BOOK REVIEW
Joshua Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020)

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Apricot pits, fish scales, poultry feathers, discarded film stock, rubber shoe soles, used rope, human hair. These are just a few of the material types that were officially "recycled" by the state during the Mao era. While recycling copper and iron was most central for the state's challenge to industrialize despite resources shortages, this list highlights the material breadth of Joshua Goldstein's *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing*.

Socially, the book covers a similarly wide swath. Further back, in the Republican era, the streets of Beijing hosted street cleaners and waterers (to keep down dust); night soil collectors and night soil merchants (including "shit lords," and "shit hegemons"); and an array of used and waste goods collectors categorized as net carriers, drumbeaters, plank-cart pullers, big-basket toters, and more. Together, these actors "combined into arguably the most pervasive economic sector in Beijing" (p. 3) and ranged from the destitute to powerful capitalists, statuses that in the Mao era were condensed in range and for the latter inverted.

In the reform era, more massive shifts occurred in the realms of materials and labor. As a new regime of material disposability took hold, far greater quantities and heterogeneity of postconsumer waste appeared. Rural migrants reemerged to take over most links of the city's waste trades, creating steep hierarchies of capital accumulation through thriving informal recycling economies. Migrant labor also helped turn China into the premier destination for globe spanning commodity chains of scrap, over which the state struggled to assert control.

Remains of the Everyday is an enthralling history of how used, broken, and discarded materials have circulated and where the materials have come to rest (if at all) since the Republican era. It is a history of a particular urban metabolic system, one that embeds material flows in movements of people and capital as well as in shifting and competing ideologies and governance regimes. Although focused on Beijing, the tendrils of this urban metabolism reach far, from Wenan County, Hebei (a "rural backwater" that became a concentrated waste plastic processing center); to the migrant recycler sending county of Gushi, Henan; and all the way to factories and recycling bins in the United States and other waste exporting countries.

The book primarily draws on and is engaged in debates in discard studies (an emerging interdisciplinary field) and China Studies. It is the first book-length work that provides a social and environmental history centered on solid waste in modern China.[1] There is no singular theoretical focal point around which the book is organized. Instead, Goldstein commits to specificity and telling nuanced stories about the lives of waste workers via gazetteers, archival documents, oral histories, memoirs, propaganda posters, newspaper articles, scholarly research, and a total of two years of fieldwork between 1999 and 2018. He consistently pushes against the tendency for subaltern groups, who lack much of a historically recorded voice, to be represented in "monodimensional" ways (p. 43). When discussing the changes that occurred across the standard periodization of modern China, Goldstein mostly presents sets of contradictions, avoiding neat conclusions. His account also highlights continuities across historical eras that problematize the often too tidy pre-Mao, Mao, and

post-Mao sequential parsing, even though the book is still structured according to this chronology. In this sense, *Remains of the Everyday* is impressive in its commitment to representing complexity and allowing the unique lens afforded by waste and waste work to open up many new perspectives.

Part I of *Remains of the Everyday* includes two chapters that cover the Republican Era (1912-1949), Part II includes three chapters covering the Mao Era (1949-1980), and Part III includes three chapters covering the Reform Era (1980 through the 2010s). In this review I try out a different organizational principle for synthesizing all of this complexity: material instead of strictly chronological. This will lead to one key question at the end.

Shit

Chapter One starts with shit. It comes first in a list of postconsumer wastes and goods ranked according to their quantities in Beijing in the first half of the 20th century. And quite the "good" shit used to be. Night soil economies were the primary means of removing human excrement from the city; and the fertilizer cakes into which the shit were baked ensured that the fields surrounding Beijing had a boost in fertility (with the secondary result that roundworm was endemic to the city). During this era the city was modernizing quite unevenly and sanitation infrastructure was a major short-coming. Lacking such infrastructure, residents' everyday behaviors and night soil merchants were both relied upon and blamed for the city's sanitation woes. Administers instituted many behavior and labor regulations, the latter mostly focused on better containment of night soil along the process of removal.

