



Beijing Besieged by Waste

2011 • Running time 86 minutes • Directed by Wang JiuLiang • Distributed by Icarus Films

While China's economic ascent commands global attention, less light has been shed upon the monumental problem of waste spawned by a burgeoning population, booming industry and insatiable urban growth. Award-winning photographer and director Wang Jiuliang focuses his lens on the grim spectacle of waste, detritus and rubble unceremoniously piled upon the land surrounding China's Olympic city, capital and megalopolis, Beijing. The film depicts the decimation of once-essential rivers and farmlands in the background of gleaming high-speed trains, stadiums and skyscrapers. Wang's film reveals a sinister cyclical pattern of construction, consumption and garbage. But it also provides moving images of the daily lives of the scavengers who live in the wastelands of Beijing.

Beijing Besieged by Waste



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WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Beijing Besieged By Waste exposes the largely hidden and unknown dark side of the lights, glamour and architectural brilliance of rapidly developing Beijing as it becomes an international city. Wang reveals the lack of strategy and foresight in dealing with the concomitant waste that now surrounds the city, poisons essential and scarce natural resources and fosters a dystopic landscape where some rural people still try to eke out a living. The film effectively calls attention to an ecological and social crisis that daily grows more desperate.

This documentary on the growing ecological disaster that results from this rampant dumping of waste in the greater Beijing metropolitan area will find relevance in a number of courses on topics as varied as environmental studies, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and film, among others.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

History

Anthropology

Political Science

Environmental Science

Media Studies

Geography

Ethnography

Urban Studies



THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

The film highlights a subculture of rural people who, displaced by lack of economic viability in their native regions yet unable to obtain government permission to live in the city, seek to make a life among the toxic and foul waste dumps that surround Beijing. The failure to develop the city of Beijing in a manner that responsibly deals with the problem of waste management has created an ecological and social disaster that creates a stark and alarming disparity between those who live in the cosmopolitan luxury of Beijing's new developments and those who inhabit its fetid and dystopic periphery.

BACKGROUND

This is an early effort by the same filmmaker who directed *Plastic China*, though this film uses Wang's work as a photographer more centrally. Additionally, it has more of a journalistic/reportage style than the narrative style we see in *Plastic China*.

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KEY LOCATIONS AND PERSONS

Beijing, China

Wang Jiuliang – photographer and filmmaker

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of this film have the most impact in telling the story? The film has a more journalistic/reportage style than a narrative style. How might this have been a different film if it had focused more on following the lifestyles of one or two of the people we see inhabiting the dump sites?
2. Beijing's waste problem arises alongside its economic development and expansion. Must development necessarily lead to an increase in waste?
3. One factor that seems to exacerbate the waste management problem in Beijing is a culture of neglect and apathy toward the consequences of dumping toxic materials near water sources. How might this *social* issue be addressed?
4. Another of the fundamental problems seems to be the lack of any long-term plan for managing waste from the city. If you were a government official, what plan might you implement to solve this issue?
5. What are the conditions that make living in metropolitan area dump sites attractive to some people from rural areas? What forces would cause people to leave behind presumably cleaner, healthier spaces for a life among urban waste?
6. What problems or consequences might arise from building new construction on top of sites that were previously dump sites? Might further construction not just serve to create even more waste in the future?



“Its focus is clear eyed and frank. The shots of people working and living in the often-illegal garbage dumps are routinely heart-breaking.”
– *Planning Magazine*

FILM EXCERPTS

Where time is limited, the following excerpts can be screened.

0:01-5:30 – Intro

47:07-54:20 - Portrait of people raising animals among the waste

QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE EXCERPTS

1. Images of waste-laden foregrounds inhabited by people and grazing animals with cranes and the skeletons of luxury residential homes not far beyond suggest not only a stark contrast in people's lifestyles within the same landscape, but also that these two spheres inevitably impact one another. What kind of environmental and social policies could be enacted now to ensure better lives for all (including animals)?

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“An example of the power of cinematic reportage in China today.”

– Asian Educational Media Service

2. What response do you have to seeing the lifestyles of the people who use the urban periphery as an opportunity to make a living off of the castoff waste of central Beijing? How has this footage impacted your understanding of the social and environmental situation caused by rapid development in Beijing?

