood depot in exchange for a few pennies. Meanwhile, the state-owned company BBRC slowly closed their neighbourhood recycling depots. Goldstein (2006: 279) has found that in the course of only 15 years, the number of BBRC collection points in central Beijing fell from more than 2,000 to just six by 1998 because the state-owned company found it more profitable to rent the depots out to other businesses. While valuable materials such as precious metals are continually recycled by state-owned enterprises, the much less valuable material created by hundreds and thousands of residential neighbourhoods and small businesses are no longer taken care of by state units.

The Beijing city government continues to run district garbage collection stations (*huanwei zhan* 环卫站) and street-level garbage bins, but requires households or businesses to haul their garbage to the stations at their own cost. The result is that small businesses, residences, and small industrial sites would rather “sell” their garbage to waste pickers who are willing to take away all the discards (*Xinhua* 2014). By 2010, some residential or commercial buildings no longer “sold” their garbage but paid a fee to waste pickers to come and collect it.

As a result of these post-socialist arrangements, waste pickers are able to access a large amount of waste every day and salvage as much recyclable materials as they can. The size and lucrativeness of the waste picking business in China is well known. This was especially true in the early period of economic reform, when the amount of municipal waste was growing and the number of waste pickers was limited. Urban legend even claimed that waste pickers could make a monthly income much higher than that of uni-

versity professors in the 1980s.⁽³⁾ In general, waste pickers' monthly income is better than that of most low-skilled factory workers. During our fieldwork from 2009 to 2012, we found that an experienced waste picker couple could earn more than 3,000 RMB to 4,000 RMB per month, while a factory worker couple had to work a great deal of overtime to gain the same amount of pay.

Unlike waste gleaners in other countries who try their luck at waste dumps or recycling bins, waste pickers in Chinese megacities secure valuable recyclables at their source and move a significant amount of waste out of the city for profit. No official statistics are available to confirm the amount of material salvaged and the amount reduced that would have gone to landfills. Various sources, however, have spoken highly of their contribution. Xu Haiyun, the chief engineer at the China Urban Planning and Research Institute in Beijing, has acknowledged that "the municipal waste recycling system is mainly achieved and carried out by an army of waste pickers" (Zhang 2017). Journalist Adam Minter, an expert on the scrap business in and outside of China, has said that "China sends very little recyclable waste to landfills or incinerators" because "migrant waste pickers are the last screen of a system" that harvests recyclables from the trash every single night (2013: 26-7). Chinese waste activist Chen Liwen believes that the informal economy of waste picking and recycling in megacities may possess the highest sorting efficiency, rivalling high-tech machines in developed countries because of the meticulous screening and scrounging effort involved (Chen 2017). In short, the municipal functions of clearing waste from city centres is to some extent dependent on an informal and low-tech migrant population in the country.

The issue of waste in China is a complex nexus where high-speed urbanisation and consumption and domestic or international waste trading meet with a severe rural-urban divide and rural migrants eager to find cash opportunities in a huge informal economy. The waste recycling business is not limited to megacities and certainly not to domestic garbage production. China has been the biggest receiving country of international scrap (Minter 2013; Alexander and Reno 2012: 4; Ye *et al.* 2016). Waste imported from Euro-America has created waste industries in many parts of rural China, where villagers form chains of business through buying, transporting, sorting, and remanufacturing recycled waste for raw material reprocessing and profit. Both domestic and imported waste have each created their own recycling businesses, waste pickers, and waste sorting courtyards.⁽⁴⁾

