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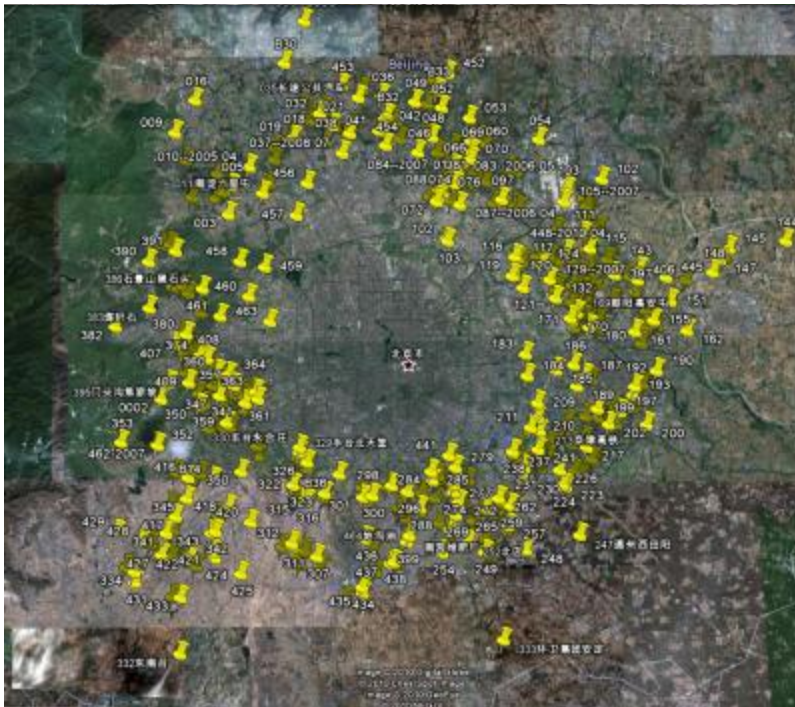
# Beijing Besieged by Garbage | Cross-Currents

*Shih-yang Kao*

8-10 minutes

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Photographing "Year One": Wang Jiuliang and the Reign of Garbage



Garbage dumps form Beijing's "7th Ring"

Since the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis, the Western media has increasingly pointed to China as the potential savior of global capitalism. This is based on the idea that the demand of Chinese consumers, which has been pumped up by increasing

governmental spending in infrastructure, urban renewal, and social welfare programs, has the potential to inject new energy into the sluggish world economy. This changing perception of China from its role as the world's exporter to that of prime consumer is gradually reshaping the contour of the global economy. Luxury brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Prada are all expanding their business in China by opening up new stores in fast-growing, second-tier inland cities. "Mao Zedong would not have approved," wrote *The Economist*, "but his former serfs ignore his frowns and merrily fritter away the banknotes that still depict his face."

It is difficult to measure the extent to which the emergence of consumerism in China has made the global economic downturn less precipitous. After all, the idea that Western economies should put their hope for recovery on Chinese buyers, instead of focusing more on disciplining the greedy gamblers of Wall Street, is simply absurd. It does seem quite clear, however, that the rise of consumerism in China has already induced its own crisis. In the autumn of 2009, more than three hundred villagers in Guangzhou's Panyu District protested in front of the city hall against a proposed incinerator plant. They complained that people in Panyu had already suffered from a high rate of cancer and other chronic diseases caused by an existing landfill in the district and that the proposed incinerator would only make what was already a bad situation even worse. The city officials' response to the protest was short, yet hard to dispute: How are we going to solve the city's booming garbage crisis without incinerators? Meanwhile, 2,000 kilometers to the north, in the capital city of Beijing, residents of a high-end neighborhood called "Napa Valley" were brainstorming plans for a new neighborhood recycling program. They hoped that

if they could show that the amount of waste can be significantly reduced through recycling, city officials would have no excuse to move ahead with their plan for the Asuwei Incinerator, which was to be built in close proximity to the community's golf course and California-styled villas.

