(Re)made in China

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Material (Dis)connections, Art, and Creative Reuse

Anna Grasskamp (Ed.)

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Contents

Acknowledgements —— VII

Anna Grasskamp
Material (Dis)connections, Art, and Creative Reuse
An Introduction to *(Re)made in China* —— **1**

I Historical Cases

Dawn Odell
Chinese Porcelain Remade
A Projectile Point on the Northwest Coast of America —— **23**

Pai Yen-tzu
From Automatons to Hairpins
The Reuse of Dragons as Flying Serpents in the Imperial Workshops of Emperor Qianlong —— **33**

Monica Klasing Chen
Laughing at the Past
Resignifying "Waste" in Early Republican China —— **53**

Mei Mei Rado
Folding, Unfolding, and Refolding
The Transcultural Remaking of Chinese Skirts in Western Fashion, 1890s–1950s —— **77**

II Contemporary Positions

Marcela Godoy
Re-Make
An Artist's and Pedagogue's Perspective from Shanghai —— **109**

Evelyn Kwok
Used and Reused
Cardboard as the Unlikely Hero in Creative Space Making in Hong Kong —— **133**

Tseng Shao-Chien
Regenerating Taiwan's Cultural Memory
Waste Reimagined in the Artworks of Rahic Talif and Yeh Wei-Li — **149**

Meiqin Wang
On the Ground of the Discarded
Integrating Ecology and Socially Engaged Public Art in Chongqing — **173**

Simone M. Müller
Why Don't We Go to an Exhibit that Stinks?
Response to Wang's "On the Ground of the Discarded" — **199**

III **Reflections**

Lisa Claypool
"High Prices for Recycling"
Thinking about Art History with Photographer Yao Lu — **215**

Valentina Gamberi
A Political Ecology of Reuse
Challenging the Concept of "Sacred Waste" from an Asian Perspective — **225**

Authors — 235

Credits — 239

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Anna Grasskamp
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Anna Grasskamp

Material (Dis)connections, Art, and Creative Reuse

An Introduction to *(Re)made in China*

Abstract: This introduction discusses the eleven contributions to the edited volume *(Re)made in China Material (Dis)connections, Art, and Creative Reuse* in relation to developments in contemporary global history, discusses terminological issues, relevant scholarship, and historical examples of creative reuse and recycling of material culture from China in a global context. By considering how the meanings and values attributed to objects and raw materials change through practices of creative reuse, it provides news ways of writing the histories of art and material culture made in China through the lens of (dis)connectivity and with a focus on remaking and resources rather than authorship, authenticity, origin, or originality. The volume thereby contributes to the rapidly growing field of ecocritical perspectives on art made in China.

Keywords: China, reuse, art, material culture, (dis)connectivity, ecocritical art history

The reuse and recycling of materials that were made in China has a short history in the daily practices of private households around the globe, but a long history in art, craft, and design. When Ming-dynasty potters in China's 'porcelain capital' Jingdezhen made plates, cups, and bowls, they could not have known that their work would be reused to decorate European sites, such as the ceiling of Lisbon's Santos Palace and the walls of Berlin's Charlottenburg Castle. Similarly, in China, factory workers producing consumer goods for global markets and ragpickers salvaging reusable items at garbage dumps may be unaware of artworks made entirely of discarded objects that are being exhibited in exclusive art spaces around the world. As raw materials and manufactured goods circulate the globe, the transfer of the information and value systems connected to them can be disrupted in two major ways. First, as material crosses cultural boundaries and historical divides, as several contributions to this volume show, radical changes in systems of material evaluation become possible, for example, enabling the perception of trash as treasure. Second, in several contemporary settings, artists and designers have reused and re-evaluated seemingly 'meaning-

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less' garbage as a resource for multi-million-dollar art installations and prized design innovations.

A creative engagement with trash is not specific to materials made in China or available in China. Yet, it is important to note that Asia is currently the world's number one garbage dumping destination despite recent waste import bans to China.[1] Accordingly, the inhabitants of some Asian cities that contain more garbage than most other metropolises have more intense relationships with discarded materials than people in places like London, Tehran, or Los Angeles. While contemporary artists' engagement with garbage has been analyzed and conceptualized,[2] most recently as "constitutive of an ecological consciousness,"[3] China-specific studies have come to alternative conclusions. Margaret Hillenbrand argues that contemporary art from China that employs garbage renders the figure of the ragpicker invisible and enables works that profess a "politically correct sympathy" for the myriads of people in China who live with and from waste while at the same time keeping them 'out of the picture' in socially sanitized works of art.[4] In contrast, Meiqin Wang argues that some of the very same trash-using artworks that Hillenbrand criticizes "contribute to the growth of bottom-up civic consciousness and public space."[5] Wang's argument corresponds to insights presented by scholars of environmental activism in China who consider eco art as a critique of the communist regime's concept of "ecological civilization" (*shengtai wenming*) that presents the environmental crisis as a "non-Chinese" problem by ruling out Chinese responsibility and blaming global circumstances.[6] In addition, the works of Chinese artists who use discarded materials have been conceptualized in terms of "material art" (*caizhi yishu*), which emerged in the 1980s across different

1 Finn Arne Jørgensen, *Recycling* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 126–128; Ernest Kao, "China's waste ban has rocked the recycling world and revealed Hong Kong's dire record. What next for the city's rising mountains of trash?" *South China Morning Post*, Sep 19, 2018; Lucy Siegle, *Turning the Tide on Plastic: How Humanity (And You) Can Make Our Globe Clean Again* (London: Trapeze, 2018), 63–67.
2 Jo Anna Isaak, "Trash: Public Art by the Garbage Girls," in *Gender in Landscape Art*, eds., Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 173–185; Lea Vergine, *Trash: From Junk to Art* (Milan: Electa, 1997); Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art: TRASH Rubbish Mongo* (Milan: Skira, 2007), 7–18; Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Anna Dezeuze, "Junk Aesthetics in a Throwaway Age," in *Almost Nothing: Observations on Precarious Practices in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 39–77; Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).
3 Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism.*
4 Margaret Hillenbrand, "Ragpicking as Method," *Prism* 16, no. 2 (2019): 291.
5 Meiqin Wang, "Waste in Contemporary Chinese Art," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 76 (Spring 2017): 33.
6 Paolo Magagnoli, "The Civilized Artist Beautifies Pollution: Zhao Liang's *Water* and *Beijing Green*." *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2012): 367–376.

genres like painting, sculpture, installation and performance.[7] These somewhat contradictory insights derived from research on art in mainland Chinese metropolises are of limited use for understanding the art and design worlds of Hong Kong and Taipei that are deeply entangled with mainland Chinese practices while at the same time being closely embedded within global circuits of creation, curation, and sales in different ways than Shanghai, Chongqing, and Beijing.[8]

Early modern and modern practices of reuse, remaking, and recycling in relation to art and crafts from and in China are less researched than contemporary practices. Examples are, however, easy to find. The Ming-dynasty collector's manual *Zhangwu zhi*, for example, which in English is known as the *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, features several examples.[9] The manual's author Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645) recommends repurposing bronze hooks from ancient belts as handles for whisks and fans or hooks for scroll paintings. He also suggests rededicating ancient bricks once employed for supporting musical instruments as footstools and speculates on the original function of a particular type of ancient jar that was reused as a container for breeding ornamental fish in elite garden settings during the Ming. The guidebook mentions several instances of the remaking of ancient artifacts in Ming workshops and abounds in examples of artfully crafted objects that once had straightforward practical purposes but in their new contexts were considered rarities and no longer served any function other than that of being collectors' items to be handled and beheld by connoisseurs. Furthermore, the manual features one instance of what today would be called recycling when, in the section on mattresses, Wen suggests that worn-out cushion covers could be used to make textile mounts for scrolls. The Ming-dynasty text does, however, neither look at these examples through the lens of sustainability nor employ Chinese terms that are the literal equivalents to contemporary expressions such as remaking, reusing, or recycling.

A late Ming term that comes close to our expression "recycling" is to be found in the *Tiangong kaiwu*, a treatise on crafts and the use of natural resources commonly

7 Wu Hung, "Material Art from China. An Introduction," in *The Allure of Matter. Material Art of China*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione with Christine Mehring and Trevor Smith (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2020), 32–33 and 37.

8 On art in Hong Kong see David Clarke, *Art and Place, Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong University Press, 1996) and David Clarke, *Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011). On contemporary Taiwanese (eco) art see, for example, Jui-Chung Yao, "Installation Art of Discarded Objects: The Conditions of Taiwan Installation Art in the 1990s (part 4)," *Artco Monthly* 116 (May 2002): 82–87, and Lu, *Art/Movement as a Public Platform: A Study of Contemporary Art and Social Movements* (Taipei: Artco Books, 2024).

9 The English translation of the treatise is available as: Wen Zhenheng, *The Elegant Life of Chinese Literati. From the Chinese Classic*, Treatise on Superfluous Things: *Finding Harmony and Joy in Everyday Objects*, trans. Tony Blishen (New York: Better Link Press, 2019). It was first brought to the attention of a larger English-speaking readership by Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (first edition 1991) (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2004).

known as *The Exploitation of the Works of Nature*,[10] published in 1637, a decade after Wen finished writing his collector's manual. In a section on how to make paper from bamboo in Southern China, the *Tiangong kaiwu* features a description of cleaning and soaking used scrap paper to make recycled paper in Northern China, where bamboo was a much scarcer commodity than in the South. The term that the treatise's author Song Yingxing (1587–c. 1666) chose to refer to this type of recycled paper, *huanhun zhi*, has been translated into English as "reincarnated"[11] paper, evoking religious connotations associated with Buddhism and Hinduism. An earlier authoritative English translation of the treatise refers to it as "resurrected"[12] paper, a word loaded with religious associations, in particular the resurrection of Christ. Without the different religious beliefs of reincarnation and resurrection that are attributed to the recycled paper by the word choices made in the English language translations, *huanhun*, as it is used in the original treatise, denotes a returning soul or spirit – and, in modern Chinese, also the return of a discarded or discredited idea – in another guise. The concept of *huanhun* therefore implies the existence of something like a soulfulness or spiritedness of matter that "comes back to life" and, in the case of the Ming-dynasty bamboo paper made from a pulp of pre-used matter, is preserved despite the erasure of the ink on the paper scraps to which Song Yingxing explicitly refers. As argued elsewhere,[13] the implication of the existence of something like a soulfulness or spiritedness of matter that the term *huanhun* encapsulates can be understood to resonate with the contemporary approach of "vital materialism" and Jane Bennett's conceptualization of (trash) matter as active and vibrant,[14] both of which aim to overcome a "false dichotomy" that "separates the world into 'dull matter' (the it and the category of things), and 'vibrant life' (the us, the category of beings)."[15]

While in the Ming-dynasty treatise Song Yingxing explains the motivation for recycling paper by the local scarcity of natural resources and as an attempt to save labor, in later periods the term *huanhun zhi* can be used to indicate the erasure of text and the material recycling of printed paper and entire libraries under conditions of cen-

10 Dagmar Schäfer, *The Crafting of the 10,000 Things. Knowledge and Technology in Seventeenth-Century China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 17–18. On different translations of the treatise's title see Timothy Brooke, "Review of Dagmar Schäfer, The Crafting of the 10,000 Things," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 73, no. 1 (2013): 158–159.

11 "Reincarnated paper" is the translation chosen in Schäfer, *Crafting of the 10,000 Things*, 243.

12 This is the term E-tu Zen Sun and Shiou-Chuan Sun chose in their translation of the treatise; see Song Yingxing, *Tiangong Kaiwu*, 1637, in *T'ien-kung K'ai-wu: Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. E-Tu Zen Sun and Shiou-Chuan S. C. Sun (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 229.

13 Anna Grasskamp, "Found Objects in Southern Chinese Craftsmanship and Design: Social Connections and Material Agency," in *The Dynamics of Asian Design: Material Culture and Social Agency*, eds., Sandy Ng and Megha Rajguru, Material Culture of Art and Design (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), 35–55.

14 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

15 James L. Smith, "New Bachelards? Reveries, Elements and Twenty-First Century Materialism" *Altre Modernità/Otras modernidades/Autres modernités/Other Modernities* (October 16, 2012): 159.

sorship and political pressure.[16] As the case of paper recycling in Song's treatise and the examples in Wen's collector's manual illustrate, practices of 'reuse,' 'remaking,' and 'recycling' were common during the late Ming dynasty when the two treatises were compiled. Semantic changes in the term *huanhun zhi* over time – from a label for a sustainable practice in the Ming to inferring censorship in later periods of Chinese history – as well as variations in its translation from premodern Chinese to contemporary English highlight some of the complexities related to the language of 'reuse,' 'remaking,' and 'recycling,' especially across historical and cultural divides.

Written with a focus on art, design and crafts, the chapters in this volume do not approach aspects of remaking, repurposing, recycling, and reuse in relation to Chinese material culture from a linguistic perspective. Instead, the book's eleven essays examine objects and artworks that can be referred to in contemporary English as remade, recycled, or reused – like Wen's worn-out cushion covers that were turned into scroll mounts and Song's recycled paper – while discussing them 'on their own terms,' for example, in relation to the different terminologies and settings of the imperial workshops in eighteenth-century Beijing (as in Pai Yen-tzu's contribution), contemporary Chongqing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and several sites across Taiwan (as in the chapters by Valentina Gamberi, Marcela Godoy, Evelyn Kwok, Tseng Shao-Chien, and Meiqin Wang), and in relation to the early twentieth-century exchange of ideas and materials between China, Europe, and the US that play an important role in Mei Mei Rado's and Monica Klasing Chen's essays. Depending on the context, the terms reusing, remaking, and recycling are employed with varying preferences and frequency by different authors. Across the volume as a whole, these terms serve to signal that practices that transform 'old,' pre-used, or discarded things into things with 'new' purposes, functions, or status can be identified as connected across time and space despite differences in materiality, temporality, and locality that disconnect them.

In this regard, the volume draws inspiration from discussions on issues of "(dis)connectivity" in the field of global history. As Zoltán Biedermann has argued, the histories of connections and circulations, encounters and entanglements that were written during the twenty years that followed Sanjay Subrahmanyam's transformative contributions to the field of history cannot be separated from histories of disconnections.[17] Biedermann suggests using the term "(dis)connectivity" to capture the interplay of both factors. In an alternative response to positions that see disconnectivity as the opposite of connectivity,[18] other scholars have pushed the boundaries of terminology even further via the neologism "dis:connectivity," suggesting that for contemporary scholarship "the term dis:connectivity is invaluable because it captures

16 As discussed in Lucien X. Polastron, *Books on Fire: The Destruction of Libraries throughout History* (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 2007), 208.

17 Zoltán Biedermann, "(Dis)connected History and the Multiple Narratives of Global Early Modernity," *Philology* 119, 1 (2021): 13–32.

18 Jeremy Adelmann, "What Is Global History Now?" *Aeon* (blog), March 2, 2017, https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-historystill-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment.

precisely this mutually constitutive, tense relationship of global integration, disintegration, and the absence of connections whose relevance is only apparent in the context that they collectively build."[19] These positions inform the present volume's understanding of material (dis)connections as, after a decade of art historians' accounts that highlight how artistic and material connections link China to Europe and other parts of the world,[20] the time seems to have come to pay closer attention to the potential of histories of artistic and material (dis)connectivity. In this regard, histories of looted artifacts – that lie in the domain of the historian as well as the art historian and museum studies scholar – carry rich potential in terms of the pronounced tensions between their connections and disconnections via the histories of their possession, dispossession, and restitution. In between the places where artworks and artifacts were commissioned and made throughout China and the private collections and public mu-

19 Robert Wenzlhuemer, Thomas Menger, Valeska Huber, Heidi J. S. Tworek, Sujit Sivasundaram, Simone M. Müller, Callie Wilkinson, Madeleine Herren, and Martin Dusinberre, "Forum Global Dis: connections," *Journal of Modern European History* 21, no. 1 (2023): 2–33.