Night soil merchants suffered from many indignities and abuses, although most such accounts did not gain traction until after 1949. During the Republican era the merchants themselves were often portrayed as the sanitary problem and "shit lords" (under whom most merchants performed their labor) eventually partnered with the government to help regulate the trade. But, in an abrupt twist of fate, in 1951 the leading shit hegemon, who had been appointed director of the Night Soil Affairs Office, was executed for his abuse of workers. From the perspective of shit and the night soil economy, the 1949 turning point could hardly have been more dramatic.

By 1959, as outlined in Chapter Three, a minor cult began to form around former night soil collector Shi Chuanxiang, who had become a celebrated "model worker" and CCP member. As night soil collection faltered and personnel became increasingly hard to find, the Sanitation Bureau amplified the cult of Shi with a long feature on *The People's Daily* to inspire the nation. In the published lecture, Shi articulates the vital importance of waste work and the significance of shit as a model for handling history. Goldstein summarizes the lecture's essence: "Like shit, history must be dug out daily, removed, and confronted. If left to pile up, it rots, stinks, and contaminates, but fully unearthed and correctly applied, it spurs inexhaustible growth and renewal" (p. 84). Yet this notion of history as stinking shit that must be confronted eventually caught up with Shi. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, a handshake Shi shared with Liu Shaoqi six years before led to him being labeled a traitor and being subjected to public humiliation, bullying, and beatings.

Meanwhile, the use of night soil as an agricultural input began to fall out of favor in the 1970s as chemical fertilizers became more widely available. The final severing of the metabolic cycle of excrement came in the mid-1980s as the implementation of the household responsibility system meant that the large parcels of land needed for commune brigades to manage night soil were no longer available. Shit had shifted dramatically from "good" to "waste."

Waste-goods

Shifting to materials that are more commonly evoked by the term "recycling," Chapter Two and the majority of subsequent chapters deal with the circulation of (1) secondhand goods, (2) "junk" (objects that are reworked but retain a certain identity and integrity), and (3) "scrap" (items valued for the material from which they are made). Recycling, as a master category used to organize the book, is thus on the one hand deployed in a very broad sense, to include all of these objects and materials that *cycled* in ways that defy linear economic models of production, consumption, and disposal. But on the

other hand, Goldstein carefully differentiates reuse from recycling. While both practices often entail circulations of used materials, recycling is technically defined as the old goods/scraps that are "melted, shredded, or otherwise processed to the point that their previous identity as an object is lost and they function only as a kind of material" (p. 12). Recycling thus corresponds with an energy-intensive industrial process of using wastes as raw materials for production.

In Republican era Beijing, reuse was much more widespread than recycling (in the technical sense), although lines between the two can be blurry in practice. Reuse was prevalent as the city "fell to cannibalizing its greatest resource, its own majestic past" (p. 45) as it no longer had the status of imperial seat after 1928. Almost matching the number of categories of collectors and peddlers was the categorization of markets and shops, the key nodes through which most junk moved. Many of these nodes existed in gray areas of legality and operated at night or next to waterways, into which stolen goods could be thrown if the authorities appeared. The most famed market, Tianqiao, brought flows of junk, scrap, and secondhand goods together with snack stalls and cheap amusement performances of many types. The market epitomized "modernity of a different sort:" a notion emphasizing the ways that recycling and reuse enabled the poor to adjust to Beijing's decline, and "cope with its incorporation into an economic system increasingly shaped by foreign imperialism and industrial capitalism" (p. 60).