This paper focuses on just one node of the numerous material consequences of waste as it metamorphoses into new spatial, social, and communal configurations in a small waste courtyard in the outer ring of Beijing. Although the community we focus on handles only one stop in the long chain of waste flow and the recycling economy, the case reflects how discards become intimately intertwined with the migrants, infiltrate their daily lives, and are formative of communal lives and group identities. In the following, we recount long-term contacts and conversations we had with 12 waste picking households in the waste collecting courtyard of Cold Water Village, Beijing, from 2009 to 2013. Located in the sixth ring of Beijing city, Cold Water Village was one of thousands of urban villages surrounding the capital that were converted from farmland to a peri-urban space where many waste collecting courtyards are located. We accessed Cold Water Village with a research team of around a dozen graduate students and teachers from universities in Beijing and Hong Kong with the view of understanding urban villages and urban China. The fieldwork was approved by the village leadership, and we were allowed to go into both local and migrant worker

households and dormitories for interviews. After years of immersion in the site, we became well acquainted with all of the waste picker household in the courtyard. In summer and winter, we observed how they sorted recycled materials, and how they talked about their lives and families. We gradually came to understand their situation, precarity, and struggles in living with waste.

Waste collecting and sorting courtyards

Picture an image that appears every morning inside and outside of Beijing: an army of waste pickers bike or drive from different suburban areas into the city centre. Many ride tricycles (*sanlunche* 三輪車) attached to pull-carts or drive small trucks to urban residences, commercial buildings, or construction sites where they have contracts. They take away all the garbage generated in the contracted sites, make an initial sorting in back of the buildings, and then load everything that is potentially valuable into the bike carts or trucks. Some go around buildings and pay a small amount for valuable waste such as old electronics, used books, clothing, and shoes. By ten o'clock in the morning, they start to disperse from the city centre and head in various directions of the city fringe with loads of waste materials. The real sorting process takes place inside thousands of courtyards or scrapyards hidden in urban or rural villages surrounding the city. These courtyards are usually hidden behind high walls. Yet in the open space of these courtyards, waste pickers spend the rest of the day sorting, pressing, cleaning, and stacking the recyclables. With no equipment or mechanics, they sort everything by hand and categorise materials with great care and in a specified manner. For example, plastic bags of different types and grades are bundled separately: cheap plastic bags are rolled together; detergent bottles are tied together with string; food containers are stacked in another pile. DVD discs need to be broken into pieces. Liquid from glass bottles is drained, and the necks of bottles are broken off for reprocessing. The sorting of valuable waste is extremely meticulous and involves a lot of handiwork. In fact, the labour is very much about separating different materials from one object. A glass container is separated from its metal cap. A cooking pot with a burnt plastic handle is broken down into two pieces for different piles. The metal embedded under the plastic wrap of cables or other electronic products is also taken out. A day of sorting means breaking and shaping various materials into smaller parts or specific forms. Waste pickers need strong arms and fingers to pull things apart, and that is why their fingers often exhibit protruding bones and twisted joints. Sometimes they use gloves to break things apart, but most of the time they do not wear any protective layers. Women tend to use aprons more when sorting waste, as they often switch to cooking or washing tasks in between. By the end of each day, waste pickers build up their piles of recyclable materials in the open space of the courtyard. The remaining food waste and other unrecyclable material is taken directly to government-run garbage stations or landfills.

Space is the key. A good location to sort and store waste not too far away from the city is one of the keys to success in the business. This is why urban villages surrounding the city centre, like Cold Water Village, are prime locations. In these villages, there is little regulation, much less implementation,

3. "One hundred fifty thousand waste pickers with families living in Beijing's landfills," *China Youth Daily*, 3 February 2016, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2016-02/03/nw.D110000zgqnb_20160203_2-09.htm (accessed on 4 March 2019).

4. The global trend of exporting waste to China has been partially halted as the Chinese government implemented a ban on 20 types of scrap from entering its borders starting in January 2018.

of land use planning or sewage treatment. The rent for a large plot of former farmland is cheap, and the ride to various urban sites is not too long. In the last ten years, Cold Water Village has seen many patches of its farmlands turned into small factories, unlicensed workshops, and cheap dormitories for low-end workers. One of its spatial changes has been the production of waste collecting courtyards.