20 Examples published in English include but are by no means limited to: Craig Clunas, "Connected Material Histories: A Response," *Modern Asian Studies* 50 (2016): 61–74; Emily Byrne Curtis, *Glass Exchange between Europe and China, 1550–1800: Diplomatic, Mercantile and Technological Interactions* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009); Anne Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain." *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 87–113; Anna Grasskamp, "The Matter of Cultural Exchange: China, Europe, and Early Modern Material Connections" in *Cambridge Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, edited by Lu Ann De Cunzo and Catharine Dann Roeber, 269–300 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja, eds., *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600–1800*, Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context (Cham: Springer, 2018); Kristina Kleutghen, "Chinese Occidenterie: The Diversity of 'Western' Objects in Eighteenth-Century China," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 117–135; Yu-chih Lai, "Images, Knowledge and Empire: Depicting Cassowaries in the Qing Court," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013); Lihong Liu, "Vitreous Views: Materiality and Mediality of Glass in Qing China through a Transcultural Prism," *Getty Research Journal* 8 (2016): 17–38; Stacey Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History," *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 9–39; Mei Mei Rado, *The Empire's New Cloth. Cross-Cultural Textiles at the Qing Court* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025); Ching-fei Shih, "A Case Study of Tribute Gift from the 'Western Ocean:' Wooden Goblets with Nesting Cups in the Qing Court," in *Tribute System and Rulership in Late Imperial China*, eds., Ralph Kauz and Moriss Rossabi, 317–364 (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2022); Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and critical ornament in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Kristel Smentek, "Chinoiseries for the Qing: A French Gift of Tapestries to the Qianlong Emperor," *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 1 (2016): 87–109; Pamela Smith, ed., *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledge across Eurasia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019); Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Ning Ding, eds., *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West*, Issues & Debates (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015); Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milan, eds., *Beyond Chinoiserie. Artistic Exchange between China and the West during the Late Qing* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), and Greg Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles: Intercultural Interactions between Chinese and European Palace Cultures," *Art History* 32 (2009): 115–143.

seums in Europe and the US where they may have been displayed as symbols of culture and conquest before sometimes being restituted, myriad dynamics of connectivity and disconnectivity, belonging and not belonging unfold that cannot adequately be captured by art histories of encounter and material exchange and approaches that highlight circulation, connection, and entanglement.[21] As a key component of (dis)connective histories of art and artifacts looted from China, provenance research has changed the ways in which we see antiquities and interpret their histories, demonstrating the political necessity to consider restitution and advocate for institutional changes on national and international levels.[22]

While the histories of looted artworks throw disparities and entanglements between connectivity and disconnectivity into relief, an art history of creative engagements with pre-used, discarded, or unwanted materials – some of them more adequately captured by the term garbage than others – carries similarly rich potential for changing our views of (dis)connectivity in relation to material and artistic values. As Amanda Boetzkes has demonstrated, in the current discourse on waste in contemporary art "many artists voice a certain pleasure or gratification in the sight of waste, as though to revel in the persistence of commodities."[23] This does not contradict the findings on Chinese contemporary art by Wang and Hillebrand referred to above and seems to resonate with aspects of the motivations for the creation of what Wu Hung has categorized as "material art" (*caizhi yishu*). Yet, looking at eco art practices at the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival, where the environmental footprint of art production itself was also considered, Wang's contribution to this volume updates her findings of 2017, shedding new light on practices of reuse with particular attention to aspects of eco-sensibility in contemporary Chinese art, a concept that has also recently received broader international attention via the "ecosensibility exercises" and

21 Particular attention has for many years been given to looted items from Yuanming Yuan. For an early example of an English language publication on the topic, see James Hevia, "Plunder, Markets, and Museums: The Biographies of Chinese Imperial Objects in Europe and North America," in Jan Mrazek and Morgan Pitelka, eds., *What's the Use of Art. Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, 129–141 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); for a recent one, see Christine Howald and Léa Saint-Raymond, "Tracking Dispersal: Auction Sales from the Yuanmingyuan Loot in Paris in the 1860s," *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2, no. 2 (2018): 1–23. More recently, the projects on provenance and the Boxer Uprising at Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and Freie Universität Berlin led by Christine Howald have brought together scholars from different institutions for conferences and publications on the topic. Publications are too numerous to name, but the China-specific entries in the *Hypotheses* blog of the research cluster *translocations, Historical Enquiries into the Displacement of Cultural Assets*, provide a highly useful entry point.

22 Prominent cases of the return of items looted from Yuanming Yuan include two 'zodiac animal' heads from the collections of the late Yves Saint Laurent in 2013 and objects from the collections of the Kode museum in Bergen, Norway, in 2023.

23 Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 2.

works of the Beijing-born Hong Kong-based artist, scholar, and educator Zheng Bo.[24] Wang's study of Chongqing in 2020 is micro-historical in its dedication to an art project that she defines as a "community micro-renewal endeavor." The chapter is therefore less invested in the exploration and ongoing redefinition of Asian or global conceptualizations of eco art than it is in a better understanding of the role of curation and art in the mediation between materiality, community, and site in a particular place at a specific time. Examining the material interactions between artists, recycled objects, aging communities, neglected venues, and the deteriorating environment at Chongqing, Wang concludes that through "endeavors in community regeneration, participatory design, and the establishment of ecological gardens, which often repurpose local materials as part of a recycling strategy for environmental renewal, art becomes a conduit for grassroots social co-governance."[25] According to Wang, at Chongqing in 2020, "the discarded" – whether tangible objects or intangible spaces – became "a catalyst for critical artistic expressions that transcend aesthetic boundaries, contributing to a broader ecological narrative"[26] promoting a prudent attitude toward materials by critiquing throwaway culture as a showcase of public participation in transforming collective living environments. She connects this example of community regeneration in 2020 to historical philosophical principles and lived practices related to the sustainable use of resources in China, hinting at their continuation via the art festival.

In her response to Wang's chapter, Simone Müller offers the possibility of a broader contextualization of the Chongqing case study against the background of capitalist and socialist settings to some extent informing artistic practices. While to Wang "the discarded" is a fertile ground for renewal, Müller, an environmental historian specializing in global waste economies and transnational inequalities of toxicity, highlights its hazardous potential, drawing our attention to the fact that "the materiality of waste is not only one that attacks the senses" through smell but also one that "potentially harms our body." Her question "should we not go to more exhibits that stink?" opens up a separate avenue to art historians as, of course, exhibits that do stink exist.[27] Yet, the goal of her question is not to encourage the writing of a new history of unpleasant aromas in museum spaces, but rather to consider the fact that art engaging with discarded materials commonly uses a clean version of garbage that, having subtracted one of its key elements – its odor – is sanitized and no longer garbage proper. Similarly, Müller points our attention to the fact that art not only eliminates

24 Such "ecosensibility exercises" were, for example, a part of the 2021 exhibition at Gropius Bau, Berlin. Important academic contributions by Zheng include Zheng Bo and Lee Sohl, eds., theme issue *Contemporary Art and Ecology in East Asia, Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2015).

25 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang to this volume, 194.

26 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang to this volume, 177.

27 The literature on the topic is growing and includes Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets, "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, 3 (2007): 273–286; Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone, eds., *The Multisensory Museum. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (Lanham/Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

the 'true' smell of things but equally deprives waste of its toxicity. This again is not always the case, of course, as demonstrated by *Vessel—Rare Earthenware* (2015) that the designers of *Unknown Fields Division* founded by Liam Young and Kate Davies created in collaboration with the ceramicist Kevin Callaghan (Fig. 1). The vessels of that series

Figure 1: Unknown Fields (designers) with ceramicist Kevin Callaghan, *Vessel – Rare Earthenware*, 2015, black stoneware clay and Inner Mongolian toxic tailings mud (including acids, heavy metals, carcinogens, and radioactive material), coated with a matt spray layer, height: 11 cm, mouth diameter: 6.2 cm.

combine the Chinese clays that constitute porcelain, stoneware, and earthenware with minerals crucial for contemporary technological advancement, namely the rare earth elements found in China that are currently in extremely high demand globally for the production of digital devices such as laptops and smartphones. The vessels consist of stoneware and mine tailings mud, the latter extracted from a lake close to Batou, the largest city in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, a dumpsite for radioactive

mining waste.[28] According to the designers of *Unknown Fields Division*, "one tonne of rare earth produces 75 tonnes of acidic waste water, a cocktail of acids, heavy metals, carcinogens and radioactive material at three times background radiation."[29] The vessel from the *Rare Earthenware* series that we see in the illustration is made from the exact amount of toxic waste that would be produced from the manufacture of a smartphone.[30] Everyone involved in the crafting and display of the hazardous vessel had to wear protective clothing. Treated with a spray lacquer that prevents the object from shedding potentially harmful dust, it is now safely exhibited behind glass.

Obviously, *Vessel—Rare Earthenware* forms an exception to the rule and Müller is right in stating that we are not 'commonly' confronted with (or exposed to) smelly or toxic materials in art exhibitions but, more often than not, encounter heavily sanitized versions of what once 'was' garbage and possibly smelly and perhaps hazardous and no longer 'is.' Müller's attention to artworks with a "return to sender" motivation in which garbage is given back to those who produce it contrasts sharply with the renewal practices that Wang analyses at Chongqing while also putting discarded items and recyclables at the center. Positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum of possibilities of artistic engagement with waste, Müller's and Wang's examples reveal as much about the development and diversification of eco art practices as they do about eco politics in China under Xi Jinping and the politics of waste management and environmental governance in the global context of industrial nations.

Tseng Shao-Chien's contribution, on the other hand, focuses on the potential of garbage to hold memories, considering garbage dumps as archives of both cultural memory and oblivion. Taking a cue from Aleida Assmann's findings on the creation of cultural memory by collecting the forgotten and the rejected in Ilya Kabakov's work,[31] Tseng presents us with two artistic positions in contemporary Taiwan that she argues "developed poignant ways to reframe waste as both a symbol of transience and a medium for regenerating Taiwan's cultural memory."[32] Against the background of Taiwanese history and Indigenous traditions transferred by the Amis (also known as Pangcah) tribe, Tseng examines the relationships between migrating people and migrating things, between personal transformations and object identities as mediated in contemporary art. Through an interpretation of Rahic Talif's work, her analysis of

28 See https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1326005/rare-earthenware-vessel-unknown-fields-division, accessed February 4, 2025.

29 https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1326005/rare-earthenware-vessel-unknown-fields-division, accessed February 4, 2025.

30 See www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/what-is-luxury/object-in-focus-rare-earthenware-by-unknown-fields-division/, accessed February 4, 2025. For a discussion of the vessels with a focus on their shapes, see Anna Grasskamp and Anne Gerritsen, "Transformative Jars: An Introduction" in *Transformative Jars: Asian Ceramic Vessels as Transcultural Enclosures*, edited by Anna Grasskamp and Anne Gerritsen, Material Culture of Art and Design, 1–10 (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

31 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 369–384.

32 See the contribution by Tseng Shao-Chien to this volume, 169.

Amis ideas that objects from the sea are "gifts given by the ocean" delivered by typhoons adds an exceptional and unique Indigenous conceptualization of discarded objects to the extant panorama of possibilities on how to (re)interpret waste.

Engaging with another type of spirited matter in Taiwan, namely sacred waste, the contribution by the anthropologist Valentina Gamberi takes an ethnographic perspective in exploring a variety of responses to no-longer-worshipped religious statues in Taiwan. Drawing on literature that discusses practices of desacralization in Africa, Japan, and elsewhere, her discussion of Taiwanese representations of deities detached from their original context of worship adds a multi-layered case study to this volume's panorama of reused things. Starting with the example of an ancestors' shrine that is turned into a museum piece for educational purposes by a Chinese-Indonesian family, Gamberi problematizes ideas on emotional labor, the haunting forces of things, thing power, vibrancy, and agency in relation to sacred waste from an anthropological perspective. The contribution by the designer and university professor Marcela Godoy, on the other hand, presents us with the perspective of an educator who integrates recycling into the art and new media curriculum. Teaching at New York University Shanghai, Godoy takes us into one of her classrooms for insights into pedagogical experiences with remaking as an artistic methodology and a way to address environmental challenges, combining critical-making, service-learning, and community-engaged learning, which enable students to develop social responsibility. Against the backdrop of a brief historical contextualization of twentieth-century practices of reuse and recycling in Communist China, Godoy's chapter is by far the most instructive text in this volume as it is written *in medias res* from an educator's and practicing artist's perspective. It adds another micro-historical study to the book by contrasting Wang's observations on the involvement of the art academy in the festival at Chong-qing with academic practices that are local and global and equally conditioned by the context of Shanghai *and* the global educational framework offered by one of New York University's international network of campuses.

Situated in the different, but similarly globalized, space of Hong Kong, Evelyn Kwok's contribution offers another look into a case study beyond the world of galleries and museums, focusing on the temporary structures that migrant domestic workers create out of reused cardboard in public spaces across the city. As Anneke Coppoolse has shown in her artistic explorations of garbage (and garbage-related practices) throughout the city,[33] the wastescapes of Hong Kong are special and, in many regards, different from those of other regional cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou.[34] Kwok's chapter is, however, not a study of wastescapes but an exploration of spatial transformation through the seemingly disposable yet abundant material of reused

33 Anneke Coppoolse, "Under the spectacle. Viewing trash in the streets of Central, Hong Kong," in *Global Garbage: Urban Imaginaries of Waste, Excess and Abandonment*, eds. Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

34 Ernest Kao, "China's waste ban has rocked the recycling world and revealed Hong Kong's dire record. What next for the city's rising mountains of trash?" *South China Morning Post*, Sep 19, 2018.

cardboard and its role in creative space making by migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong's "Little Manila." The "unlikely hero" cardboard is, as Kwok writes, a "key ingredient that can be reincarnated endlessly, aiding the resilient living of marginalized groups in unexpected and creative ways."[35] The recycling of paper-based materials, as also evidenced by the "reincarnated paper" made from Ming-dynasty bamboo discussed above, is, of course, one of the most common and best researched reuse practices worldwide.[36]

Similar things can be said about the reuse and recycling of clothing and textiles.[37] Yet, like Kwok's contribution, which adds a powerful chapter to the history of paper-based product reuse, the contributions by Monica Klasing Chen and Mei Mei Rado further push the boundaries of what we thought textile recycling would (and could) mean. In her exploration of late-Qing skirts that circulated in Europe and the US where they were remade in Western fashion styles, Rado insists that these items that, as Klasing Chen details, carried the wrong kind of connotations in China itself, can be understood as "infused" with "new lives and meanings" in their new cultural contexts rather than as "inauthentic" and "compromised" objects. While Rado explores skirts made in China in the context of the world of high fashion and elite consumption in the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries via a number of astonishing examples, Monica Klasing Chen draws on newspaper articles and reports in Republican China itself to explore the heavily politicized discourse of "putting waste to good use" against the backdrop of the nation's modernization. Klasing Chen shows how the material culture of the past became a trope for satire in the service of a symbolic deconstruction and overwriting of the past in China, while Rado's chapter reveals how parody plays a role in the Western reception of Qing dress, too, but a far less politicized one. Together, their essays demonstrate through the example of late-Qing material culture how epistemic categories shift across space and time.

All of these contributions that focus on the period from the late nineteenth century to today engage on some level with the act of waste picking while refraining from romanticizing it. In her important book on contemporary art and the "drive to

35 See the contribution by Evelyn Kwok to this volume, 146.

36 For a recent discussion of the topic, see Jørgensen, "Paper" in *Recycling*, 33–49. Practices of paper collecting for recycling in China are discussed in Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3–4, and throughout Joshua Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), especially 55–56, 122–128.

37 For a recent discussion of the topic see Jørgensen, *Recycling*, 51–64. For the secondhand trade in clothes and textile recycling in China see Rachel Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes: The Secondhand Clothes Dealer and the Western Art Collector in Early Twentieth-Century China." *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 26, no. 2 (2019), 164–187, Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 34, 71, 83, 184, and Antonia Finnane, "Rationing," in *How to Make a Mao Suit. Clothing the People of Communist China, 1949–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 156–160.

waste," Amanda Boetzkes re-reads Walter Benjamin's much-discussed conceptualization of the ragpicker as a figure with a "unique view of modernity from the perspective of its ruins and artifacts"[38] through the eyes of Jacques Rancière arguing that "Benjamin's ragpicker … stands for unauthorized collectivities to come and their foreclosure in the drive to decipher."[39] She uses the term "gleaning" as an appropriate but less heavily loaded alternative to the term ragpicking.[40] The authors in this volume employ a variety of terms for the ways in which the reusers and recyclers they discuss gather their materials. In her study of migrant workers' creative engagement with cardboard in Hong Kong's "Little Manila," Kwok addresses the local "cardboard grannies" who collect used paper-based products to resell them for a few dollars, highlighting the fact that the unofficial labor of this other marginalized group "is a visible indicator of the lack of sufficient social welfare for senior citizens" in the territory.[41] Godoy cites interviews with a waste picker from the streets of Shanghai who she invited to her classes for sharing with students. In the Chongqing that Meiqin Wang describes, "gleaning" takes place by artists and curators as well as members of the local community; all three parties live and work with waste. They do so, of course, in different ways to those men, women, and children who make a living from recycling waste and are affected by "slow violence,"[42] as documented, for example, in the work of director Wang Jiuliang.[43] Yet, as an influential thinker from a region today referred to as "the Global South," which also includes China, the Indian chemist, biotechnologist, and engineer Chetput Venkatasubban Seshradi (1930–1995) has argued, recycling practices in slums can form the basis for the development of the "aesthetics of a new science around the scavenger and forager as a hero."[44] In Seshradi's understanding, the recycling of waste as "the only resource of a wasted people"[45] makes the recycler a storyteller who not only extends the material life of an object but adds another chapter to waste's inventiveness. Not merely reworking materiality, recyclers engage with the potential of ideas and creativity to interpret the "polyphony of

38 Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 5.