Post-1949 changes were slightly less drastic for used goods, junk, and scrap peddlers than they were for night soil merchants. The long-term goal of the new regime was to eliminate all forms of private business, in which peddlers were engaged with a highly ambivalent class status. Making the sector more legible was thus the priority, leading to some benefits (e.g., legitimacy, stability, and respectability) and some significant trade-offs (e.g., fees, regulations, and meetings). Eventually, after a set of complex bureaucratic shifts and disagreements over access to different types of materials and goods, the "Beijing Scrap Company" formed in 1956, completing the state's absorption of the scrap sector (along with its capital and assets), even though many scrap retailers continued to essentially operate as independent businesses.

Scrap snagged a rare "leading role" in the late 1950s in China's Great Backyard Steel Furnace Debacle. But more broadly, during the Great Leap Forward the state went to great lengths to standardize the scrap sector and instill in urban residents habits of thrift re-oriented away from the household and toward the state's project of turning cities into sites of industrial production. This project of standardization was a massive undertaking. A wide array of specialized peddlers had to become experts on every type of scrap and their different grades and subtypes (e.g., twenty-one types of used cotton fiber alone). It was thus a "simultaneous deskilling and reskilling, a pedagogical shift from apprenticeships to booklets, department meetings, and group training" (p. 110). Meanwhile, the ideological fervor that was suffused into recycling practices played out differently in households than it did in workplaces. The labor of being thrifty at home was rewarded generously at scrap collection depots, offering a bit of pocket money in a cash-scarce economy. But in the workplace, the extra labor needed to realize the fullest potential of used materials was often not remunerated. In this way, under the ideological fervor of the "fetishization of use value," and of reusing waste, workplace complaints that can be read as being about labor exploitation were reframed into matters of "insufficient socialist consciousness" (p. 128).

A particular kind of environmental awareness became prominent in China in the 1970s, which helped lead to a recasting of the scrap sector as backward, unorganized, and in need of removal to urban peripheries. The disruptive displacements that resulted were balanced out with reform era policy shifts and economic growth that led to a "golden age" for the state's recycling companies starting in the 1980s. A major transfer in labor took place in the 1990s from urban workers to rural migrants, who were arriving in cities in increasingly large numbers and utterly outcompeted the state system. Although this was a success story for many migrants, they faced intense discrimination and were common targets for "repatriation" until the policy finally ended in 2003. After 2003, displacements and sporadic campaigns to crack down on or clear out

recycling market activities persisted, although markets for scrap stayed strong. Entire villages and counties surrounding Beijing turned into "waste cities," gravitationally pulling in particular waste streams and with them significant amounts of wealth. Despite the persistent official framing of scrap trading as inimical to environmental protection, the golden age persisted until the domestic economic downturn of 2013.

Pollution

Goldstein aptly notes that "[r]ecycling is often portrayed as being about reducing waste, as a kind of pushback or resistance to industrial profligacy and material use, but … [a]s far as recyclers interfacing with an industrial system are concerned, the more waste the better" (p. 149). Thus, as China's industrialization has deepened, so too has the *disposability* + *waste* + *recycling* triad come to dominate over reuse. While recycling extracts raw materials of value from a much broader stream of waste, the byproducts, leftovers, and remains of such industrial activity have become overwhelmingly voluminous and increasingly toxic. Pollution is thus the third and final thread that is most prominent in Goldstein's final chapters that cover the reform era.

The overall trend in this era has been a race to the bottom in waste disposal and in the industrial processing of recyclables to sites where labor is cheapest and environmental regulations most lax. Within Beijing's waste sector, this trend created long tendrils elsewhere as the scrap processing hubs that served Beijing increasingly pulled in materials from across the region, country, and globe. Dumping and burning of polluting byproducts has severely damaged water, soil, and air, leading to high rates of associated health ailments in some areas. Crackdowns in the recycling sector in the 2000s and 2010s mostly just dispersed polluting practices elsewhere, but more serious reforms begun toward the end of Goldstein's research period in the late 2010s.