A waste collecting courtyard is usually an open area of mud and grass about 10,000 square feet in size, if not bigger. The open space is often surrounded by brick walls, and by-passers rarely know what is going on inside. On the dirt ground, one sees liquid of different colours leaking from various unknown sources. Spread out on the open ground are numerous open buckets of pigwash and food waste, which in turn feeds armies of flies, roaches, and dogs. At different corners of the courtyard are piles of used clothing, paper, cardboard, old blankets, stacks of broken shoes, old electronics, and furniture. Hundreds of old cables are coiled into what looks like a gigantic sculpture. The visual effect of all of these discarded materials piled together is quite spectacular. The odour from the courtyard is nauseating. Strong and acidic, it stings one's eyes, nose, and respiratory system after just a short stay. Whenever it rains, the courtyard often becomes flooded, muddy, and squishy. The rain also brings out the strong smell of the garbage.

The waste collecting courtyard is a space combining work, home, and storage. It is where waste pickers' shelters are located, and where they can guard, store, and sort the waste they harvest daily from the city until it is further transported to reprocessing factories. The 12 brick shacks where waste pickers live are connected and built on one side of the courtyard. Each room is about 100 square feet with one door and no windows. Most living spaces are dark and packed with clutter. The floor is often covered with thick layers of grime that accumulate from people walking in and out of the muddy waste yard. For most urbanites in Beijing, this "miscellany of junk and smell adds up to a shithole," as vividly described in the ethnographic writing of waste pickers' homes by Dutton, Lo, and Wu (2008: 155). Simple stoves are usually built outside of the shacks. The open space courtyard outside of individual shacks is also fairly sub-divided among households. Each waste picker household can access one corner of the open space where they accumulate their piles of waste materials, park their bikes or trucks, and put aside unrecyclable waste. Most households grow vegetables, such as tomatoes and green beans, in the courtyard to reduce the cost of food. The middle of the yard and the space in front of everyone's door are reserved for passage and social gathering. Waste pickers often sit around a small table to play cards after a hard day's labour. At the back of the yard is a water faucet for residents to do their daily washing and cooking. The toilet next to the faucet consists of two pits behind a brick wall. There is no flushing facility, and a clearing service comes in only once every two weeks. The space outside of the toilet is also used for laundry. For shower, residents have to go to a commercial bathhouse near the village centre. Urbanites would find such a living environment unbearable, but waste pickers spoke of it sharing similarities with their homes in the rural areas, where the basic infrastructures of tap water, flushing toilets, and concrete roads were lacking. What they treasured was its low rental level. A brick shack inside the courtyard cost 180 RMB in 2009. It slowly rose to 200 and then 220 RMB in 2011 and 2012. With this rent, a waste picker couple earning 4,000 RMB per month could save a good portion of their income.

Waste pickers we knew at the courtyard were from the hilly region of Sichuan Province in southwestern China. They were often related to each other as members of the same lineage or as residents of the same rural

hometown. It takes such a close connection for anyone to enter the waste picking business and to gain a spot to stay in the courtyard. Husband and wife often work as a team and deploy a division of labour, with the man doing the collecting work outside the home, and the woman taking on reproductive labour such as cooking, buying groceries, babysitting, and hand-washing clothes while also helping out with the sorting. Most have been in Beijing for more than ten years. Since arriving in Beijing decades ago, they have faced barriers from the municipal authorities (*chengguan* 城管) and have needed all kinds of documents to work, to stay in the city, and to send their kids to school. While police harassment, payments, and fines were more frequent before 2000, rapid urban development, and most recently, the municipal authorities' eviction of the "low-end population" (*diduan renkou* 低端人口) and migrants' small businesses have threatened their space for survival.⁵ Many initially sorted waste near the city centre and slowly moved to more distant corners as Beijing's city centre expanded. Leading a rather isolated life without going to many locations other than the regular waste generation sites, waste pickers consume little outside of basic necessities and save money for rural hometown consumption during the Lunar New Year holiday. To avoid stigmatisation, they socialise mostly with each other and seldom interact with anyone outside of their circle. In order to save on fuel costs, most continue to ride tricycles with a pull-cart that weighs up to a hundred kilos when loaded with waste. The job can be particularly challenging in winter and summer. Traders in the recycling industrial chain buy their waste products several times a week when business is good. Traders of different hierarchies, from street-level pickers, waste station owners, and buyers to factory owners, may form native place-based business communities. Different native place-based waste communities such as those from Sichuan Province and Henan Province may also enter into conflict over new sources of waste collection.