39 Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, 62.

40 Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism*, chapter 1.

41 See the contribution by Evelyn Kwok to this volume, 144.

42 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

43 Wang Jiuliang, *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, documentary, 86 min, 2011. For an interpretation of the documentary, see Gong Haomin. "Place, Animals, and Human Beings: The Case of Wang Jiuliang's *Beijing Besieged by Waste*," in Chia-ju Chang, ed., *Chinese Environmental Humanities. Practices of Environing at the Margins* (Cham: Springer, 2019), 167–188.

44 Shiv Visvanathan, "Rethinking Waste: Time, Obsolescence, Diversity and Democracy," in *Arts and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*, eds., Raminder Kaur and Parul Dave-Mukherji (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 99–118, 114.

45 Visvanathan, "Rethinking Waste," 114, citing Seshradi, "Interview," 1995.

waste" that goes beyond obsolescence, essentially "subverting the very definition of uselessness" through memory and craft.[46]

In his study of debates on waste in modern and contemporary India, Shiv Visvanathan refers to "craft as a skill" that "pluralizes waste into a variety of dialects which can be lived out in different ways"[47] through the body as a sensorium. Visvanathan transfers Seshradi's insights derived from his experiences in slums (and meant to be used for the renewal of science) to the art world. In a similar way to Seshradi, who did not differentiate between what he observed in the slums and what he wished to develop for science, Visvanathan does not differentiate between the aesthetics of untrained recyclers and professional designers. Looking through the lens of waste, he sees both as interpreters of polyphonous matter and experts in bricolage where tinkering and improvisation are united across socio-cultural divides by the perception of waste as a resource. As I have argued elsewhere with a focus on jewelry design in Hong Kong, a place where recycling as a strategy for survival (as experienced by Seshradi in the slums of Chennai) coexists with other recycling practices, works that result from creative practices of reuse *can* form evidence of a relationship between waste picking and design in which some of the makers act in solidarity with the figure of the waste picker.[48] Benjamin's ragpicker who was developed against the background of the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris may therefore be accompanied by Seshradi's figure of the scavenger born out of the slums of twentieth-century Chennai in future conceptualizations of what is at stake when artists and designers reconsider waste in the so-called Global South and elsewhere.

In the chapters of this volume, it is less an interest in conceptualizations of 'the figure' of the ragpicker or scavenger than an interest in individual waste pickers that comes to the fore. Kwok's "cardboard grannies" in Hong Kong, Godoy's waste picker from the streets of Shanghai, Wang's Chongqing communities who live "on the ground of the discarded" but also the "clever housewives" and other resource-conscious modern citizens who figure in Klasing Chen's contribution and the sellers of pre-used textiles in Rado's chapter all add more nuance to the multitude of individuals whose labor looms large behind artists' and designers' works. Tseng's interpretation of artworks that engage with the potential of garbage to hold memories draws on Aleida Assmann's work but equally harmonizes with Visvanathan's and Seshradi's positions. Her focus lies on the forging of alliances between contemporary Indigenous practices of "scavenging" with past ones (rather than alliances across social strata) through one artist's personal experience of litter picking that oscillates between clear consciousness and a subconscious state of mind surrounded by unused and ruined former industrial sites across Taiwan as reinterpreted by another artist whose work with discarded buildings and objects embraces strategies of curation and repair. Lisa Clay-

46 Visvanathan, "Rethinking Waste," 114.

47 Visvanathan, "Rethinking Waste," 117.

48 Anna Grasskamp, "Found Objects," 41, 46.

pool's discussion of the work by photographer Yao Lu argues that "Yao challenges the typical art historical focus on stuff outside the image by composing his photographs from it."[49] This stuff, of course, includes discarded material that the artist employs in his attempt to shape our interpretive lenses, as Claypool argues. While Tseng's, Claypool's, Müller's, and Gamberi's chapters are less invested in identifying the origin of discarded items than other contributions to the volume and do not explicitly discuss wastework, they all signal different degrees of awareness of the tensions and mediations between art and waste as a resource. In contrast to extant scholarship on recycling practices across Asia, they revisit ideas on recycling and remaking through the lens of art history (or anthropology in Gamberi's case) in the service of the further advancement of humanities scholarship rather than recycling practices.

Pai Yen-tzu's and Dawn Odell's contributions take us back in history to the eighteenth century with examples that precede the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cases discussed in Rado's and Klasing Chen's chapters but follow the seventeenth-century treatises by Wen Zhenheng and Song Yingxing cited at the start of this introduction. Odell tackles the pertinent question of whether a material can be "culturally neutral" through the case of a projectile point found on the northwest Coast of America made from a sherd of Chinese porcelain sometime after 1700. Pushing the boundaries of this book's framework, which focuses on object's that were "(re)made in China," Odell questions the Chineseness of blue and white porcelain, matter that is historically among the most clearly branded as "Chinese," by suggesting that as "Chinese" a material as chinaware could in fact be received "neutrally" by local audiences. Arguing in favor of the "cultural neutrality and impersonal affect of fired clay,"[50] Odell counterbalances historiographies of art that wrongly prioritize stories of origin while marginalizing the properties of matter. She thereby provides an important prompt to rethink the colonial frameworks of the discipline itself as well as the ease with which we assume geographic origins to matter more than other criteria when we interpret artworks. In contrast, the study of the Qianlong reign artifacts at the heart of Pai Yen-tzu's chapter make an engagement with transculturality (and origin) in addition to aspects of materiality inevitable. Pai demonstrates how decorative elements derived from foreign automatons were used in the production of hairpins for women at the Qing court and how this formed part of a larger economy of reuse at the imperial workshops in Beijing. Her analysis of how components from the imported mechanical devices were not only materially transformed but also underwent an iconographic metamorphosis from "dragon" to "flying serpent," highlights recycling methods as part of the larger cultural phenomenon of 'reverse chinoiserie' at the Qing court. While Pai's eighteenth-century artifacts, as well as the seventeenth-century examples presented at the beginning of this text, are the oldest examples in this volume, earlier cases of reuse and recycling related to materials made in China could easily be iden-

49 See the contribution by Lisa Claypool to this volume, 223.

50 See the contribution by Dawn Odell to this volume, 30.

Figure 2: Trouser leg made from a woven woolen wall hanging found at Shanpula outside Khotan, a site that contains materials from the third century BCE to the fourth century CE.

tified. The famous woolen trouser leg found at Xinjiang that was made from a wall hanging featuring the locally modified motif of a classic Greek centaur (Fig. 2) would be one such case that could benefit from being considered through the lens of reuse with careful attention to the danger of ahistorical conflations between ancient

practices and contemporary ecocriticism.[51] Certainly, more recent works could be added, too, such as the Chinese artist Song Dong's pivotal work *Waste Not* of 2008, which by now is part of the canon of twentieth-century Chinese art, as well as more examples of ongoing grassroots projects across Asia. Yet, this volume does not attempt to be complete but, instead, within the limited possibilities of eleven chapters, aims to provide news ways of writing the histories of art and material culture made in China through the lens of (dis)connectivity and with a focus on remaking and resources rather than authorship, authenticity, origin, or originality, thereby contributing to the rapidly growing field of ecocritical perspectives on art made in China.[52]

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51 For the site where the trouser leg was found alongside other textiles, see Dominik Keller and Regula Schorta, eds., *Fabulous Creatures from the Desert Sand: Central Asian Woolen textiles from the Second Century BC to the Second Century AD* (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 2001).

52 A pioneering contribution specific to recycling in East Asia is the *Ars Orientalis* special issue "Reuse and Recycling in Japanese Visual and Material Cultures," edited by Halle O'Neal and her "Introduction: Reuse, Recycle, and Repurpose: The Afterlives of Japanese Material Culture." *Ars Orientalis* 52 (2022): 1–9. Other recent attempts in the field to rethink and rewrite the art history of East Asia from an ecocritical perspective include, but are by no means limited to, Hai Ren, Bo Zheng, and Mali Wu, "Planetary Art in the Sinophonecene," *Verge* 8, no. 2 (2022): 24–45; Lisa Claypool, ed. *EcoArt China*, exh. cat., (University of Alberta Department of Art & Design, 2021); De-nin D. Lee, ed., *Eco–Art History in East and Southeast Asia* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019); De-nin D. Lee, "Chinese Landscape: Representations and Environmental Realities" in *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, ed., Karl Kusserow (Princeton University Press, 2021), 42–56; Jonathan Hay, "Green Beijing: Ecologies of Movement," in *Ming: Courts and Contacts 1400–1450*, eds., Craig Clunas, Jessica Harrison-Hall, and Luk Yu-ping (London: The British Museum, 2016), 46–55; and Zheng Bo, and Lee Sohl, eds., *Contemporary Art and Ecology*. Planetary perspectives have also already entered textbooks for undergraduate teaching on Asian art in a global view, see "Epilogue: Asian Art in Planetary Perspective," in De-nin D. Lee and Deborah Hutton, *The History of Asian Art: A Global View*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023), 354–363.

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I Historical Cases

Dawn Odell

Chinese Porcelain Remade

A Projectile Point on the Northwest Coast of America

Abstract: Can a material be "culturally neutral"? This brief think piece considers a sherd of seventeenth-century blue and white Chinese porcelain that was remade into an arrow point sometime after 1700 by an inhabitant of the northwest coast of today's United States. It explores the utility to which this sherd/projectile point has been put in constructing narratives of "first contact" and asks us to consider the possibility that even as globally distributed and recognizably "Chinese" a substance as blue and white porcelain may be rendered "culturally neutral" within distinct localities, opening a space in which to ponder the affect of glazed and fired clay.

Keywords: Manila trade, Chinese porcelain, materiality, Indigeneity

When discussing the early modern global trade in Chinese ceramics with students, I often show this projectile point (Fig. 1). Knapped from a piece of blue and white Chinese porcelain sometime after 1690 by an indigenous inhabitant of what is now the northwest coast of the United States, the point invariably elicits strong emotional responses from those seeing it for the first time. Even when viewers lack information about the historic circumstances that brought this piece of porcelain from Jingdezhen to present-day Oregon – likely the wreck of a galleon traveling between Manilla and Acapulco – the point evokes both the breadth of the transregional trade that connected Asia and the Americas in the seventeenth century, and the intimate, human-scale of the local actors who made, used, and re-made objects transported through that trade.

Any piece of Chinese porcelain excavated from the site of an indigenous community living on the northwest coast of America before the mid-1700s (that is, before documented contact between Europeans and indigenous inhabitants of this region) would be of interest to historians. But the fact that this piece of porcelain was 'remade' in America, transforms it from detritus washed-up along the coast into a rare and expressive artifact, a work capable of conjuring both temporal and geographic distance, and temporal and geographic congruence between the hands that formed and reformed the ceramic object. In this brief essay, I consider the porcelain point's ability to embody confluence and separation from two perspectives. First, I discuss the uses to which this object has been put when in the hands of twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians, particularly the ways that it has been employed as evidence of 'first-contact' between Europeans, Asians, and Native Americans. Second, I reflect on the act of re-making, the context in which the porcelain was converted from ceramic shard to projectile point. Here, the substance of porcelain is my focus, as I open the possibility that a material, even one as recognizable and geographically specific as Chinese blue-and-white ware, may be, in some instances, 'culturally neutral.'

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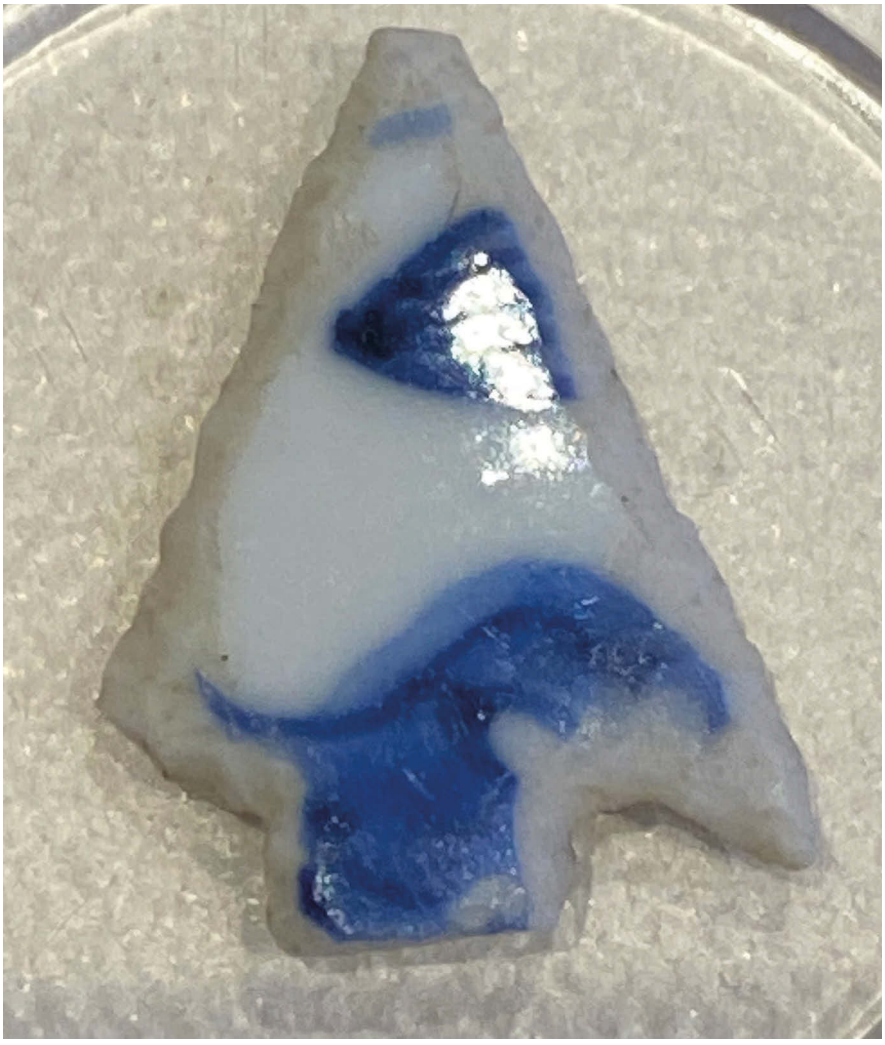

Figure 1: Shard of decorated porcelain, cobalt underglaze, Jingdezhen, China, ca. 1680–1690, modified to an arrow point by a maker whose name is no longer known; 2.4 x 1.9 cm, Tillamook County Pioneer Museum, Tillamook, Oregon.

The projectile point is housed in the Tillamook County Pioneer Museum. It is one of several pieces of Chinese porcelain currently on display in the museum that were excavated from an archaeological site near present-day Nehalem Bay.[1] Long before that excavation, however, ceramic shards and other Asian materials – including blocks of

1 John Woodward, "Prehistoric Shipwrecks on the Oregon Coast? Archaeological Evidence," *Contributions to the Archaeology of Oregon 1983–1986*; Kenneth Ames, ed. *Association of Oregon Archaeologists Occasional Papers* 3 (1986).

beeswax and pieces of ship's timber – could been found buried in the sand along the Oregon coast. Among indigenous and colonial communities of the Pacific northwest, stories have long been told that a single shipwreck was the origin of this detritus. For the past 150 years, amateur and professional archaeologists have attempted to locate the wreck, debated the identity of the ship, and endeavored to reconstruct the vessel's crew, cargo, and travel path. More recent studies, based in part on geoarchaeological analysis, including x-ray fluorescence testing of some of the porcelain artifacts, argue that the ship was most likely the galleon *Santo Cristo de Burgos*, which left Manilla in 1693 and never arrived at its intended destination of Acapulco.[2] Scholars believe that the ship encountered storms in the winter of 1693/1694 and, having already sustained structural damage on an earlier Pacific journey, was pushed north and east of its planned route, to finally run aground along today's Oregon coast. In the normal course of events, the wrecked galleon would have broken-up slowly over the following years, distributing its contents in a relatively circumscribed region. But on January 26, 1700, an 8.7 to 9.2 earthquake occurred along the Cascadia subduction zone and caused a tsunami to strike the Pacific coasts of East Asia and North America. The archaeological record suggests that this enormous wave crushed and dispersed the galleon, distributing its wreckage across a large swath of land well above the mean highwater line.[3]

Written documents in Japan and oral histories among inhabitants of the Americas (including those preserved by the Huu-ay-aht, Hoh, Makah, and Quileute) recount the devastation the tsunami wrought amidst communities living along the Pacific coasts. Many individual stories are contained within this larger narrative of disrupted transregional trade, shipwreck, and natural disaster, but strikingly, the most discussed and popularized of these is the one least supported by the historical record. That is, the claim that some members of the *Santo Cristo de Burgos* crew survived the shipwreck,

2 Jon Erlandson, Robert Losey, and Neil Peterson, "Early Maritime Contact on the Northern Oregon Coast: Som Notes on the 17th Century Nehalem Beeswax Ship," *Changing Landscapes: "Telling Our Stories" Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Coquille Cultural Preservation Conference, 2000* (Coquille Indian Tribe, North Bend, Oregon, 2001). Cameron La Follette and Douglas Deur, "Views Across the Pacific: The Galleon Trade and Its Traces in Oregon, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2018): 162–191. Cameron La Follette and Douglas Deur, Dennis Griffin, and Scott Williams "Oregon's Manila Galleon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2018): 150–159. Cameron La Follette, "The Galleon's Final Journey: Accounts of Ship, Crew, and Passengers in the Colonial Archives," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* no. 119, no. 2 (2018): 210–249. Scott S. Williams, Curt D. Peterson, Mitch Marken and Richard Rogers, "The Beeswax Wreck of Nehalem: A Lost Manila Galleon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2018): 192–209. Scott Williams, "The Beeswax Wreck, A Manila Galleon in Oregon, USA," in *Early Navigation in the Asia-Pacific Region, A Maritime Archaeological Perspective*, ed. Wu Chunming (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2016), 147–167. Scott Williams, "The Beeswax Wreck Project: The First 14 Years," in *The Archaeology of Manila Galleons in the American Continent*, eds. S. S. Williams, and R. Junco (Cham: Springer, 2021).