ACTIVITIES

1. Visit a local landfill and find out how it manages waste. Ask about long-term strategies and solutions in place. Find out what future challenges are anticipated.
2. Challenge the class to make desirable items out of things they otherwise would have thrown away or recycled. Consider holding a “craft fair” event to sell these items to raise money for educational materials or to donate to an appropriate non-profit organization.
3. Have students make a documentary film about any local waste management problem that they encounter in their lives.
4. Volunteer to help remove waste from a local site that attracts litter or dumping.
5. Hold a contest to see which member of the class can go the longest without creating any waste, and have all students reflect on the process of becoming aware of every bit of trash they were creating and considering creative ways to avoid doing so.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Learn more about ongoing developments in the Beijing waste management crisis:

“Land shortage in Beijing adds to problem of disposing city’s trash,” Hui Fern Tay, February 4, 2014.

“The Burning Problem of China’s Garbage,” February 20, 2017.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/02/20/515814016/the-burning-problem-of-chinas-garbage>

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Take a global perspective on the waste crisis. Consider the following resources:

View Candida Brady's 2012 documentary *Trashed* (featuring actor Jeremy Irons) for a global perspective on wasteful consumerism and pollution.

"More people, more trash? Rethinking waste from New York to Beijing," Steve Cohen, May 11, 2017.

<https://www.greenbiz.com/article/more-people-more-trash-rethinking-waste-new-york-beijing>

The Zero Waste Solution: Untrashing the Planet One Community at a Time, Paul Connett (2014).

Consider the connection between consumption and waste:

Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash, Susan Strasser (2000).

Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash, Edward Humes (2013).

View the 5-minute video that explores Wang Jiuliang's methods of creating a documentary film by combining work in photography and information systems: <https://vimeo.com/188616955>

SCENE LIST

0-5	Opening sequence Huge landfill with many scavengers, trucks dumping garbage, sheep eating garbage, competing with scavengers Wang Jiuliang a photographer and the NARRATOR takes a picture and narrates. Says he has photographed many landfills. Aerial shot of landfill. Wang has been to between 400 and 500 landfills around Beijing. Title: "Beijing Besieged by Waste"
6- 14	Garbage collection and activity at the landfill, Night time in a landfill, a man gathers paper, puts it on his wagon. We are on a square / a street / a sidewalk / the highway / apartments / office buildings Garbage arrives by truck and motorcycle. Scavengers pick over garbage. Beijing generates 30,000 tons of waste a day
14-16	Tattered plastic on fences / kids / dogs / pickers. NARR — Some have chosen to live close to the landfills.
17-23	Expanding dumps, many illegal, close to wealthy urban neighborhoods. Images of the dumps.

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24-29	Life in the dumps, polluted streams, does anyone care? A wedding party poses for photos with sheep. Wang documents the dumps with a still camera examines a river bed coated with garbage.
30-33	Farmers try to grow vegetables and raise ducks despite the pollution. WANG- they won't drink the water from here but they do eat the vegetables that are grown using polluted waters. Being must import much of its water.
33-36	Unidentified piles of black substances, excrement from buses, sewage from residential areas. No permits. Google images show growing expanse of liquid waste.
37-47	An expanding city, construction waste, rock quarries and sand mines. Villagers work on building site. Police attend the destruction of a building. Scavengers (Wang says there are 100,000 in Beijing) live and work in construction areas. Many cranes over half built buildings
47-54	Scavengers in a small settlement. Wang photographs sheep and cattle grazing in garbage. Residents raise pigs. A woman objects to the camera crew.
55-60	Metal and plastic scavengers at work. Police arrive. A woman objects to being filmed. Another shows the house she built and has lived in for ten years. Food is scavenged. Woman discusses cost of health care. Ostracism by others. A man dies unnoticed, is laid to rest in a grave dug in landfill.
61-63	Garbage fires. Flames in the night sky, smoke. Wang says economic development is priority and nobody gives much thought to the waste problem. Wang digs a hole / many men with jackhammers work. Men erect gigantic forms.
64-68	2 thousand residents evicted as a landfill is redeveloped for an exposition site. Trees and corn are planted on top of the landfill.
69	Street level / Tiananmen Square / Wide shot reveals hundreds of landfill sites. Credits