Narratives of freedom and escape

Inside the waste collecting courtyard in Cold Water, everyone was conscious of their class standing and the widespread stigma attached to waste work. One could hardly avoid the potential contamination or stigma, ideological or material. There was no point in separating "work" from "home," because they were combined. Most waste pickers used the phrase "We are used to it" (*women xiguan le* 我們習慣了) to avoid talking about the smell, filthiness, or danger involved in the work. Chong, a full time professional waste picker in his twenties, responded to our question about his career with an answer typical among the group: "I've never told my relatives and friends what I do and where I live. I told them I run my own business in Beijing." Another waste picker, Zhang, with a high school education, became more irritated with the subject: "I once saw a woman pinching her nose when passing by me. I stared at her to let her know that she has no right to look down upon others." Most, however, were quiet about the subject to avoid potential discrimination and hostility.

One might imagine that it is mostly denial and negative feelings that waste pickers have towards waste matter. But almost all professional waste pickers we talked to speak of their work in terms of "自由" (*ziyou*). The Chi-

5. For details regarding the Beijing government's eviction of hundreds and thousands of rural migrants who have run business and lived for decades in areas or tenements considered unfit for use in the capital starting from November 2017, see "The bitter generation: In China's cities, young people with rural ties are angry," *The Economist*, 3 May 2018, <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/05/03/in-chinas-cities-young-people-with-rural-ties-are-angry> (accessed on 4 March 2019).

nese word “*ziyou*” is most often translated as “freedom” in English, but it might be better understood in terms of autonomy or flexibility. Waste pickers’ narratives go like this: “This career is relatively free (*gan zhe hang bijiao ziyou* 幹這行比較自由). I do it whenever I want to (*xiang gan jiu gan le* 想幹就幹了). I stop whenever I don’t feel like it (*bu xiang gan le jiu bu gan* 不想幹了就不幹!)”

We eventually came to understand more what the term “*ziyou*” might approximate. There are at least two levels of understanding. The first concerns the relatively looser daily work schedule they have in contrast to the more intensive work life migrant workers experience in factories. While most factory workers have to live on crowded bunk beds in gender-segregated dormitory rooms, and wake up, eat, and rest collectively at fixed hours inside the industrial zones, waste pickers gain better control of their living space and non-working hours. Factory workers also work very long hours and are always called upon to work overtime to meet production deadlines. Scholars on labour in China have argued that the situation in which employers give very low income to migrants but provide accommodation and food within the factory complex has subjected workers to a “dormitory disciplinary regime” (Smith and Pun 2006). This regime allows employers to maximise extraction of workers’ time and productivity while compressing their private space and social life. The regime also makes it easier to extend workers’ labour time and enables companies to respond to fluctuations in production demand. In such a highly extractive and worker-unfriendly labour regime, perhaps one can better understand waste pickers’ claims of having more freedom or autonomy.

Indeed, many waste pickers value the fact that they are not being bossed around and can work at a pace according to their personal well-being. Even though there is the pressure of going out to find recyclables every day, they find the job much more challenging and exciting. There is the opportunity of going entrepreneurial: getting to learn how to negotiate contracts with residential buildings, making investment decisions on small trucks, and bargaining with waste buyers. But the work is also much more physically demanding, involving a lot of risk (fluctuating prices of recyclables) and barriers. No wonder waste pickers who can stay long in the industry are generally considered capable. The kind of freedom they talk about is therefore also related to the sense of mobility, success, and pride, however limited, that they derive from the process. Chong put it succinctly: “If I stay in the factory, I work for others. Here I sweat for myself.” His decision certainly resonated with others who chose self-employment as a form of resistance or “oppositional politics” to demeaning and low-wage formal jobs in many developing countries (Bourgois 1995). Yet his decision also means opening up to more opportunities and choices in the huge informal economy in China.