3 Curt D. Peterson, Scott S. Williams, Kenneth M. Cruikshank, and John R. Dubé, "Geoarchaeology of the Nehalem Spit: Redistribution of Beeswax Galleon Wreck Debris by Cascadia Earthquake and Tsunami (~A.D. 1700), Oregon, USA," *Geoarchaeology: An International Journal* 26, no. 2 (2011).

made their way to shore, and coexisted with indigenous communities to initiate the "first clearly documented case of European, Asian, and Meso-American contact with the Native peoples on today's Oregon coast."[4] In a 2018 essay by Cameron la Follette and Douglas Deur, for example, the authors draw on oral histories that were collected and transcribed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to argue that ancestors of the Nehalem-Tillamook and Clatsop witnessed the wreck and interacted with the survivors. The authors acknowledge that "This disaster [the tsunami] no doubt affected transmission of oral traditions on many topics, including these related to the wreck."[5] But despite their recognition of the oral record's fragmentary and, at times, internally inconsistent form, La Follette and Deur strive to find within it evidence for the survivor story and support for their claim that the *Santo Cristo de Burgos* shipwreck resulted in "the earliest" instance of cross-cultural contact in the Pacific northwest.

The porcelain projectile point (Fig. 1) is illustrated within La Follette's and Deur's essay and its placement there (along with drawings imaginatively recreating the appearance of a sixteenth-century galleon and a market in Acapulco) suggests that the arrow point too should be seen as a historical representation of the "life-changing" encounter between shipwreck survivors and indigenous inhabitants that La Follette and Deur propose.[6] But to view the arrow point in this way, to see it as an embodiment of "first contact," requires a conflation of actors and events. The indigenous inhabitants who welcomed and housed the *Santo Cristo's* imagined survivors in 1693/94 must be melded with those who salvaged the galleon's wreckage after it was dispersed by the tsunami in 1700, and with those who created from the wreck's detritus objects like the projectile point, the making of which has not yet been securely dated and which could have been created many decades after the wreck.

I have focused thus far on La Follette's and Deur's arguments, but their perspective is not unique. It builds upon earlier scholarship and is in conversation with recent essays by fellow historians and archaeologists. In the hands of these other writers too, the arrow point is often invoked as not simply a trans-regional artifact – that is, an object that has moved between and been modified in different locations across the globe – but as an object formed out of embodied, "in person" encounters between culturally distinct peoples. This version of history, this view of the arrow point as physical evidence of "contact," relies on a belief that an object, for example a vessel made of clay, carries within its fabric the "handprints," the physical traces, and perhaps even the cultural contexts, of those who formed, painted, and fired the work and (in the case of the arrow point) those who salvaged and knapped its broken remains. Read in this way, the arrow point can be interpreted as the tangible residue of corporeal acts – human hands working the porcelain clay in China, and human hands meet-

4 La Follette, "Views Across the Pacific," 175.
5 La Follette, "Views Across the Pacific," 176.
6 La Follette, "Views Across the Pacific," 176.

ing across social, linguistic, and geographic division through the recovery and modification of the porcelain shard on the northwest coast of America.[7]

For those who wish to read the wreck of the *Santo Cristo de Burgos* in this way, as "the first clearly documented case of European, Asian, and Meso-American contact within Native people's on today's Oregon coast," no substance is better suited to support such a claim than Chinese blue and white porcelain – the most recognizable, the most "Asian," and the most "global" of early modern materials.[8] As Anne Gerritsen has written when discussing the porcelain-producing center of Jingdezhen and the worldwide reach of Chinese blue and white wares, "[n]ot unlike a fragmentary piece of the Berlin wall, a shard of porcelain allows the beholder to be part of a much larger historical story."[9] When that fragment, that piece of global history, is remade into a quintessentially "native" object, it is easy to see how the resulting work could be positioned as evidence of physical contact between previously unmet communities.

Although alluring and evocative, this interpretation of the arrow point elides (as I noted above) the significant temporal and geographic distances between the making and transport of the original porcelain object, the galleon's wreck, the tsunami of 1700, and the finding and re-fashioning of the ceramic shard by indigenous hands. In the few pages that will follow, I aim to think more about dissonances of time and space and to approach the archaeological and historical record from a perspective different from La Follette's and Deur's. Rather than viewing the porcelain arrow point as a vector for cross-culture contact, I propose instead that we consider the possibility that even a substance as uniquely 'Chinese' as a shard of blue and white porcelain could, in disparate places and times, be received as a 'culturally neutral' material. In other words, I suggest that the act of remaking the porcelain shard into projectile point provides little evidence on its own that cultural difference, Chineseness specifically or foreignness generally, played a role in the porcelain material's appeal, value, or utility to those who knapped its edges and transformed it from ceramic shard to arrow point.

In proposing this possibility, I am indebted to the work of Robert J. Losey and Vanessa Renee Litzenberg, both of whom draw attention to bias in the interpretation of the archaeological record. As Losey writes, "Much of the interest in the porcelain [found along the northwest coast of present-day Oregon] relates to its presumed asso-

7 For a thought-provoking discussion of the indexicality of material substances and the reframing of value through recovery in relation to the Santo Cristo de Burgos wreck, see Aaron M. Hyman, and Dana Leibsohn, "Lost and Found at Sea, or a Shipwreck's Art History," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 28, no. 1 (2011): 43–74.

8 La Follette, "Views Across the Pacific," 175.

9 Anne Gerritsen, *City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 231.

ciation with a shipwreck on the Nehalem Sandspit… ."[10] He notes that John Woodward, the primary archaeologist working on the site where the arrow point was discovered, stated this aim explicitly.[11] Litzenberg too finds that "[t]he historic materials and their potential narrative as coming from a Spanish Galleon overshadow the pre-contact house pits and midden, ignoring what it meant for the people who occupied the site to be essentially adopting the materials from the wreck for their own uses."[12] For Litzenberg, the as yet unanswered question is not how these archaeological finds relate to a story of European shipwreck but "how regionally Native people viewed these materials."[13] One way to respond to Litzenberg's question and to understand the arrow point's utility beyond the role it has been given in narratives of "first contact" is to look closer at the interpretive challenges that surround the archaeological context in which the porcelain shard was found.

The arrow point was uncovered at House 7, one of several dwellings located at archaeological site 35-TI-76. When the floor of House 7 was excavated in 1986, archaeologists discovered fifty-seven small shards of Chinese porcelain, several blocks of beeswax of Asian origin, fifty-three pieces of iron nails and modified sections of iron plate and bands, and three arrow points, two knapped from porcelain shards and one knapped from a piece of chert (a quartz analog).[14] At least four issues complicate an interpretation of the making and utility of the arrow points found at House 7. First, projectile points knapped from porcelain shards are extremely rare in pre-1800 contexts along the Northwest coast of America. Jessica Lally found that among the over 1,189 shards of Chinese ceramic she examined from private collections and the nineteen shards from the Tillamook County Pioneer Museum, only twenty-eight of them were culturally modified in any way.[15] Similarly, archaeological reports on the utilization of Chinese porcelain shards by indigenous communities at other sites on the Pacific Coast reveal that while a few shards were refashioned into scrapers, none were remade into arrow points.[16] Second, the dating of House 7 is insecure. The house shows evidence of both pre- and post-1700 habitation and is located over 20 feet above high tide which, according to Losey, was almost certainly beyond the

10 Robert J. Losey, "Communities and Catastrophe: Tillamook Response to the AD 1700 Earthquake and Tsunami, Northern Oregon Coast" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon, 2002), 434.

11 Losey, "Communities and Catastrophe," 434 – 435.

12 Vanessa Renee Litzenberg, "Stoneware and Earthenware from the Beeswax Wreck: Classification of the Dubé Collection and Discussion of the Interpretation of the Materials in Protohistoric Site" (unpublished Master's of Science thesis in Anthropology, Portland State University, 2022), 91.

13 Litzenberg, "Stoneware and Earthenware from the Beeswax Wreck," 92.

14 Losey, "Communities and Catastrophe," 441.

15 Jessica Lally, *Analysis of the Chinese Blue and White Porcelain Associated with the Beeswax Wreck, Nehalem, Oregon* (Unpublished Master of Science thesis, department of anthropology, Central Washington University, 2008).

16 Edward P. von der Porten, *Ghost Galleon: The Discovery and Archaeology of the* San Juanillo *on the Shores of Baja California* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2019), 255.

height reached by the tsunami of 1700, suggesting that the construction of a domicile at this site may not have been affected by or occurred in response to the earthquake and tsunami.[17] Third, the typology of the arrow point [fig. 1] is not typical of that produced by the Nehalem-Tillamook or Clatsop. This type of arrow point, referred to as "Hells Canyon Corner Notch," has no known coastal distribution.[18] This suggests that House 7 may have been inhabited seasonally by people who usually lived inland on the Columbia Plateau and Cascade range or farther east to the Snake River Plains and the northern Great Basin. In other words, this is not the type of projectile point that is commonly produced by indigenous communities living permanently along the present-day Oregon coast. Fourth, although authors like La Follette and Deur refer to the projectile point makers as "skilled artisans," a study reconstructing the knapping process that would produce an arrow point from a piece of porcelain showed that even students with little previous knowledge of knapping could "reproduce the porcelain arrow point in less than 15 minutes," which may suggest that the production of the point could have been a casual or impromptu act.[19]

In sum, the archaeological record is, at best, inconclusive in linking the making of the arrow point to the events that caused pieces of porcelain and other detritus to be scattered along the beaches of present-day Oregon. There is no evidence indicating that those who made the arrow point, or the ancestors of those who made it, lived permanently on the coast, experienced the tsunami, watched the *San Burgos* run aground, or aided the survivors of the shipwreck (if those survivors indeed existed). And it is therefore impossible to know whether those who crafted the arrow point would have been aware of the non-indigenous origin, the 'Chineseness,' of the material upon which they worked. Porcelain's physical qualities – its high silica content and overall plasticity, which make it more prone to flaking than to cracking – could have rendered the shard a promising substance upon which to experiment. The two porcelain arrow points were after all found next to an arrow point made of quartz (in addition to other objects), which suggests that porcelain as a material held no special status among, or may even have been difficult to distinguish from, other media. Historians too have long confused the composition of the three projectile points, assuming, until recently, that the third (quartz) arrow point was made from unpainted Chinese porcelain.

My aim with this essay is not to erase the arrow point's potential significance for the individual who originally created it, but rather to change the narrative surrounding the point from one that emphasizes 'first contact' and cultures brought into conjunction through a trans-regional trade network that served Asian and European empires, to one that focuses on the possibility that even as ubiquitous, worldly, and

17 Losey, "Communities and Catastrophe," 540.

18 Projectilepoints.net website and email correspondence with Maury Morgenstein on July 13, 2024.

19 Ronald Cummings, "Knapping Porcelain: A Research Note," in *Contributions to the Archaeology of Oregon 1938–1986,* ed. Kenneth M. Ames, (*Association of Oregon Archaeologists, Occasional Papers* 3, 1986), 257.

'Chinese' a material as porcelain could be received 'neutrally' by local audiences. Scattered terrestrially following the shipwreck, pieces of blue and white ware became embedded within a landscape from which they were recovered (and continue to be recovered) asynchronously. In this setting, detached from associations with Jingdezhen, China or stories of shipwrecked galleons, a piece of porcelain might be recovered and remade in response to the spectacular vibrancy of its material qualities – quickly flaked to sharp edges, as malleable as a piece of quartz. From this view, a shard of ceramic may be of little use to the global ambitions of seventeenth-century merchants or the colonial perspectives of twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians but it conveys much about the cultural neutrality and impersonal affect of fired clay.[20]

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20 For more on vibrant materials, "impersonal affect," and encounters between "ontologically diverse actants," see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii–xiv.

Peterson, Curt D., Scott S. Williams, Kenneth M. Cruikshank, and John R. Dubé. "Geoarchaeology of the Nehalem Spit: Redistribution of Beeswax Galleon Wreck Debris by Cascadia Earthquake and Tsunami (~A.D. 1700), Oregon, USA," *Geoarchaeology: An International Journal* 26, no. 2 (2011).

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Pai Yen-tzu

From Automatons to Hairpins

The Reuse of Dragons as Flying Serpents in the Imperial Workshops of Emperor Qianlong

Abstract: The Qing court adapted European automatons into Chinese hairpins, integrating them into its material culture. This study examines the modification of the 'Flying Serpent' hairpin and the reuse of European dragon motifs in the imperial workshops of Emperor Qianlong.
The research traces global material culture exchange in the 'Flying Serpent' and 'Flower' hairpins, showing them as both Chinese court artifacts and witnesses of cross-cultural exchange with the British James Cox workshop. The study explores the influence of Rococo Chinoiserie style and its reinterpretation in Chinese court culture, highlighting the interactions of the dragon motif between East and West, and offers a new perspective on feminine iconography in material culture studies.

Keywords: Sino-European exchange, Qing court art, eighteenth century, automatons, women's accessories

With the emergence of new maritime routes during the sixteenth century, the following centuries witnessed an unparalleled surge in the circulation of goods between Asia and Europe resulting in a large increase in global reach and economic impact of certain commodities. Following Craig Clunas' assertion that material culture studies should pivot towards understanding how local consumers select and incorporate foreign items,[1] art historical research on material exchange between China and Europe has expanded.[2] In line with investigations into objects like the nautilus shell, which reveal diverging conceptualizations of objects in terms of knowledge and gender

Note: This essay is an abbreviated and translated version of Pai Yen-tzu, "The Reception and Appropriation of Rococo Chinoiserie Style at the Qing Court: A Case Study of the 'Flying Serpent' Hairpin," (*Luokeke Zhongguofeng zai Qinggong de jieshou yu zhuanhua: Yi boli Feishe zan wei li*) *Gugong Xueshu Jikan* 39, no. 3 (2022): 107–168.

1 Craig Clunas, "Material Culture: Beyond the East/West Binary," (*Wuzhi Wenhua: Zai Dong Xi Eryuan Lun Zhiwai*) *New History* (*Xin Shi Xue*) 17, no. 4 (December 2006): 195–215.

2 Such as Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Ning Ding, eds., *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West, Issues & Debates* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015); Anna Grasskamp, Monica Juneja, eds., *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600–1800* (Cham: Springer, 2018); Pamela Smith, ed., *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledge across Eurasia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

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across regional divides,[3] and artifacts like the so-called 'Western nesting cups' from Nuremberg in the collections by Emperor Qianlong,[4] the following essay will study a group of selected European artifacts that are invested with new meanings and functions upon integration into the Qing court context. In contrast to previously studied works, the three examples presented here feature dismantled items of which components are being repurposed. This allows for an interpretation through the lens of reuse across transcultural divides.

Recent scholarship elucidates that Sino-European exchange in art and material culture has never merely been a one-way transfer but a dynamic dialogue between cultures that goes beyond the transaction of goods and includes the transmission of styles, technologies, ideas and knowledge. Research on female agency and the role of artifacts made by or for women in this transcultural process has so far been scarce, also due to the lack of tangible and written records.[5] To fill this gap, the present chapter studies a number of hairpins made for women in the Qing palace context based on the actual artifacts as well as British workshop records and documents from the Chinese imperial palace archives. It reveals how, upon instruction by the emperor himself, these objects intended for female use were made to entangle Chinese and European aesthetics through the material reuse of selected decorative elements.

