

BOOK REVIEW

Circular Ecologies: Environmentalism and Waste Politics in Urban China

Amy Zhang. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. 216 pp. \$28.00 (pbk). ISBN 9781503639294

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As an anthropologist and a discard studies scholar, I eagerly awaited Amy Zhang's monograph, and the wait was certainly worthwhile. Based on 18 months of fieldwork in Guangzhou in 2012 and 2013 and multiple follow-up visits, this excellent ethnography offers a timely and intimate account of various forms of environmental activism in relation to waste, but it is about so much more than that. Discard studies scholars have long made a case for taking waste and its flows as a prism through which to understand a wide range of social, political, economic and cultural dynamics. Indeed, as Zhang's book shows, waste management is inextricably linked to state efforts to forge an image (and reality) of hygienic and sustainable modernity. Equally, such visions of development, circularity, environmental sustainability, health and sanitation are contested by residents and activists in multiple ways.

The catchy title somewhat underrepresents the scope of the important issues covered in the book. Zhang's ethnography is not only a story about circular ecologies, environmentalism and waste politics (as per the title and subtitle), but it also sheds light on urbanization, the evolving rural–urban divide, the political and moral economy of the late reform and Xi Jinping periods, the effects of the state-promoted impetus to consume, the multiple forms of precarity, negotiations over citizenship and not least, a personal favourite, subtle forms of agency. One of its remarkable features is the range of research participants and engagements with waste that it describes. Vivid vignettes, complemented by several images, portray the everyday strategies with which waste collectors secure a livelihood, the processes through which homeowners and villagers alike come to regard incineration as a threat to their health and the multilayered pathways followed by environmental advocates who campaign against incineration but also nurture eco-enzymes. Ethnographic accounts of, for instance, an informal recycler strategically packing cardboard to conceal lower quality material, achieve a fine balance between uncritically embracing research participants' practices and a judgemental or moralistic stance on their more cunning actions. Were the system (and society at large) more equitable in distributing resources, they would not have to resort to such tricks. The judgement is, implicitly and rightly, on the system, not on the individuals navigating it.

An evocative opening describes a visit to a waste treatment plant, choreographed to demonstrate techno-scientific sophistication and reassure residents of surrounding areas that living near an incinerator is perfectly safe. Soon after, Zhang unpacks the rationale that sustains this approach, explores whose labour and value is displaced by it and reveals how these discourses are contested by nearby residents and environmental activists. This sets the tone for a captivating journey through different ways in which waste circulates (part one) and the collectives which emerge surrounding its management and treatment (part two). Five chapters gradually illustrate how a range of types of waste and waste management are sites for producing, sustaining and contesting relationships and rights to the city.

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Chapter one, reminiscent of work by Carlo Invernizzi-Ferri and Joshua Goldstein in other parts of China, maps out the everyday practices of informal scrap collectors (most often rural migrants) who perform vital roles in the circular economy while they are simultaneously constituted as outsiders and recurrently displaced as the city grows. Chapter two revolves around “toxic displacement,” showing that the siting of incinerators can become an opportunity for a shared experience of threat from toxic exposure across the rural–urban divide. At the same time, it shows that displacement affects predominantly rural residents, exacerbating rural–urban inequalities, and that scientific and political participation for rural residents is uneven at best. Chapter three highlights homeowners’ strategic embrace of techno-scientific arguments against incineration based on the overly wet composition of waste. This functions to side-step accusations of localism or “not in my back yard” (NIMBY) activism, sustaining broader alliances with other activists. Chapter four illustrates how these concerns over the composition of waste became the premise for waste activists’ shift towards recycling and the implications for the distribution of waste-related labour and access to waste as a resource for sanitation workers. The last chapter showcases how activists and some residents embraced fermentation of organic waste to make eco-enzymes as a way of enacting new imaginaries and opening opportunities for actively caring and repairing environmental damage through collaborations between humans and more-than-human infrastructures.

The book illustrates strikingly how so many of the challenges posed by waste management are a direct consequence of rapid urbanization. This of course makes Guangzhou an especially valuable field site given the scale of urbanization and its relatively long history in the region. Conversely, it raises the question of how some of the issues described in Zhang’s book unfold in smaller cities and in areas where urbanization is less rapid. While land as a resource for siting incinerators may be a less pressing issue, and distance from residential areas may be easier to achieve in less densely populated areas, the precarity of informal waste collectors, concerns about safe disposal of waste, and individual and collective efforts to engage actively with waste (whether through eco-enzymes, or by establishing relationships with informal waste collectors or in other ways) are still likely to be highly relevant.

The concept of “collectives” is introduced at the start of the book as a substitute for the potentially homogenizing term “communities” or the democratic assumptions surrounding the term “publics.” Throughout the book (particularly the second part), the term functions to hint toward the convergence of middle-class homeowners alongside peri-urban villagers, waste workers and professional environmentalists in pursuit of shared goals, but only in contingent and ephemeral ways that fall short of a full-blown social movement, given the illiberal context in which such collectives come together. While it is clear that the term “collectives” serves a theoretical purpose, it would be fruitful to reflect more on what terms research participants used to describe these contingent collective formations. As a geographer, I also craved more discussion of when these collectives overlapped with geographical or place-based identifications such as housing developments, neighbourhoods, when they were multi-scalar, and what difference this may have made. Neither of these points, however, detracts from the excellent analysis and the quality of the empirical detail, which simply left me wanting more.

A thoroughly enjoyable, accessible and stimulating read, *Circular Ecologies* will be of interest to advanced scholars but should also be essential reading for undergraduate and postgraduate students of contemporary China, anthropology and discard studies, as well as sustainability, environmentalism, and science and technology studies.