The second level of “freedom” concerns the remote and informal nature of waste picking work. The old couple Chen told us that their initial reason for leaving their rural Henan hometown was to escape the threat of arrest by local officials after they gave birth to two extra children and were unable to pay the outrageous penalty under China’s previous one-child policy. Their escape eventually led them to this job, which was unlicensed, unregistered, and mobile. The authorities found it very hard to locate their whereabouts and eventually dropped the charges after many years. Another waste picker, Zhang, was a high school graduate from a small rural village. He told us about entering the business for an even more scandalous reason. He was upset with his father because the latter, who was a primary school headmaster, failed to arrange a job for him. Feeling desperate at the thought of

being stuck with agricultural labour for the rest of his life, Zhang fled his rural hometown and joined the waste picking business.

Both Chen and Zhang narrated the start of their careers in terms of escape, or protest, from government penalties or lack of jobs in China’s rural areas. Both cases reflect some of the most enduring problems in China’s rural areas: outrageous penalties for disobeying the one-child policy, and the shortage of jobs for educated youth. Both saw fleeing rural hometowns and joining waste picking as a way to get away from a repressive regime of exhortative governance and economic despair.

Research has already shown that waste work strangely offers a “space of autonomy” (Gidwani 2015) or a sense of “relational autonomy” (Millar 2014) for many urban poor to weave their desire for autonomy from the capitalist discipline of clock and control. Such narratives of freedom from waste pickers in China, however, show how they further weave their desire for mobility and entrepreneurial success and for escape from structural problems in the rural area. Last, we might also understand waste pickers’ narratives of freedom as a form of boundary-making. By telling us that they feel more autonomous, waste pickers craft a local context of empowerment and mobility within which the work is perceived differently. By emphasising freedom, they valorise the sense of autonomy and exile over tough physical labour and a disgusting work environment, and therefore render it legitimate and understandable. The freedom narrative is therefore one of the ways for them to normalise the stigma of waste work, and even to provide a salutary meaning for it.

Building families and raising kids with waste

Within the waste pickers’ community, contact with waste was a continuous subject of controversy, negotiation, and taboo. Although our informants tended to avoid talking about the negative dimensions of living with waste, we heard stories about them getting hurt by sharp objects from time to time. The case we heard about in the yard happened to a young boy. His mother told us that while he was playing in a pile of waste, a gas canister blew up and hurt him badly. Such incidents, however, did not prevent Chong, for instance, from raising his three-year-old son in the courtyard. Chong’s first child drowned while swimming in a pond in his rural hometown while the parents were away for work. Ever since, he was determined to find a job where he could also keep an eye on his kid. To Chong, the waste courtyard was not an ideal workplace, but it allowed him to keep his kids close by. During our visits, Chong’s kid climbed up and down the tricycle pull-cart and played with all kinds of objects, making himself muddy and stained. Chong seemed to know what we were thinking and responded to the scene directly: “No fear (*bu pa* 不怕).” To him, the heaps of dirty and smelly waste could be an unconventional “playground.” Knowing of all the hazards and pollution, he wanted to think and speak about its potential for protecting his kids from strangers or dangers.