Traces of global material exchange in flying serpent and flower hairpins

Chinese women's hair adornments exhibit great diversity, hairpins were inserted between the crown or stood (*diji*) and natural hair to anchor the hairstyle, serving both a practical and ornamental purpose.[6] Most hair adornments in the Qing imperial palace were crafted, stored, and distributed by the Imperial Household Department (*Neiwufu*). However, the craftsmen remain anonymous, with only the Gold and Jade Workshop (*Jinyu Zuo*) under *Neiwufu* recorded as the producer, specializing in metal and

3 Anna Grasskamp, *Art and Ocean Objects of Early Modern Eurasia: Shells, Bodies, and Materiality* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

4 Shih Ching-fei, "'Selection' and 'Translation': Perspectives of the Qing Court on Wooden Nesting Cups from the 'Western Ocean'," (*"Xuanze" ji "Zhuanyi": Quanqiushi Shiye Xia de "Xiyang" Duoceng Mutaobei*) *The Journal of Art Studies (Yishu Xue Yanjiu)* 21 (December 2017): 1–76.

5 An exception with a focus on the modern period is Lai Yu-chih, Dorothy Ko, and Aida Yuen Wong, eds., *Seeing and Touching Gender: New Perspectives on Modern Chinese Art* (*Kanjian yu chupeng xing bie: jinxiandai Zhongguo yishushi xinshiye*) (Taipei: Stone Publishing, 2020).

6 The *diji*, a head cover woven from gold or silver threads, gradually replaced the crown due to its lightweight design. Following the Manchu conquest, it became preferred by women of the Jurchen ethnicity, often made from real hair or black silk. Zhishui Yang, *Shades of Luxury: Research on Gold and Silver Wares in the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasty* (*Shehua zhi se: Song Yuan Ming jinyinqi yanjiu*) expanded edn. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2022), 1–71.

jade inlay. When imperial consorts passed away, their belongings were inventoried and presented to the emperor, who decided their final disposition. Most of their hairpins were reclaimed by *Neiwufu* for reuse.

Our first example is a hairpin decorated with a "flying serpent" made from silver and inlaid glass and a large pearl which dangles from the creature's snout (Fig. 1). "flying serpent" (*feishe* 飛蛇) is the term depicted on two yellow labels attached to the hairpin. By comparing the date of reclamation to the imperial treasury on the yellow labels, Chen Hui-hsia points out that its holder was likely the Lingyi Imperial Noble Consort.[7] However, further evidence from Palace Memorials and The Qing Veritable Records almost certainly identifies the Qing Noble Consort as the holder, who predeceased Lingyi by a short period and held a lower rank.[8]

The mythological beast on the hairpin's head features a triangular head, a flat oval body, with a curved tail and bat-like wings. Different from Ming dynasty adornments which feature polished and smooth gemstones, this piece displays gemstones with geometric faceting that create internal light refractions resulting in a visual spectacle of multiple reflections.[9] Another remarkable feature is the use of pave settings, a technique prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe, that diverges significantly from the filigree bezel setting technique typical of Ming and early Qing dynasty jewelry. Such a stylistic and technical evolution in craft raises questions about its origins and influences.

This "flying serpent" hairpin represents a new type, as no similar items have been found in collections or tombs predating the Qing Dynasty. Yet, the same record in the Huojidang mentioned above, dated to Qianlong 33rd year (1768), further references a "Western flying serpent," shedding light on the origins of this technique and style:

> On the sixth day of the month, the general warehouse manager Side, accompanied by the inventory records officer, reported that the eunuch Shijie Hu had submitted [the following] items: two diamond-inlaid Western flying serpents accompanied by six bezels and two packets of watch fobs. Subsequently, they conveyed the emperor's command: 'disassemble the clock ornament in the

7 Chen Hui-hsia, "The Evolution of Hairpins in the Qing Court," (*Qingdai gongting funu zanshi zhi liubian*) *Studies in Modern Chinese Women's History* (*Jindai Zhongguo Funushi Yanjiu*) 28 (December 2016): 53–123.

8 Palace Memorials from the fortieth year of the Qianlong reign show that Qing relics were handled with those of Lingyi. The conferral ceremony for Noble Consort Qing occurred on the sixth day of the tenth month in the thirty-third year of the Qianlong reign (1768). This corresponds to the *Huojidang* crafting record from the same year. The following section will discuss its details. Accessed through the Qing Palace Online Memorials Archive System at the Academia Sinica Institute of Modern History. https://mhdb.mh.sinica.edu.tw/document/. Accessed April 7, 2021; Gui Qing, ed., *The Veritable Records of Emperor Gaozong of the Qing Dynasty: the Pure Emperor* (*Qing Shilu: Gaozong Chunhuangdi Shilu*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1986), *juan* 820, 1128.

9 The gemstones seem to be diamonds due to their cutting and weight although further testing would be necessary to confirm this. Diamonds and particular kinds of rubies were often mistaken for glass by eunuchs working at the court.

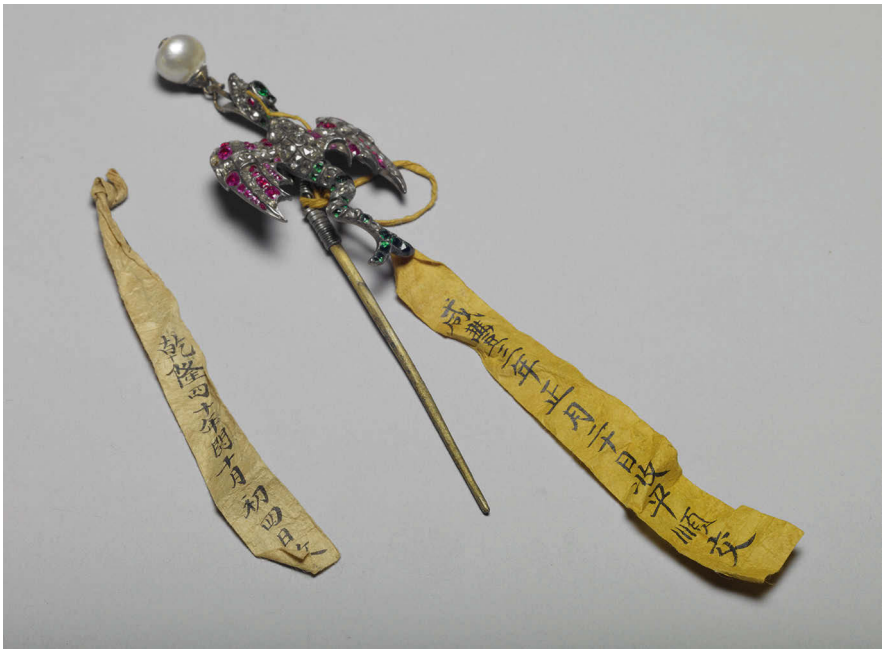

Figure 1: *Glass-Inlaid Silver Serpent-Shaped Hairpin*, Qing Dynasty, The National Palace Museum, Taipei.

shape of a flying serpent to craft a hairpin, and use the attached clock to sort and melt down the accompanying bezels and chains. Proceed as I have instructed.[10]

The record suggests that the flying serpent in the hairpin was appropriated from one of the European timepieces imported to the Qing court during the Qianlong era.[11] One

10 初六日庫掌四德筆帖式富呢呀漢來說，太監胡世傑交: 嵌金剛石西洋飛蛇二件，隨表圈六件，沫子二包。傳旨將飛蛇配銀鍍金挺做簪子，用其表圈沫子認看歸類鎔化，欽此。*Zaobanchu Archives of the Qing Imperial Household Department* (*Qinggong Neiwufu Zaobanchu Dangan Zonghui*) vol. 31, entry for July 6 of the thirty-third year of the Qianlong reign, "Gold and Jade Workshop (Jin Yuzuo)," 451. Compiled by The First Historical Archives of China and Art Museum the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2005.

11 The literature on such timepieces is vast and includes Joseph Needham, Ling Wang, Derek J. de Solla Price, and John H. Combridge, *Heavenly Clockwork: The Great Astronomical Clocks of Medieval China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Catherine Jami, "Western Devices for Time and Space Measurement: Clocks and Euclidian Geometry in Late Ming and Ch'ing China," in *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, eds., Huang Chün-chieh and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 169–200; Joanna Waley-Cohen, "China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century," *American Historical Review*, 1993. Reprinted in *Technology and European Overseas Enterprise: Diffusion, Adaptation and Adoption*, ed. Michael Adas (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 199–220; Baichun Zhang. "Transfer of European Clock-Making Technology into China during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Chinese Annals of History of Science and Technology* 4 (s) (2020): 9–25. Fuxiang Guo, *The Historical Image of Time* (*Shijian de Lishi Yingxiang*) (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2013).

such timepiece, an elephant-shaped automaton clock with bunting scenes made from gilded brass (Fig. 2) can be located in the Qing imperial collections at the Palace Museum in Beijing. Atop this clock sits a "flying serpent" that closely resembles the one on the hairpin. This particular clock represents one of the eighteenth-century clocks made by James Cox in London, who was widely recognized for producing special timepiece automatons for European and extra-European royalty.[12] In the inventory of Cox's workshop, a clock can be identified which resembles the Beijing piece to a remarkable degree and records indicate that in 1769, the following automatons were brought to Guangdong and subsequently purchased by the Chinese emperor from the British East India Company:

> A Temple of Agate, with triumphal Chariots moving on a rich Gallery, supported by Palm Trees . . .. A richly caparison's Elephant, standing on a magnificently ornamented terras, . . . In the year 1769 the fellow to this stupendous piece, was sent on beard the Triton Indiaman to Canton, and now adorns the palace of the Emperor of China.[13]

Another clock automaton topped with a "flying serpent," resembling the hairpin discussed above and also crafted in James Cox's workshop, was donated by the Linsky family to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and will henceforth be referred to as the Linsky clock.[14] This automaton is one of a group of clocks that the British East India Company shipped to Guangdong in 1766 for acquisition by the Chinese emperor.[15] It not only showcases the mechanical artistry of the late 1760s to early 1770s period, but also exemplifies the aesthetic and technological advancement of silversmithing and jewelry making in that period.

The Linsky clock is further embellished with flowers consisting of a single pearl surrounded by five bicolored, oval-shaped glass petals. Such flower adornments reappear on another clock automaton in the former imperial collections, crafted from gild-

12 Catherine Pagani and Ian White both attribute the "Gilt Brass Elephant Clock with Bunting Scenes" to the 1770s. Catherine Pagani, *Eastern Magnificence & Europe Ingenuity: Clocks of Late Imperial China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 138; Ian White, *English Clocks for Eastern Markets: English Clockmakers Trading in China and the Ottoman Empire*, 1580–1815 (Sussex: Antiquarian Horological Society, 2012), 192.

13 James Cox, "Piece the Fortieth," in *A Descriptive Inventory of the Several Exquisite and Magnificent Pieces of Mechanism and Jewellery: Comprised in the Schedule Annexed to an Act of Parliament, Made in the Thirteenth Year of the Reign of His Majesty, George the Third; for Enabling Mr. James Cox of the City of London, Jeweller, to Dispose of His Museum by Way of Lottery* (London: Printed by H. Hart, for Mr. Cox, 1774), 30–36, https://archive.org/details/ADescriptiveInventoryOfTheSeveralExquisiteAndMagnificentPiecesOf.

14 James Cox, *Automaton in the form of a chariot pushed by a Chinese attendant and set with a clock*, 1766, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982, 1982.60.137.

15 Ian White, *English Clock for Eastern Markets: English Clockmakers Trading in China & the Ottoman Empire 1580–181*5 (Sussex: Antiquarian Horological Society), 162–165.

Figure 2: *Gilt Brass Elephant Automaton Clock with Bunting Scenes*, Qing Dynasty, The Palace Museum, Beijing.

ed brass and agate.[16] This piece can also be attributed to the Cox workshop and dated to 1765 based on two inscribed keys that form part of its winding apparatus. The flowers correspond to the design and inlay techniques observed in another group of artifacts from the former imperial collections: thirteen hairpins adorned with glass-inlaid flowers. Of these, eight feature butterfly ornaments mounted on springs, which sit atop the flowers. Matching butterflies attached to springs can be found in another Cox's clock produced between 1766 to 1772. (Fig. 3)

In Cox's clocks the butterflies attached to the flowers start to jiggle on the springs when certain mechanisms were activated in the automaton. Similarly, in the so-called "swaying hairpins" (*buyao*), these elements resonated with movements of the body, enhancing feminine elegance. Originally, such "swaying hairpins" were introduced to

16 James Cox, *Gilt Brass Automaton Clock with Agates Inlays*, 1765, Palace Museum, Beijing, Gu 00184137.

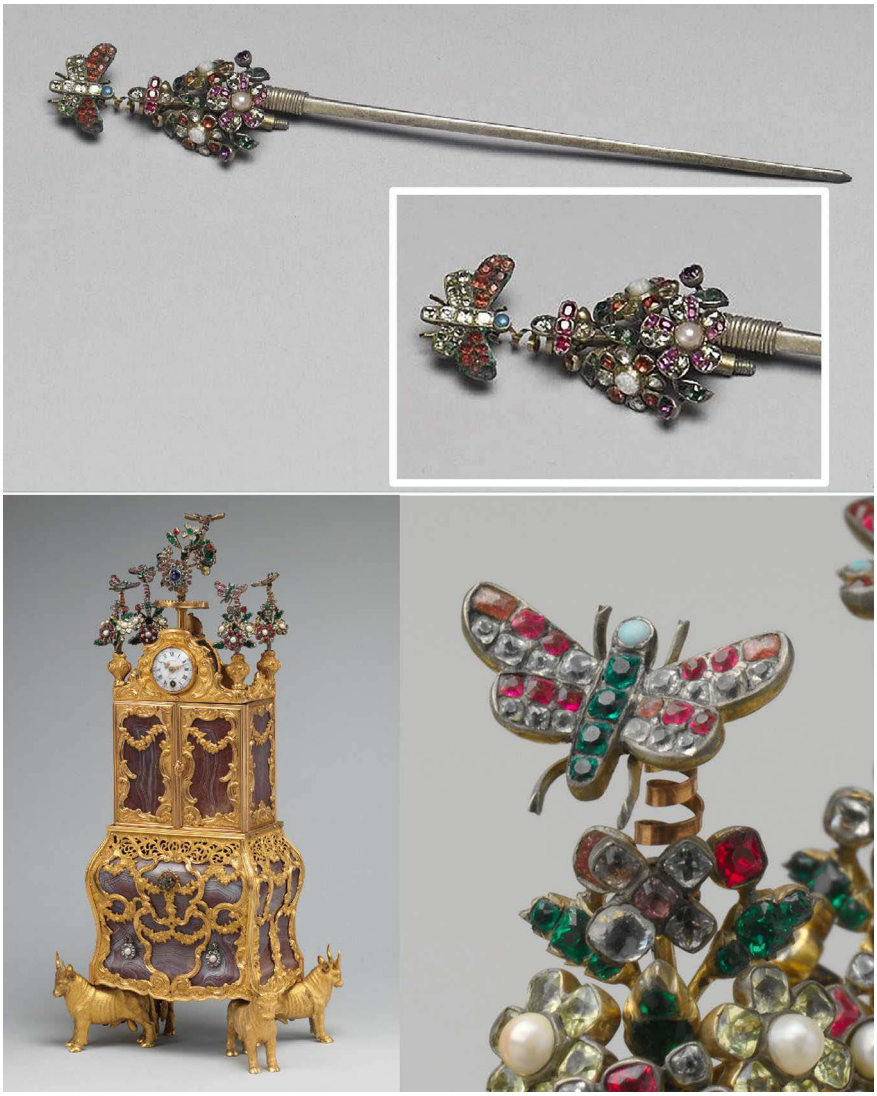

Figure 3: The above figure: G*lass-Inlaid Western Flower Hairpin*, Qing Dynasty, The National Palace Museum, Taipei. The below figure: James Cox, *Automaton Clock with flower vase at four corners*, 1766 – 1772, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Northern China by the Greater Yuezhi, Wuhuan, and Xianbei nomads, eventually spreading to the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. Initially characterized by the presence of dangling gold leaves,[17] these "swaying hairpins" evolved

17 Ji Sun, "Swaying Hairpin, Swaying Crown, and Dangling Leaves," (Buyao, Buyao Guan, Yaoye Shipian) *Wenwu* 11 (1991): 55 – 64.

with the development of fine metal filigree twisted into springs for connecting ornaments during the Tang Dynasty.[18] Subsequently, this type of head ornament featuring flowers and butterflies connected by filament springs was frequently unearthed at Yuan and Ming archaeological sites. The motif of flowers paired with butterflies, commonly known as "Butterflies Longing for Flowers," reached its peak popularity during the Ming Dynasty,[19] and persisted into the Qing Dynasty.