The recent reforms have two parts: "the ban" and "the merge." The former is the globally well-known story involving China increasingly restricting imports of types of scrap labeled "foreign garbage," culminating in bans in 2018 that upended the global recycling economy. On the other hand, "the merge" represents a less heralded domestic policy shift that involves merging the management of municipal solid waste (the purview of the sanitation department) with the management of recycling (overseen by the Commerce Ministry since 1949). This new push for a merged system appears to be aimed at full elimination of the informal, migrant-run recycling system. The Ban + Merge together are thus designed to give the state control over all aspects of waste management and help China ascend upwards in the teleology of development to become a rich country. Although the plan can appear environmentally beneficial in some ways, and is situated within the China's broader campaign to build an "ecological civilization," Goldstein shows how benefits appear as such only with the help of perspectives built on nationalism, the logics of large capital investments, and discriminatory against rural migrants.

First, banning scrap imports is a way to force manufacturers in China to use more virgin materials, which require mining and extraction but lead to higher quality products. When these virgin materials are imported, the environmental costs of processing scrap in China are thus replaced with environmental costs incurred outside of China's borders. Second, by eliminating the informal recycling system, many investment opportunities are opened for state-backed waste management companies. The waste incineration sector, in particular, has experienced massive investment and growth even though incineration has a very poor track record in China and is at odds with the goal of waste reduction (because incinerators require decades worth of garbage to recoup their investments and become profitable).

Third, concerns with the pollution generated by the informal scrap trade are as much about unwanted people as they are about environmental contaminants. Although serious pollution does result from the unregulated processing of scrap, the rural migrant recycler community has come to epitomize what the state calls the "low-value population" that they began dramatically evicting from Beijing after a fire broke out in a migrant enclave in 2017. Such discrimination trumps consideration for all of the economic and environmental benefits that the migrant system provides. For example, in the 1990s,

90% of electronics and appliances collected by informal recyclers in urban China were reused (through networks of repair, refurbishing, and resale), dropping down to 50% in the 2010s. However, rather than support these networks, the state has increasingly acted on the "e-waste problem" by implementing policies that subsidize ripping these materials into raw material factions for resale to manufacturers (i.e., recycling). Like other trends in China's waste management, the strategy not only places informal workers within the category of uncontrolled pollution, but also is complicit with increased resource extraction, planned obsolescence, and a capital investment and growth model that primarily benefits well-resourced and well-connected actors.

Thought experiments

Throughout *Remains of the Everyday*, Goldstein weaves a set of thought experiments into a wide-ranging political, economic, social, and environmental history that will interest scholars far beyond the confines of China studies. Three of these experiments stand out. First, building primarily on Republican era accounts, Goldstein asks what it would look like if we denaturalized the economic categories and imagined linear progression of production, consumption, and disposal; instead utilizing practices such a repair, maintenance, and mending as frames for a different understanding of how materials, value, and labor are distributed and in motion (p. 15). Second, building on Mao era accounts, Goldstein takes seriously the promises offered from the project of carrying out industrialization without disposability (p. 66), avoiding both the romanticizing and denouncing conclusions that much scholarship produces. Third, engaging with reform era transformations through the 2010s, Goldstein grapples with a new "waste regime" that is taking hold in China, one based on a definition of both garbage and recycling as forms of pollution instead of as opposite sides of waste/resource, valueless/valuable binaries (p. 236-240).

The last thought experiment is deeply historically specific and in part arises out of China's unique positioning in global waste flows in the first decades of the 21st century. Recycling can hardly be imagined as the virtuous act of putting unwanted postconsumer packaging in a bin (as it is often imagined in the West) when the polluting processing of recyclable waste is occurring close to home and regularly gains negative media attention. While Goldstein rightly emphasizes how the newly emerging waste regime that views recycling as a form of pollution is functioning to expunge informal waste workers from urban China, this view of recycling may also have untapped potential to further disrupt status quo economic/environmental consciousness beyond China. What if, in addition to repair, maintenance, and mending, this redefined category of recycling was included in the thought experiment to disrupt linear economic models? Perhaps the question is not just about linearity versus circularity but also about what logics of circularity are conducive with social justice and environmental sustainability.