Ling, the young and amicable woman who raised her one-year-old in the courtyard, was much more negative when knowing that her kid was playing with waste, as shown at the beginning of this essay. Newly wedded to a husband who was a cable technician, Ling was expressive and talkative. She would tell us how generous her spending was on snacks and fruit, food consumption considered expensive by her neighbours. Her one-room living space, with little clutter and a clean floor, was unlike the majority in the yard. We eventually learned that Ling was no newcomer to this waste courtyard. In fact, she had spent many summer and winter holidays in various

waste collecting courtyards in Beijing, where her parents had laboured for the last twenty years. Left behind to study in her rural hometown, Ling always came to Beijing during the holidays. When we met in 2011, she was 23 years old and raising her newborn. Her parents, veteran waste pickers, had retired, but they kept paying the rent for the courtyard shack so Ling could start her new household there. No wonder she knew everyone in the courtyard so well that they interacted like family members. Despite her constant complaints, Ling knew all too well what it takes to survive and put together a family in a big city. Indeed Ling found great support in the courtyard as her waste picker neighbours were ready to keep an eye on her baby boy while she went out for groceries, or even for a few hours of part-time work. As much as she disapproved of her baby boy's newfound treasure, she shared her dream of opening her own handbag shop. To Ling, discarded objects simultaneously embody the contradictory senses of refuge and danger, purity and pollution, new opportunity and filth.

The tolerance for kids being in contact with waste changes as they grow. Mrs. Ma, for instance, simply could not bear the idea of her teenage son coming into contact with waste. She told us of a day when she and her husband were so busy sorting plastic bottles that they forgot about preparing dinner long after the son came back from school. When the father naturally asked his son to help out, Mrs. Ma became so irritated at the request that she yelled at the son to go away and started a big fight with her husband. She justified her anger to us: "My job here is all about making sure that my son never touches those bottles." To Mrs. Ma, her son's contact with waste would probably violate all that hard-earned urban personhood. She, however, did not see any problem with her or her husband working with waste on a daily basis.

These differentiated attitudes towards who is allowed to have contact with waste makes the taboo a complicated one. In general, very small kids or grown-ups can touch, play, and work with waste with no issues. Their rural bodies seem to be either pure or strong enough that nothing matters. School kids in contact with waste, however, suggests a sense of corruption that must be stopped in order to preserve intact the "urbanising and civilising" body that parents slave to cultivate. In determining the taboo and contamination of waste, values and differences between parents, small kids, and teenagers attending schools can become valorised and reassessed in relation to family needs and individual evaluations. How the contact with waste is tolerated or talked about, however, suggests the different ways each family creates its own boundaries from waste, and in doing so expresses the aspiration and ability to control their own lives.

Status-making and gender positions in the waste trade

Recyclables are symbols of accumulation and networking ability in the waste courtyard. They are material testimonial to individual hard work and business networks. But different waste materials and sources of waste say much about the identities and internal status differences among waste pickers. For instance, walking with a hunched back and in rags, 70-year-old Mr. Chen gave the impression that he was a poor, elderly migrant attempting to survive by collecting garbage on the edge of the city. Looking closely at his waste collecting courtyard, however, we started to understand the greater complexity within the business. In Chen's courtyard there was a spectacular wall of shoes, made up of hundreds of canvas rubber shoes, all

in the same style and colour. Some had holes, cuts, or dirt on the soles or the upper cloth vamp, but the majority were in good shape. They piled up to more than four feet high and four feet wide, together with another pile of old jackets, long pants, and caps in similar styles. The old couple Chen told us that a military camp nearby regularly disposed of old stock and gave them away. They asked us twice, "Tell me your foot size and I will pick out a good pair for you."

We eventually understood that what he tried to show, through this gift offering, was his ability to network with the military base, which was quite exclusive. Clearly, the old couple Chen differentiated themselves from most waste pickers in the village, who had to sort through dirty garbage or go around town to find recyclables. With such a network, they secured a stable and top-quality waste supply. According to them, their access to such quality waste was due to the fact that "the military camp people feel sorry for our old age and situation." We were unable to verify how they referred to their rural and class-based disadvantage when talking to people at the military base. It was perhaps not unusual for waste pickers to evoke rural inferiority, difficult living conditions, or place-based identities as bargaining chips in their dealings with customers (Nguyen 2016: 122). In China, however, the ability to network with government or related departments is a form of privilege-marking practices. Government departments and state-owned enterprises, including the military, control the best resources at all levels. Networking with them means special relations (*guanxi* 關係) and priority access to certain resources and information that most people do not know.