In other words, the use of filament springs in "swaying hairpins" and the 'Butterflies Longing for Flowers' motif, which were common in China, perfectly matched the iconography of swinging butterflies as activated in James Cox's musical clock automatons. As demonstrated by the case of the flying serpent motif being transferred from one object to another, flowers and butterflies were also appropriated from timepieces for reuse in hairpins. This assumption, supported by the material evidence, is further solidified by a record from the Haojidang which notes that in 1768, Emperor Qianlong ordered the repurposing of a "Western flower" for use in a hairpin, a command that preceded his directive to transform the "flying serpent" adornment into a hairpin by only one day. [20]

Upon incorporation into the microcosm of the Qing palace collections, British clock automatons underwent a fascinating metamorphosis, which affected their function as well as their cultural implications. As Catherine Jami has shown, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, Jesuit missionaries introduced clock automatons to China, but the metaphors behind the mechanical model of the Universe and the Christian revelation of God's creation were not fully understood or absorbed. In contrast to astronomical instruments which were directly related to calendrical calculations used to materialize imperial orthodoxy, clock automatons were more like fascinating toys, primarily for entertainment.[21]

By his grandson Qianlong's reign, integrated European astronomical devices (such as globes) into the *Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Imperial*

18 Yanfen Zhang,"Materials and Craftsmanship of Gold and Silverware in the Ming Dynasty," (*Mingdai jinyinqi de yuanliao yu zhizuo gongyi*), *Journal of Gugong Studies* 19 (2018): 74–93.

19 Zhishui Yang, *Shades of Luxury: Research on Gold and Silver Wares in the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasty* (*Shehua zhi Se: Song Yuan Ming Jinyinqi Yanjiu*), expanded edn. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2022), 155–168.

20 *Zaobanchu Archives of the Qing Imperial Household Department* (*Qinggong Neiwufu Zaobanchu Dangan Zonghui*), vol. 31, entry for July 6 of the thirty-third year of the Qianlong reign, "Gold and Jade Workshop (Jin Yuzuo)," 449–450. Compiled by The First Historical Archives of China and Art Museum the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2005.

21 Catherine Jami, "Western Learning and Imperial Scholarship: The Kangxi Emperor's Study," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 27 (2007): 146–172; Catherine Jami, "Imperial Control and Western Learning: The Kangxi Emperor's Performance," *Late Imperial China* 23, 1 (2002): 28–49; Catherine Jami, *The Emperor's New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority during the Kangxi Reign (1662–1722)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Catherine Jami, "Western Devices for Time and Space Measurement: Clocks and Euclidian Geometry in Late Ming and Ch'ing China," in *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, eds., Huang Chün-chieh and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 169–200.

Qing Dynasty (*Huangchao Liqi Tushi*) among various automatons, elevating the epistemic tools to an institutional level.[22] Meanwhile, imported European timepieces began to feature increasingly luxurious inlays of diamonds and gemstones.

Transcultural transformations of symbolic connotations in the "flying serpent"

The imperial collections also feature another remarkable pair of hairpins wrapped in yellow paper, with descriptions written directly on the wrapping, indicating that eunuchs mistakenly identified these hairpins as magpies. The birds resemble the flying serpents discussed above. Both are creatures not typically found in traditional hairpins,[23] (Fig. 4) a fact that illustrates a certain insecurity concerning the identity of such winged creatures. The creatures feature hollow interiors as well as distinct polishing marks and seem to match "flying serpents" mentioned in imperial archive records of 1766, which state:

> On the 10th day of the 11th month in the 31st year of Emperor Qianlong's reign . . . a eunuch . . . delivered two pieces of inlaid glass 'flying serpents' The emperor's command was to first create a prototype, and then to hollow out the bellies of the 'flying serpents' and install a bodkin thereby crafting a pair of hairpins. [24]

As the extant pieces reveal, the gilt layer on the underside of the beasts' wings has indeed been abraded. Multiple irregular perforations testify to the ignorance of the craftsman concerning the original depth of the settings prior to polishing. Furthermore, two rectangular openings on the creatures' backs used to insert two flaps as wings are soldered inversely with L-shaped gilt sheet metal into these openings, clearly indicating that the wings and the bodies were crafted separately before being conjoined. This noticeable difference from the one-piece elements in European automatons, made using the lost-wax casting method, reveals that wing-elements of this

22 Fuxiang Guo, "The Compiling of Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Imperial Qing Dynasty and the Incorporation of Scientific Instruments into the Ritual System during the Qianlong Reign," (*Huangchao Liqi Tushi Bianzuan yu Qianlong Chao Kexue Yiqi de Lizhiuua*) *The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2020): 1–44.

23 The creatures on these hairpins are made of gilded brass with glass inlays, affixed to a bodkin with metal wire. I gratefully acknowledge Ms. Chen Hui-hsia's support in gaining access to images, and the National Palace Museum's approval for personal examination of the hairpins.

24 乾隆三十一年十一月初十日……太監……交鑲嵌玻璃飛蛇二件， 傳旨著先做過一樣，將肚下掏空安挺子成做簪子一對. *Zaobanchu Archives of the Qing Imperial Household Department* (*Qinggong neiwufu zaobanchu dangan zonghui*), volume 30, entry for November 10 of the thirty-first year of the Qianlong reign, "Gold and Jade Piercing Workshop (Jin Yuzuo)," 58–59. Compiled by The First Historical Archives of China and Art Museum the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2005.

Figure 4: *Glass-Inlaid Gilt Brass Flying Dragon Hairpins*, Qing Dynasty, The National Palace Museum, Taipei.

pair were modified in the imperial workshops. The process included polishing the wings and hollowing out the bodies to reduce the weight of the hairpin supported by the head when worn. In other words, the reuse of "flying serpents" from imported timepieces involved different methods of incorporation into the context of Qing imperial decoration. While this explains how the "flying serpent" was created materially, it is less clear how the motif as such entered Chinese iconography.

As mentioned above, if not mistakenly identified as magpies as in the previous example, these particular creatures are referred to as "flying serpents" in their labels, wrapping paper, and imperial archives. However, European records on Cox's works, for example the inventories of his workshop, refer to such creatures as "flying dragons."[25] While Chinese and West Asian conceptualizations of dragon motifs have developed in conjunction with each other,[26] European and Chinese types of dragons seem to have developed independently out of two distinct cultural traditions. Recent research on the motif of the dragon in sixteenth-century Europe reveals that the ancient European term for dragon initially denoted a great serpent with depictions of winged and increasingly also fire-breathing dragons emerging not before the Middle Ages. Dragons were considered evil and likened to demons. Commonly characterized by a canine head, bipedal stance with three claws, serpentine tail, and a pair of bat-like wings, they were also associated with hell.[27]

In contrast to this, the iconography of the Chinese dragon is versatile ranging from a function as vehicle for the soul during the Han dynasty[28] and as a sacred animal symbolizing the East during the Wei-Jin Northern and Southern Dynasties,[29] to a symbol of imperial sovereignty by the Song period.[30] By the Yuan dynasty, the "five-clawed golden dragon" had evolved into an exclusive insignia of supreme imperial authority,[31] while Marco Polo's accounts refer to the Chinese dragon as a terrifying monster

25 Cox, *A Descriptive Inventory*, 30. See also "John Nichols, *The Gentleman's Magazine* (London: Edward Cave, 1766), 586.

26 Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and Dragon* (London: British Museum, 1984), 93–99; Kyong-Mi Kim, "Research on The Dragon Image in Turkish Miniature Paintings," *Acta Via Serica* 3, no. 1 (2018): 119–138.

27 Phil Senter, Uta Mattox, and Eid. E. Haddad, "Snake to Monster: Conrad Gessner's *Schlangenbuch* and the Evolution of the Dragon in the Literature of Natural History," *Journal of Folklore Research* 53, no. 1 (2016): 67–124.

28 Ling Li, "Portraits of Tomb Owners in Ancient China: Notes on Archaeology and Art History," (*Zhongguo gudai de Muzhu huaxiang: Kaogu Yishushi Biji*) *Wenwu*, no. 2 (2009): 12–20. Hung Wu, "Dragons and Bi Discs in the No. 1 Han Tomb at Mawangdui," *Wenwu* 1, no. 2015 (2015): 54–61; Hung Wu, "Art in A Ritual Context: Rethinking Mawangdui," *Early China* 17 (1992): 111–144; Qingquan Li, "Guiding the Soul up to Heaven, or Summoning It into the Tomb: On the Function of Silk Paintings in Mawangdui Tombs and Posthumous Soul Summoning Custom of the Han Era," (*Yinhun Shengtian, haishi Zhaohun Rumu: Mawangdui Hanmu Bohua de gongneng yu Handai de sihou zhaohun xisu*) *Taida Journal of Art History* 41, no. 9 (2016): 1–60.

29 Sofukawa, Hiroshi. "Stone Animals and Brick Carvings at the Mausoleum of Southern Dynasties," (*Minami Chou Teiryou no Sekijuu to Senga*) *Journal of Oriental Studies* 63, no. 3 (*Touhou Gakuhou*) (1991): 115–263.

30 Patricia Ebrey, "Huizong and the Imperial Dragon: Exploring the Material Culture of Imperial Sovereignty," (*Huizong he Huanglong: Tansuo huangquan de wuzhi wenhua*) *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 41, no. 1 (2011): 39–71.

31 The double-horned five-clawed dragon has been widely discussed in the context of the Yuan dynasty. Yabe Yoshiaki, argued in 1970 that the double-horned five-clawed dragon was established as an imperial emblem during the Song dynasty and was later inherited by subsequent dynasties. According to the Ming Taizu Shilu, a decree mandated the destruction of all objects and garments

capable of devouring humans.[32] Clearly, such things as "a European dragon" were very different from the types of dragons emerging in Chinese art, material culture, and written historical accounts.

Yet, by the seventeenth century, mainly through reports from travelers and Jesuits, among them most importantly the work of Athanasius Kircher, Chinese conceptualizations of dragons were presented to European readers as a symbol of imperial authority.[33] However, the act of cultural translation did not proceed without misunderstandings. For instance, in Athanasius Kircher's treatise *China Illustrata* of 1667, the Chinese dragon's role in the fengshui concept of "dragon veins" was detailed alongside illustrations of Western dragons, reflecting a cultural appropriation that blended European iconography with Chinese symbolism.[34] And the Dutch traveler Johannes Nieuhof's report *Het gezantschap der Neerlandtsche Oost-Indische Compagnie* of 1665, illustrates Nieuhof's attempt to understand the significance of the Chinese door god (*Kouja*) by comparing it to Saint George vanquishing the dragon, thereby equating

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featuring dragon designs within 100 days, firmly establishing the dragon as an exclusive imperial symbol in the Ming dynasty. Yabe Yoshiaki, "Dragon motif and Yuan ceramics in the Song, Yuan dynasties," (*Songyuan no ryūmonyō to yuanji*) *Museum* 242 (1971): 13–16; Youli Wang, ed., *Legislative Articles from the Comprehensive Regulations of the Yuan Dynasty* (*Dayuan Tongzhi Tiaoge*) (Chapter 9), compiled by imperial decree during the Zhizheng era of the Yuan dynasty. Zhonghua Wenshi Congshu, no. 56. Facsimile of the Ming-dynasty manuscript held by the Beiping Library (printed in 1930). Published by Huawen Book Company, 340; Lun Dong, ed., *Veritable Records of the Ming Emperor Taizu* (*Ming Shilu: Taizu Shilu*) (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of History and Philology, 1966), facsimile of the Hongge manuscript held by the National Beiping Library, vol. 7, juan 55, "Section 11, Part 2," 1079.

32 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (London: Telegram Books, 1958), 178–179.

33 Athanasius Kircher, *China monumentis qua sacris quà profanis nec non variis naturae et artis spectaculis aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1667), 41.

34 "In illis consistere suam felicitatem ac fortunam omnem rati, idque ob Draconis, quem felicitas putant principem, in illis habitationem. Unde pro sepulchris struendis montis figuras diligenter examinant, venas omnes ac viscer a rimantur, sumptibus nullis aut laboribus parcunt, ut selicem scilicet terramobineant caputputa, velcaudam, vel cor Draconis; Nam inde pro sepulti posteris felicitas omnia, ex voto fluxura existimant… Mira superstitio, in quatamen ad insaniam usque delirant. … Supposita rei veritate; Respondeo id contingere ex ventorum intra concava montis viscera sævientium flatibus; …." (They believe their happiness and fortune are assured there, due to the Dragon, whom they consider the prince of happiness. To build tombs, they carefully examine the mountains' shapes, investigating all veins and inner parts, sparing no expense or labor, seeking forms resembling the head, tail, or heart of a Dragon. They believe that from there, all happiness will flow to their descendants, according to their vow … A strange superstition, to the point of insanity … Assuming the truth of the matter, I respond that this phenomenon occurs due to the strong winds raging within the concave parts of the mountain's interior.); Kircheri, *China monumentis*, 170. Chang Sheng-ching, "The Encounter of European Dragons and Asian Dragons as Seen in the Image of Dragon and Tiger Rocks Confrontation from Athanasius Kircher's Latin Edition 'China Illustrata' (1667)," *Proceedings of the Academic Conference Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Department of History*, Fu Jen Catholic University (New Taipei: Department of History, Fu Jen Catholic University, 2003), 221–251.

evil forces with "dragons."[35] In his view, just like Saint George fights against evil, so do the Chinese door gods. This conflation reveals that within a single text two diametrically opposed conceptualizations of dragons can merge, which for the sake of cultural translation preserve aspects of their original implications in the European endeavor to decipher the Chinese iconographies. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the dragon became a symbol of imperial power in China and this cultural exchange expanded the role of the dragon in artifacts made in the chinoiserie style in Europe. It thus inspired its reinterpretation in horological craftsmanship such as in James Cox's intricate timepieces.

The dragons in Cox's timepiece commonly carry a malevolent facial expression displaying snarling grins and lashing tongues and appear fierce. Yet, paradoxically, they are adorned with diamonds and other jewels and feature graceful curves typical of the Rococo style. They are curiously macabre creatures embedded in aesthetically pleasing artifacts. As previous research has shown, Cox's dragons and rhinoceros in Rococo chinoiserie style were in all likelihood drawn from the broader context of European natural history treatises, which in turn nourished the creation of certain motifs in chinoiserie-style craftsmanship across Europe.[36] Lai Yu-chih notes that the illustration of the rhinoceros from Conrad Gesner's *Historiae Animalium* entered the Qing Palace through Jesuit missionaries,[37] differing from other popular eighteenth-century

35 "Likewise, they imagine that this Kouja, through their Gods direction and power, did once overcome a most hideous Dragon, which threatened the destruction of this city … as a second St. George; …." Based on the context of the passage, "Kouja" appears to refer to China's door gods. However, this term does not correspond to any known name or title of door gods in Chinese tradition. Further research is required to identify its reference. The original publication date is 1665, and this text is taken from the English translation published in 1669. Johannes Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperour of China, Delivered by Their Excellcies Peter de Goyer and Jacob de Keyzer, at His Imperial City of Peking* (London: J Macock, 1669), 15, 68.

36 As noted by Ian White, the rhinoceros in Cox's works closely mirrors Dürer's 1515 woodcut. A version of Dürer's rhinoceros was later included in Conrad Gesner's *Historiae Animalium*, which was widely disseminated across Europe in various languages. The unique dragon form, similar to the first hairpin case, can also be found in many natural history works. Cox also created other animal figures, such as goats and lizards. This strongly suggests that he drew on *Historiae Animalium* for his animal motifs. Ian White, *English Clock for Eastern Markets: English clockmakers trading in China & the Ottoman Empire* 1580–1815, 187; Pai Yen-tzu, "The Reception and Appropriation of Rococo Chinoiserie Style," (*Luokeke Zhongguofeng zai Qinggong de jieshou yu zhuanhua: Yi boli Feishe zan wei li*) *Gugong Xueshu Jikan*, 39, no. 3 (2022): 127–131; Conrad Gessner, *Historiae Animalium* (Frankfurt am Main: Johann Wechel, Robert Cambier, 1587), 44.

37 Lai Yu-chih, "Knowledge, Imagination, and Exchange: A Study of the Biological Illustrations in the 'Kunyu Quantu' by Matteo Ricci," (*Zhishi, Xiangxiang yu Jiaoliu: Nan Huairen "Kunyu Quantu" zhi Shengwu Chahui Yanjiu*) in *Feeling and Sensation in the Context of Sino-Western Cultural Exchange*, ed. Dong Shaoxin (*Gantong Shenshou: Zhongxi Wenhua Jiaoliu Beijingxia de Ganguan yu Ganjue*) (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2018), 141–182; Lai Yu-chih, "From Dürer to the Qing Court: A Global Historical Perspective Centered on the Rhinoceros," *Gugong Wenwu Yuekan* 344 (2011): 68–81.

depiction of rhinoceroses.[38] Notably, Cox chose to use a version of the older image rather than the newer one when creating his rhinoceros. He also exclusively employed dragon motifs in exports to China, demonstrating his meticulous selection to cater to the Chinese market.

It becomes clear that Cox's dragon-decorated timepieces are part of a larger cultural phenomenon that has been described as "Reverse Chinoiserie," where the West began to absorb Chinese elements to cater to the Chinese market, "Chinoiserie for the Qing," the acceptance and application of European culture, and "Chinese Occidenterie," the creation of a new style in China after assimilating Western elements.[39] These phenomena reflect the intersection and interaction of Eastern and Western cultures in the eighteenth century, moving from China to Europe and then from West back to the China, creating a globalized style of art and design.