In the circle of Chinese environmental NGOs, the year 2009 is often described as “Year One of the Garbage Era” (*laji yuannian*). The description is quite literal. It was in the year 2009 when grassroots resistance against landfills and incinerators (Panyu and Napa Valley being the two best-known cases) began to emerge across the country. It was also in 2009 when major Chinese environmental NGOs such as Friends of Nature, Green Beagle, and Global Village began to take garbage seriously and put recycling and waste reduction on their agendas. However, the term *laji yuannian* also conveys a deep sense of unease. The expression brings back the year-counting tradition of dynastic China, according to which the beginning of each new emperor's reign resets the calendar to “year one.” *Laji yuannian* is, thus, an announcement: Garbage has now risen to power. It governs, it conquers, and its empire is expanding. But what exactly does the reign of Garbage look like? Where is its territory? How does it redefine Chinese urbanism?

The collection of images from photographer Wang Jiuliang's “Beijing Besieged by Waste” series provides a powerful starting point for us to think about these questions. Born to a rural family in Shandong Province, and a graduate of the Communication University of China, the 35-year-old photographer has been documenting Beijing's garbage since 2008. His initial motivation was purely reactive. While shooting for his previous series

“Afterlives,” which explored changes in the ritual of ancestral offerings in his Shandong hometown, Wang found that it was impossible to find a place where he could capture the kind of purity and tranquility for which he had hoped. “Everywhere I went there was garbage,” he recalled during a recent talk at the University of California, Berkeley, in April 2011. “In the end, I always found myself cleaning up bag after bag of garbage before I could start shooting.” As a result, even before the completion of the ‘Afterlives’ series, Wang had decided to make his new enemy—garbage—the subject of his next project. He also decided to proceed with the project in Beijing, a city where he has lived since 2003.

“Dirt,” wrote cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, “is matter out of place.” It is thus not difficult to see why any inquiry into the subject of trash—be it artistic, journalistic, or scholarly—would inevitably turn out to be a project about geography. Beijing’s garbage takes Wang Jiuliang to places that are foreign even to the capital’s own residents. He found, for example, trash heaps being used by local shepherds as ranches to raise sheep. These sheep, as anyone familiar with Beijing might suspect, will likely end up as Xinjiang lamb sticks, a local favorite. Right next to Beijing’s grand Capital International Airport terminal 3, Wang came across a humble irrigation pond being used by airliners to dump disposables. As paradoxical and pathetic as it may sound, he discovered that when the setting sun sheds its light on all of the floating foam slippers, the entire pond looks just like Monet’s *Water Lilies*. And he found, of course, many illegal dump sites. In one of these dump sites, Wang found not only trash, but also an entire community of scavengers from the faraway province of Sichuan, enterprising

people who have built houses and new lives from scraps, right on the dump. Wang Jiuliang's work reveals that trash does not just disturb and destroy; it shapes identities and creates new social relations.

When all of these places are woven together, a peculiar geographic phenomenon emerges. Between Beijing's Fifth and Sixth Ring Roads, roughly five hundred trash dumps that Wang discovered form a thick belt that encircles the entire city. With "Beijing's Seventh Ring" (a name coined by Wang) now clearly in sight, the capital no longer looks grand, classic, or rational. It is a city suffocated by the garbage of its own production. Moreover, the area that the Seventh Ring occupies is also the area where the majority of Beijing's migrant population lives. In other words, the laborers who contribute the most to the city's growth and vitality now bear the brunt of the city's waste.

Garbage has changed not only the environment of Chinese cities, but also Chinese society itself. Environmental NGOs in China have begun to realize that the tasks of waste reduction and recycling must start inside the country's urban households, which are increasingly modeled after American-style throwaway culture. In other words, for the first time, the urban middle class has become a subject of scrutiny in China's environmental activism. Since "Year One," we have been witnessing an explosive number of exhibits, campaigns, talks, and experimental recycling programs aimed at changing the consumption and disposal practices of urban households. Wang Jiuliang's "Beijing Besieged by Waste" series, with its images that stir a sense of guilt deep in our stomachs, is representative of this changing course of environmental activism. And when the wasteland of urban China is

thus revealed, we start to wonder whether the expansion of consumerism in China is really the key to a better future.

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