In contrast to the old couple Chen's showing off, Zhang hid his valuable objects and was very discrete about their origins. He once pointed to his piles of bottles, DVDs, and plastic tools and said, "This is not worth much. No one shows the real gems here." He said he could make real money by collecting precious metals, but he would not disclose his sources to us. Recycling precious metal such as copper needs special licensing, and without it could lead to jail. Another trader, Mrs. Ma, told us of a similar trick: networking with particular construction sites or companies to find valuable metals. For this purpose, she made an effort to invest in her husband's outfit and made sure that his hands were clean when making business deals. She said, "Who wants to shake hands with you if you look like a waste picker!"

Josh Reno observed of scavengers working in landfill in the United States: "Reclaiming objects from waste is not only about recovering value, but has a value in itself as well" (2009: 42). The sources of waste therefore not only mark differences in status but also place-based identities and gender positioning. Those who can create better networks can gain access to exclusive waste with higher economic value, and the more entrepreneurial strive to go beyond mechanical collecting and sorting in order to climb up the waste trade ladder and operate a waste depot that harvests from individual waste pickers. At the same time, men tend to associate themselves with business networking, technological know-how, and higher-value items in waste trading, while women focus more on mechanical labour and cheaper waste matter (Nguyen 2016). In short, the different materiality of waste intertwines with gender personhood and status to create further internal differences within the waste trade. Attention to the different ways waste is collected and the various waste materials allows us to examine closely the ways in which waste pickers position themselves and rank others in the community, and therefore the ways in which they consciously qualify their work and distance themselves from an association with waste in general.

Conclusion

While many regard the informal labour of waste pickers as merely rural migrants finding survival in the city, and hence as insignificant, Vinay Gidwani argues that their work is in fact essential in preparing the necessary conditions for the urban capitalist process in many cities in the developing world. He invokes the concept of "infra-structural" to understand waste work as complicating Marx's notion of capital and political economy and to bring forth an understanding of informal economy as part of the "external condition of production" of capital and labour power (Gidwani 2015: 575-7). Similarly, but in a different context, Anna Tsing argues that informal picking work is a major part of capitalism because capitalism succeeds in not only concentrating wealth, but also in taking advantage of the values, living things, and raw materials outside of the formal market process. Informal and illegal picking work such as ivory extraction or mushroom picking are often translated into accumulating capitalist values, or what she calls "salvage accumulation" (Tsing 2015: 63-6).

This essay joins this larger discussion of waste and picking work by acknowledging the value of waste in signifying the foundation of economy and society, the formal market economy, and the mode of capitalist accumulation. It enriches and complicates the discussion by showing that waste pickers in China, unlike the low-skilled workers in many places, are small entrepreneurs running family business who make all kinds of investment and trading decisions every day. The drive for profit and potential mobility

motivate them to move a huge amount of municipal waste out of cities. Having said that, however, we have shown that waste pickers in China are subject to a series of challenges, including the need to build households in waste collecting courtyards, raise kids in an undesirable environment, encounter widespread social stigma, and engage in intense physical labour. Despite the narrative of freedom and autonomy they invoke, waste pickers continue to face harassment and evictions by municipal authorities.

This essay contributes to understanding the everyday effort and strategies waste pickers use to make sense of their work and life, which motivates them to keep going despite all the stigma, anxiety, and repugnance associated with waste work. "Living with waste" is therefore not merely about their condition of having to work and live with waste, but the daily effort in speaking about and negotiating boundaries with it in order to render waste work legitimate and meaningful. Last, it is also through the effort of sorting, managing, and negotiating with waste that pickers not only forge a life for themselves and their families, but also for many of us in the city.

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