For Cox, familiar with some intricacies of chinoiserie and consciously appropriating select motifs from pictorial sources like Gesner's *Historiae Animalium* in his larger project, the creation of a globally informed encyclopedic body of images was as part of an imperially monitored Qing visuality. However, the Qianlong emperor may not have grasped all of the covert iconographic implications of Cox's products. It seems reasonable to assume that the enigmatic Western chinoiserie dragon, rebranded in China as "flying serpent," was most likely unfamiliar to Qianlong. But what exactly might a "flying serpent" have been to him? Although the existence of certain animals within the canonical Chinese text *Classic of Mountains and Seas* was contested during the compilation of the encyclopedic *Album on Beasts* commissioned by Emperor Qianlong, it remained an essential reference for zoological knowledge within the official canon of the eighteenth century. Within *The Illustrated Praise of the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the flying serpent is referred to as follows:

> The leaping serpent reliant with the dragon, ascends only with the aid of mist,
> Though it longs to soar to heaven, without the mist it cannot fly on heaven,
> Lacking its own power to ascend, it finds sustaining reliance on mist challenging in heaven.[40]

38 There was a significant shift in European depictions of rhinoceroses in the mid-eighteenth century connected to various representations of an Indian female rhinoceros named Clara, which were all more realistic representations of the animal than earlier ones. T. H. Clarke, "The Rhinoceros in European Ceramics," *Keramik-Freunde der Schweiz, Mitteilungsblatt* 89 (1976): 1–16; Glynis Ridley, *Clara's Grand Tour: Travels with a Rhinoceros in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Grove Press, 2005).
39 Kristel Smentek, "Chinoiseries for the Qing. A French Gift of Tapestries to the Qianlong Emperor." *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 87–109. Kristina Kleutghen, "Chinese Occidenterie: The Diversity of "Western" Objects in Eighteenth-Century China." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 117–135.
40 騰蛇配龍，因霧而躍，雖欲登天，雲罷陸莫，材非所任，難以久託. Guo Pu, *The Illustrated Praise of the Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai Jing Tu Zan*) (Taipei: Yiwen Publishing House, 1966; reprinted in the Series of 100 Classics, based on the Ming Wanli edition collated by Hu Zhenheng and others, compiled from the Micehuihan collection), vol. 1, 30.

This suggests that the flying serpent, that may more aptly be referred to as a "leaping serpent" whenever it appears beside a dragon, can only ascend to the heavens by harnessing dragon-produced mist generated not by its own strength. The dragon represents the emperor, Son of Heaven, granted with a celestial mandate to govern. Within this celestially established hierarchy, the flying serpent's inability to ascend to the heavens autonomously not only signifies its subservience to the dragon but also its lower standing in the sacred order. These dynamics are further articulated in the contrast between the dragon's association with the heavens and the earth-bound limitations of the flying serpent. An examination of the *Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Imperial Qing Dynasty* reveals that the iconography of the Chinese dragon was reserved exclusively for the attire of the Empress Dowager, the Empress, the Imperial Noble Consort, and the Princess, with the restriction that women of ranks lower than Imperial Noble Consort were prohibited from wearing dragon patterns.[41]

While Craig Clunas has pointed out that during the Ming dynasty, the *Gold-Filigreed Phoenix Hairpin* was a symbol of the blood ties between frontier military governments and the central imperial court,[42] Luk Yuping argues that during the Ming and Qing phoenix headdresses were also donned by civilian women during the most significant moments of their lives, specifically their weddings.[43] This means that the dragon symbolizes "di" (嫡), the legitimate line of descent within the imperial clan, while the phoenix is an ornamental motif suitable for all women. This suggests that Emperor Qianlong may have considered the flying serpent, a creature of lower status than the dragon and basically its adjunct, as a novel symbol that reflected the intermediary status of secondary consorts established by the Qing dynasty's practices. In contrast to primary consorts, secondary consorts held relatively lower status and imperial stipend, served as supporting figures, mainly responsible for daily attendance and ensuring the continuation of the imperial lineage.

41 By comparing the clothing regulations and all patterns of ceremonial attire and accessories depicted in the *Illustrated Regulations on the Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Imperial Court*, it is evident that the privilege of wearing insignia featuring five-clawed dragons was strictly reserved for the Empress Dowager, the Empress, the Imperial Noble Consort, and princesses. Lu Yun and Pu Jiang. *The illustrated manuscript*, painted by the imperial workshops, is currently housed in the National Museum of Scotland.

42 Craig Clunas, *Screen of Kings: Royal Art and Power in Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 121–150.

43 Yu-Ping Luk, "The Empress' Dragon Crown: Establishing Symbols of Imperial Authority in the Early Ming," in *Ming China: Courts and Contacts 1400–1450*, eds., Craig Clunas, Jessica Harrison-Hall, and Yu-Ping Luk (London: British Museum Press, 2016), 68–76.

Conclusion

This study shows that uniquely styled hairpins in the Qing court originated from James Cox's clock workshop, with manufacturing dates narrowed down to the 1760s and 1770s, marking the beginning of a sparkling style at the Qing court. Unlike the rose-cutting techniques commonly employed for diamonds in Europe,[44] the Qing dynasty, lacking the technology for diamond cutting, instead dissembled imported items and repurposed the diamonds for imperial ornaments. Emperor Yongzheng was the first to repurpose diamonds from imported objects, namely in buttons. His four-diamond-buttons mark the earliest recorded instance of the Qing imperial repurposing of Western objects as decorative accessories. Additionally, Chen Hui-hsia has identified instances where Emperor Qianlong removed diamonds from European items and re-embedded them onto the back panel of a Buddhist statue within the Qing court.[45] Records from the Huojidang confirm that the reuse of precious stones from imported objects was a common practice at the imperial workshops.[46]

Further archival records highlight that the emperor showed little interest in the shape and craftsmanship of Western jewelry items, instead focusing eagerly on the diamonds embedded in these imports as raw materials. In 1768, a eunuch submitted a box described as containing a "Western flower," which Emperor Qianlong ordered to be opened to check for diamonds. When no diamonds were found, the object was melted down,[47] which illustrates that not all European artifacts were valued for their aesthetics. Similarly, a substantial number of James Cox clocks sold to Guangzhou were returned to Britain.[48] Even some of the Cox automatons entered the Qing court collection, as they were selectively chosen by the emperor, who only acquired them for the purpose of gaining jewels or recycling decorative elements.

In contrast to those common cases, this chapter also shows that Cox's flower and dragon design aligned well with Chinese women's hair ornaments in form and func-

44 Marcia R. Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

45 Chen Hui-hsia, "Radiant Brilliance: Eighteenth-Century Diamond-Inlaid Ornaments in the Qing Court," (*Yingbai Fangguang: Qingdai Gongting Shiba Shiji Xiangzuan Shijian*) *The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art*, no. 353 (August 2012): 66–75.

46 Wen Jing, "Transformation of Royal Jewelry: From Western Materials to Western Styles," (*Huangshi shoushi cong Xiyang caizhi zhi Xiyang fengge*) in *Imperial Encounters: Material Cultural Exchanges between China and the West in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, eds., Wanping Ren, Fuxiang Guo, and Bingchen Han (Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2017), 158–165.

47 傳旨著劄開看有金剛石無有. *Zaobanchu Archives of the Qing Imperial Household Department, Qinggong neiwufu zaobanchu dangan zonghu*, vol. 31, entry for May 5 in the thirty-third year of Qianlong (1771), "Gold and Jade Piercing Workshop" (*Jin Yuzuo*), 440. Compiled by The First Historical Archives of China and Art Museum the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Beijing: *Ren min chu ban she*, 2005.

48 Chare Le Corbeiller, "James Cox and His Curious Toys," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 18, no. 10 (1960): 318–320.

tion. The symbolic ambiguity and change of imagery of Cox's dragon allowed Emperor Qianlong to repurpose them as an element of hairpins for consorts, integrating them into the imperial aesthetic framework. In this way, the "flying serpent" became a novel status symbol of secondary consorts. Initially, clock and watches highly valued as foreign gifts and imported goods were later dismantled for reuse, becoming part of a resource-oriented imperial agenda that was both materially sustainable and aesthetically innovative. These transformations at the Qing court demonstrate a shift in the perception of Western goods, with a vast array of imported items blending with local craftsmanship to form unique "objectscapes."[49]

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49 A term coined in Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010).

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Monica Klasing Chen

Laughing at the Past

Resignifying "Waste" in Early Republican China

Abstract: This chapter focuses on the discourse around the reuse of "waste" or "useless matter" (*feiwu* 廢物) during the Republican Period (1912–1949) when China was experiencing political and economic instability. It addresses two different aspects of waste reuse associated with a narrative of modernization in China. Intellectuals hoped to instill habits of recycling and the perception of waste as a resource in readers of popular media to boost the national economy and targeted the household as a site of waste processing. At the same time, they conceptualized material culture left over from the Qing dynasty as "waste" to subvert outdated values and promote modernization. Reusing Qing material culture became a trope for satire and parodies, which lent itself to a symbolic deconstruction and overwriting of the past. The epistemic category of "waste" offered a malleable framework to reconceptualize the past and impart new meanings to material culture.

Keywords: Qing material culture, Republican China, narratives of modernity, recycling, satire

During the Republican Period (1912–1949) when China was experiencing political and economic instability following repeated defeats against foreign forces and the dismantling of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Chinese reformist intellectuals attempted to reconceptualize national identity by confronting and often giving new meaning to classical values and practices. The rhetorical manipulation of classical formulas that served Republican intellectuals in their attempts to reaffirm their role in society has been studied by several scholars. In her article "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," for example, Louise Edwards, discusses how the moral worth and virtue of women became the topic of a heated discussion led by intellectual men who were losing their footing in society. Intellectuals presented themselves as guardians of morality by chastising women who regarded themselves as modern but did not devote themselves to the building of the nation. In this debate, such women were labeled as "fake" citizens who had to be educated.[1] Margherita Zanasi has analyzed changes in meaning of the concept of "frugality" during the transition from late Qing to Republic in two articles. According to her, the orthodox view of frugality in late imperial China was based on the assumption that luxury consumption was amoral because it amounted to hoarding wealth or wasting resources, and imped-

1 Louise Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," *Modern China* 26, no. 2 (2000): 115–147, 124.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-004

ing their circulation was harmful to society.[2] Frugality persisted as a moral value even when intellectuals thought "outside the Confucian or imperial framework," often relying on such "classical paradigms to build political legitimacy."[3] Republican intellectuals chose to adapt the concept of frugality to describe "a mode of consumption that would both be in step with China's economic conditions and preserve its national identity," connecting a frugal lifestyle to efforts of modernization.[4] Shifts in meaning for "frugality" continued to occur during the Republican period. As shown by Karl Gerth, in 1934, the Nationalist Party officially took up frugality in the political discourse of the New Life Movement by "differentiating patriotic from self-indulgent consumption" and urging consumers to purchase only national products and boycott imports for the wellbeing of the Chinese nation.[5] When addressing both women's virtue and frugality, reformist intellectuals argued that modern ideas and beliefs were essential to becoming a strong nation. This modern mindset was meant to be achieved by resignifying existing concepts and disseminating new meanings by means of education.

This contribution focuses on the discourse around the reuse of "waste" or "useless matter" (*feiwu* 廢物), which reflected two different aspects of modernization in China. The first aspect is the practical, economical reuse of old, broken or otherwise no longer functional material. The first two sections discuss how the concept of "waste" and its beneficial uses were introduced to China and later disseminated through popular media, such as newspapers and magazines. It will address how practices that targeted the household as a site of waste processing became part of a wide-spread narrative. They portrayed "waste" as a potentially valuable resource and simultaneously attempted to create modern, frugal citizens.

The second aspect, which partially overlaps with the first, concerns the material culture left over from the Qing dynasty. Some items could indeed be reused to serve new purposes in the household. Crucially, however, conceptualizing them as "waste" allowed intellectuals, who published articles and satirical commentaries in popular media, to instrumentalize them in a rhetoric that subverted outdated values from the imperial period and promoted modernization. Guides on how to put waste to good use were adopted as a trope for satire and parodies. The narrative of Qing material culture as waste lent itself to a symbolic deconstruction and the overwriting of meanings associated with these objects. The readership was to understand that reusing and refashioning objects from the past was synonymous with discrediting outdated values and establishing a new, modern outlook.

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2 Margherita Zanasi, "Frugality and Luxury: Morality, Market, and Consumption in Late Imperial China," *Frontiers of History in China* 10, no. 3 (2015): 457–485, 458 – 459.

3 Zanasi, "Frugality and Luxury," 481.

4 Margherita Zanasi, "Frugal Modernity: Livelihood and Consumption in Republican China," *Journal of Asian Studies* (May 2015) 74, no. 2: 391 – 409, 398.

5 Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 318.

The discovery of "waste"

In handbooks or encyclopedias dedicated to household management, the emergence of which can be traced back to the Song dynasty (960–1279), readers will find an array of recipes and instructions to care for and extend the life of everyday possessions, such as garments or brushes.[6] For instance, the *Vast Record from the Forest of Affairs* (*Shilin guangji* 事林廣記), which was first compiled by Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚 who probably lived during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, originally collected information that pertained mostly to the civil service examinations. In such early household manuals, which targeted an elite audience, tips for maintaining the household and recipes with detailed steps were not as numerous as they would become in the Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming dynasties (1368–1644), when commercial editors began to include additional sections that were intended for less specialized audiences.[7] Recipes on how to erase ink or oil stains from garments and other textiles, for example, were common in such compilations. In a Yuan dynasty edition of Chen Yuanjing's encyclopedia, the *Newly Compiled Vast Record from the Forest of Affairs* (*Xinbian Shilin guangji* 新編事林廣記), two methods for removing ink stains from garments are presented, the first one suggesting the use of salt and saliva to be spit on the stain, the second requiring the reader to chew almonds into a paste for application to the stain.[8] However, Yuan and Ming readers would not find discussions on "useless matter" or even a more general discussion on waste or how to dispose of it in household reference works. A scientific narrative and the epistemic category of "waste," with its positive connotation, only became prominent during the late Qing and Republican period, reflecting a shift of cultural paradigms.[9]

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6 Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫, *Chūgoku nichiyō ruishoshi no kenkyū* 中国日用 類書史の研究 (Research on the history of Chinese encyclopedias for daily use) (Kokushokankōkai, 2011), 85–91.

7 For a survey on Ming-dynasty encyclopedias for daily use, see Wu Huifang 吳惠芳, *Wanbao quanshu: Ming Qing shiqi de minjian shenghuo shilu* 萬寶全書: 明清時期的民間生活實錄 (Comprehensive compendium of countless treasures: A veritable record of folk life in the Ming and Qing periods), 2 vols. (Huamulan wenhua gongzuofang, 2005).

8 Original text: 除墨汚：墨汚衣裳，口内着塩少許含水，旋洗旋吐即落。又法：口内細嚼杏仁，洗之亦便落。*Xinbian zuantu zenglei qunshu leiyao shulin guangji* 新編纂圖增類群書類要事林廣記 (Records from the Forest of Matters, Newly Edited with Added Graphs, Additional Categories and Categorized Essentials of Many Texts). [1330–1333]. *Juan* 8, 41b–42a.

9 For a parallel account of vocabulary changes and the introduction of a new terminology to refer to garbage as a valuable resource in Germany, see Kathrin Sohm, "Vom Unrat zum Wertstoff: Bezeichnungen als Indikatoren kulturellen Wandels," *Bricolage: Innsbrucker Zeitschrift für Europäische Ethnologie* 2 (2004): 63–73. Yu Chien-ming 游鑑明 provides an overview of how the concept of science and practices regarded as "scientific" came to shape household life. In her article, she focuses on three fields affected by this trend: food, garments, and the home. Yu Chien-ming 游鑑明 and Ōsawa Hajime 大澤肇 (trans.). "'Fujo zasshi' kara kindai kasei chishiki no kōchiku o miru—shoku, i, jū o rei to shite 『婦女雑誌』から近代家政知識の構築を見る—食・衣・住を例として (Looking at the construction of modern household management knowledge through the lens of "The Ladies' Journal"—Taking food,

It was only during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that "waste" came to describe things for which a proper use had not yet been discovered.[10] In modernizing China, the catchphrase "putting waste to good use" (*feiwu liyong* 廢物利用) came to refer to several different processes. *"Li"* 利, which has positive meanings including "value," "profit" or "benefit," is a term that was already used with different emphases during the imperial period. As shown by Francesca Bray, depending on the author and his intended audience, the term was used in agricultural manuals to either indicate financial and material profit or abstract values and social benefits associated with farming.[11] In early twentieth-century China, "*li*" continued to bundle the meanings of "beneficial to society" and "economically profitable," here associated with the use of "waste." *"Fei wu"* 廢物 describes something deemed useless or wasted, which in a time of economic crisis and perceived scientific backwardness became synonymous with the inability of the Chinese nation to properly use its resources. Intellectuals and politicians hoped to instruct citizens on how to identify "waste" and teach the population new skills and practices for handling and processing it for the benefit of the nation.[12]

"Putting waste to good use" could at the same time signify practices of refunctioning or repurposing things within the household, investing abstract matters, such as time and labor, in a productive manner, and the breakdown of materials into a new resource to be used for industrial purposes. The idea of reusing resources to benefit society and economy was imported from Western nations and closely tied to scientific narratives. In 1900, an essay titled "On reusing waste" (*Feiwu liyong shuo* 廢物利用說) was published by the Qing scholar Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866–1940) in the periodical

clothing and the home as examples)," in *"Fujo zasshi" kara miru kindai chūgoku josei* 『婦女雑誌』からみる近代中国女性, ed. Murata Yūjirō 村田雄二郎 (Kenbun Shuppan, 2005), 72–103.