Waste that is evaluated as potential raw materials for production (i.e., recycling) has a strong tendency to refuse ossification and containment and instead break apart and circulate through bodies and biophysical processes, or, through economic circuits that can emit pollutants to circulate through these other logics. As such, the new waste regime that emphasizes how recycling is pollution can cast an even more critical light on the project to shift environmental costs outside of China—for these circulations have strong tendencies to disregard political borders. Recycling thus not only can disrupt imagined linear economic models, but also can undermine any imagined discreteness of modern states as physical entities and any presumptions of the containability of toxicity in late capitalist risk society. Repair, maintenance, and mending could indeed be key practices and conceptual categories for any renewed effort for achieving industrialization without disposability (also necessarily including a much more genuine attempt to ensure that people are also not treated as disposable). Perhaps a deeper appreciation for the environmental contradictions of recycling can play a critical role in renewing such a project.

[1] Some key previous scholarship focused on solid waste in Beijing and China more broadly include Kao Shih-yang, *The City Recycled: The Afterlives of Demolished Buildings in Post-War Beijing* (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2013); Amy Zhang, "Rational resistance: Homeowner contention against waste incineration in Guangzhou," *China Perspectives* 2 (2014); Hu Jiaming and Zhang Yiying, *Feipin shenghuo* [Scrap Life] (Hong Kong: Chinese University of HK Press, 2016); Adam Liebman, "Reconfiguring Chinese natures: Frugality and waste reutilization in Mao era urban China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51:4 (2019); and Yvan Schulz and Anna Lora-Wainwright, "In the name of circularity: Environmental improvement and business slowdown in a Chinese recycling hub," *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2:1 (2019).

Response

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I'm grateful to the editors for featuring this review of my book, and to Adam for this rich critique; it's a tremendous boon when someone who knows this field so well shares their insights. For those who might lack the time to read the book (which in these hectic and harrowing times is most everybody I'd figure), I'd say you'll get pretty much all you need from Adam's review. Like a good scrap-sorter or dumpster-diver, he pulls out all the most important and valuable bits. But I especially appreciate his approach of reorganizing the book along the lines of forms of material as indeed the category of "waste" is enormous, unruly, and goes through huge shifts over the century the book covers. How materials move through different conceptual and economic categorizations, how they trigger shifting material practices of social and labor engagement is at the heart of the book, and so shifting the framing in this way helps highlight issues that sometimes were muted or chopped up by my chronological approach.

My only response to Adam's closing discussion about the missed opportunity to push the thought experiment on the contradictions of industrial recycling further is that he's absolutely right. It's not as if nobody was talking about micro-plastics when I was writing those last chapters, and a deeper consideration of their significance (and their inevitability in pretty much every plastics recycling process) would definitely have shaken up some of the ways I track the political-geographies of plastics scrap and its pollution hazards. And a deeper overall critique of other forms of industrial recycling might have reshaped other arguments as well. Samantha MacBride has pointed out in her work on US recycling that thus far there is no proof that recycling has in any way lessened the growth of extractive industries.[1] If the environmentalist hope (indeed, not just a hope but an existential necessity if we are to make the urgent shift to sustainability needed to save countless species and human lives) is to find socially just ways of human thriving, we need to recognize that recycling thus far has failed to deliver that promise, that at present recycling markets and processes often shift toxicity to the poor and marginalized without resulting in an aggregate measurable reduction in extractivism. This isn't to say that all recycling processes should be abandoned as increasing environmental or social harms; there are a plethora of process, just as there are materials, and many are without question more socially and environmentally beneficial in direct comparison with the production of new material. But it is to say that recycling as an industrial economic process embedded in our present form of extractive racial capitalism falls far short of slowing the life damaging destructiveness of that system.

[1] Samantha MacBride, *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States* (MIT Press, 2013).