10 Although the narrative of waste as resource was new, this does not mean that waste, especially fecal matter and organic waste, was not considered valuable in China in the past or during the development of the narrative that described the household as a waste processing site. Several works that explore networks and agents involved in the processing of wastewater and solid waste have been published. For a description of wastewater infrastructure in Tianjin in late imperial China, see Cao Mu, "A Flow of Wealth: Wastewater Disposal in Republican Tianjin." *Journal of Chinese History* 2, no. 2 (2018): 393–415. Goldstein explores networks of agents involved in waste processing and infrastructure in Republican Beijing; Joshua Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021). Liebman addresses similar issues by analyzing waste reuse and frugality during the Mao period; Adam Liebman, "Reconfiguring Chinese Natures: Frugality and Waste Reutilization in Mao Era Urban China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 537–557.

11 Francesca Bray, "Towards a Critical History of Non-Western Technology," in *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge*, eds., Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 158–209, 200–201.

12 For a parallel development and an optimistic view of "waste" matter as resource, see Gille's studies on Hungary; Zsuzsa Gille, "Legacy of Waste or Wasted Legacy? The End of Industrial Ecology in Post-Socialist Hungary." *Environmental Politics* 9, no. 1 (2000): 203–231. Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

"Journal of Agricultural Science" (*Nongxue bao* 農學報), the first journal on agricultural sciences in China. Luo, who later visited Japan and became the president of the Imperial Agricultural College in 1909, focused on new scientific methods that had aided Europeans in the "discovery of the method of recycling" (*faming liyong zhi shu* 發明利用之術).[13] He lamented that the Chinese were lagging in terms of knowledge and continued to perceive useful things as waste. Luo admonished his readers to pay close attention to recycling due to its tight connection to national economy and resources.[14] He mainly addressed processes related to industrial or agricultural production, including several examples for recycling, such as using horse excrement to produce paper, making sugar out of sweet potatoes and utilizing human urine to produce bleach.

After the establishment of the Republic in 1912, "waste" became a concept that, like "frugality," was tied to nationalistic discourses, targeting the household as a site for waste processing and designating intangible resources beyond agricultural waste matter. The magazine *Progress* (*Jinbu* 進步), conceived as a bilingual publication, published an anonymous essay titled "China's Waste of Men and Resources" in English, praising the achievements of Joseph Bailie (1860–1935), an American-naturalized Irishman who had founded the "Colonization Association" with support of the newly installed Republican government to take advantage of unused, or "wasted," land by relocating refugees to cultivate it.[15] An understanding of wasted resources that included intangible matter was further expanded in "Experiments on the Reuse of Waste" (*Feiwu liyong zhi shiyan* 廢物利用之實驗), published in three installments in the same magazine four years later, in 1916. The authors, Baohe 葆穌 and Yanmin 晷民, were both educated men active at the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association in Tianjin, the sponsor of *Progress.*[16]

In their essay, material reuse processes began to be distinguished according to where waste was produced. The three major categories were farms, which included waste materials derived from agriculture and husbandry, the industry, focusing on metallurgy, and the city, with a focus on household waste. Under each of these categories, the authors describe practices of waste reuse from around the globe that should be emulated, especially from the United States and European countries such as France, England and Germany. The examples emphasize how certain types of

13 Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉, "Feiwu liyong shuo 廢物利用說 (On Reusing Waste)," *Nongxue bao* 農學報 (Journal of Agricultural Science) 96, no. 2 of first month of the lunar calendar (1900), 1a.

14 Luo, "Feiwu liyong shuo," 1b.

15 Jinbu 進步 (Progress), "China's Waste of Men and Resources," vol. 3, no. 3 (1912): 4–8. On Bailie, see also Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898–1937* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1986), chapter 3.

16 Not much information could be found on the two authors, who most likely used pseudonyms to publish their articles in *Progress.* Baohe contributed several articles concerning foreign affairs and most likely studied abroad, as he also made translations for other periodicals, such as of a medical work by Walter Livingston, published in 1919 in the *Qingnian jinbu* 青年進步 (Youth Progress) journal. Yanmin also continued to publish articles in *Youth Progress* until 1921.

waste matter can be gathered and processed, often chemically, to produce new and useful materials.[17] The assumption was that the Chinese merely lacked the proper knowledge, methods and skills to process these materials and uncover their potential.

Besides discussing material waste and its production sites, the authors explore the concept of waste, arguing that there is much that must be "put to good use," including abstract resources such as energy, time, ideas, and even human lives. Just as materials could undergo processes of collecting, processing and repurposing, these intangible matters became resources that, if managed well, could assure the economic wellbeing of the nation.[18] Yanmin, who authored the last two installments of the essay, lamented that ideas that seem old and dilapidated are often regarded as useless, even though they might spark new thoughts and serve as inspiration if they are heeded and "scrubbed clean" (*xishua* 洗刷). Just like a useless antique object that can be picked up in a junk shop and, once scrubbed, can be appreciated as a treasure, concepts and ideas could be cleansed and given a new function in society.[19] Republican intellectuals believed that what Chinese people had been calling "waste" in fact described things that were erroneously deemed useless, things that carried enormous potential and could determine the future and economic prosperity of modern China.

Dealing with waste at home

The trope of waste as valuable resource that could save the nation was popularized by newspapers and journals during the 1920s and 1930s. Intellectuals submitted essays and opinion pieces to women's journals, targeting housewives as potential recyclers, and newspapers published home-management columns and lists with items that could be processed and reused in the home.[20] While it is difficult to establish if the advice provided in popular media was enacted in the home, women had access and were consuming this type of literature.[21] Most authors publishing such household ad-

17 These categories are used as subtitles for the article, next to a category of "miscellaneous" ways of reusing waste.

18 These follow the sites of concrete waste production. Yanmin 晏民. 1916. "*Feiwu liyong zhi shiyan* 廢物利用之實驗 (Experiments on the Reuse of Waste)," pt. 2, *Jinbu* 進步 (Progress) 11 (1): 26; Pt. 3, *Jinbu* 11 (2): 17.

19 Yanmin, "Feiwu liyong zhi shiyan," pt. 3, *Jinbu* 11 (2): 17.

20 Sometimes such tips were inspired by local commercial approaches to recycling, and housewives were encouraged to imitate these processes at home. For example, one article urges women to imitate Nanjing rag shops by gathering old textiles to make soles for shoes and mops out of fabric strips and sell them for a profit. *Ying-Mei yan gongsi yue bao* 英美烟公司月报 (British American Tobacco Company Monthly), "Nanjing zhi pobudian zhuangkuang 南京之破布店狀況 (The situation of rag shops in Nanjing)," 5, no. 3 (1925): 31–32.

21 Joan Judge, who is working on women as vernacular knowers during the same period, with a special focus on the use of "household science," argues that female literacy expanded greatly in the early twentieth century when even women in the countryside had access to books containing practical

vice used pseudonyms, including overtly feminine pseudonyms, to make the entry more approachable to female readers. The majority of the texts submitted for publication were written by highly educated men.[22] Other entries, especially short columns published in newspapers, do not identify an author. These publishing practices make identifying authors challenging, but at the same time indicate that readers were also not overly concerned with the authorship of household advice and accepted these texts for the practical advice contained in them.

Titles such as "Let's talk about putting waste to good use" (*Feiwu liyong tan* 廢物利用談) abounded in popular media, describing concrete steps on how to reuse waste. This entry, published in the journal "New Home" (*Xin jiating* 新家庭) under a woman's name, Xingyun 荇韻, provided instructions on how to reuse (1) old newspapers, which could function as wrapping paper; (2) mail envelopes, which should be flipped over an reused; (3) fabric scraps, which could be stacked to make soles for children's shoes; (4) outer leaves of bamboo stalks, which made good tinder; (5) peels of Longan and Lychee, which could be dried and burnt in a stove, giving off a pleasant smell; (6) watermelon peels, which could be pickled in salty water or fried in oil to be served to guests as a snack; (7) dried fish bladder for making a maw dish; and (8) woodchips from carpentry projects, which should be used as mosquito repelling incense.[23]

Through popular media and cheap books, a household could gain access to a rich collection of concrete examples for reusing common household waste, learning how to recognize the potential of their home waste in order to contribute to the welfare of the family and nation. Especially old textiles or fabric scraps found many new functions: women's stockings could be repurposed to make dolls, sleeve protectors, used as waistbands, as replacement for an elastic to close wrappings, or even as a compression cap for hairdos.[24] Flour bags could be bleached by using simple chemistry, and then used

advice for the home; Joan Judge, "Women as Vernacular Knowers in China's Long Republic (1894–1954): What We Can Learn from Cheap Print," *Nannü* 25 (2023): 189–197, 192–193.

22 As pointed out by Judge, texts authored by women were rare and using female pseudonyms was a common practice adopted by editors of journals that targeted a female audience. Judge also notes that according to one of the female contributors to the *Funü shibao* the writing style of the journal was too difficult for most women; Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 69–78.

23 Xingyun 荇韻, "Feiwu liyong tan 廢物利用談 (Let's talk about putting waste to good use)," *Xin jiating* 新家庭 (New Home) 1, no. 11 (1930): 109. The author listed for this entry could not be identified. The article might have been submitted by a female reader, or, more likely, published under a woman's name.

24 Dolls: *Da gong bao* 大公報 (Tianjin edition), "Funü yu jiating 婦女與家庭 (Woman and Home)" (December 31, 1933): 11. As sleeve protectors, waistbands and as elastics to close wrappings: Zifang 自芳, "Jiu wa liyong fa 舊襪利用法 (Method for Putting Old Socks to Good Use)" *Jiating yu funü* 家庭與婦女 (Home and Woman) 3, no. 5 (1940): 222. Cap: *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), "Yafamao feiwu liyong zhi you yi fa 壓髮帽 廢物利用之又一法 (One More Method for Reusing Waste—Hair Compression Cap)," 19669 (December 13, 1927): 14.

as wadding for thicker garments, undershirts or underwear.[25] Imported printed fabric scraps, left over from garment making, could be used to make decorative items, such as curtain holdbacks.[26] Women's magazines, such as *The Ladies' Journal* (*Funü zazhi* 婦女雜誌), emphasized the importance of women acquiring knowledge on waste reuse in long essays or short topics in the "Household club" (*Jiating julebu* 家庭俱樂部) section, in which women could find out, for example, how to refurbish yellowed socks by using recycled materials to dye them in a new color.[27] The essays and short articles on waste reuse were written by the editor-in-chief of *The Ladies' Journal*, Wang Yunzhang 王蘊章 (1884–1942), under the pseudonym *Xishen* 西神, "Western spirit." His articles highlight the usefulness of the items created by means of creative reuse, and it was rare to find negative views on practices of frugality. Only one instance of a negative view on reusing second-hand garments was found in the surveyed periodicals. As modern scientific ideas and medical concepts from the West started to circulate more broadly, including knowledge about bacteria and viruses, the issue of hygiene arose as a concern when dealing with garments that had been discarded. Gao Zimi 高子密 published an opinion piece in 1923 in the *Medial Affairs Monthly* (*Yishi yuekan* 醫事月刊), titled "On garments from second-hand garment shops" (*Jiu (gu) yipu de yifu* 舊(估)衣鋪的衣服). Gao advises readers not to purchase garments from second-hand shops because these stores usually acquire the garments of deceased people, who might have died of an illness. He warns readers about lethal pathogens, such as viruses for scarlet fever or the bubonic plague, which might still be attached to the garments and transfer to the purchaser.[28]

A large variety of Qing dynasty garments found their way into newspaper columns and magazine tips for reuse, but not every household possessed costly embroidered garments from the Qing period, because these were worn mainly by urban elites. This would explain why large, embroidered garments were usually not addressed in the popular household advice. Owners of once costly embroidered garments could simply sell these for profit, knowing that they might be reused at a later stage of the commodity chain, for example by European and American buyers. As Rachel Silberstein points out, embroidered silk robes and elite garments were a highly sought-after commodity for foreigners, and shop owners combed the countryside and inquired with descendants of wealthy families to purchase such garments, going through

25 Hong 鴻, "Feiwu liyong 廢物利用 (Putting Waste to Good Use)," *Jiating xingqi* 家庭星期 (Household Weekly) 1, no. 42 (1936): 267.

26 Cui Zhen 萃珍, "Hua yangbu de feiwu liyong 花洋布的廢物利用 (Putting Patterned Western Fabric Waste to Good Use)," *Jiating* 家庭 (Home) 7 (1922): 1.

27 Xishen 西神, "Jiating julebu 家庭俱樂部 (Household Club)," *Funü zazhi* 婦女雜誌 (The Ladies' Journal) 7 (1917): 152.

28 Gao published another article on hygiene in a medical journal in 1930. No further information concerning his life could be found. Gao Zimi 高子密, "Jiu (gu) yipu de yifu 舊(估)衣鋪的衣服 (On Garments From Second-Hand Garment Shops)," *Yishi yuekan* 醫事月刊 (Medical Affairs Monthly) 1 (1923): 65

the lengths of "deconstructing robes into collars, borders, and sleeve-bands to eke out their inventories."[29] This trend is confirmed by Madeleine Yue Dong in her study of Republican Beijing, where "old clothes and quilts were often bought by secondhand goods stores," and "embroideries were most often recycled through Qian Gate and Wang-fujing and ended up in Westerners' luggage."[30] Second-hand garments ended up in the hands of Western tourists and museums. A large part of the textiles in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for example, was gathered by William Christian Paul (d. 1929) who became "interested in collecting during a health trip around the world in 1908" and managed to gather "all his examples of textile by negotiations which did not take him outside the city," namely Beijing.[31] As reported in 1930 in the *Eastern Underwriter*, he was not a "wealthy man" who collected textiles in China as a hobby. After the donation of his collection to the museum, the curator of Far Eastern art remarked that "at present the stores of court robes are rapidly being dispersed from one end of the world to the other, many of them being destroyed or cut up to serve all sort of strange purposes, so that the preservation of almost any Chinese pre-revolution textile is important."[32] While, as some of the examples discussed in the contribution by Mei Mei Rado to the present volume illustrate, the conservation of textiles and the reuse of elaborate embroidery might have been among the goals of Westerners who perceived Asian dress as exotic, the Chinese consumer had a less romanticized understanding of these textiles.

Advice on reusing Qing material culture in China, including small garment items or textile objects, such as old fan cases or hats, often described creating smaller objects of daily use. In one issue of the *Shenbao* 申報, the column "Common knowledge for the Household" (*Jiating changshi* 家庭常識), which appeared daily in the paper,[33] provided a method for reusing traditional-style commoners' hats. In the entry submitted by the reader Chen Huang 陳璜, who received no pay for his contribution, the process is described:

> Make a football yourself: After wearing a Chinese hat for about a year, it becomes soft and useless due to daily wear. Discarding it would be a great pity. Here I present a new use for it. Take two useless hats and remove the topper [i. e. the pearl or knot] from the top. Use thread to sew them to each other and fill them with chicken or goose feathers or worn-out cotton wadding until it becomes firm. Then sew shut the opening and cover the outside with fabric. It can be used to play

29 Rachel Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes: The Secondhand Clothes Dealer and the Western Art Collector in Early Twentieth-Century China." *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 26, no. 2 (2019): 164–187, 170–171.

30 Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003), 139.

31 *Victoria Daily Times*. 1930. "Rare Chinese Art Left to Museum by Thrift Clerk." Aug. 9, 1930: 12. On Paul and his collection, see also the essay by Mei Mei Rado in this volume.

32 *Eastern Underwriter*. 1930. "Insurance Clerk Leaves Rare Art Collection." July 18, 1930: 19.

33 From December 1916, the *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News) featured this column in almost every issue.

> football. The resistance of the ball will be identical to a real one. This is a method for putting waste to good use.[34]

Other articles published shortly after the fall of the dynasty emphasized the use of these materials for crafting things that would be useful in the household. Among the objects to be created from garments were toys for children, such as a slingshot with a hat topper pearl, wardrobe items, such as a belt for girl's trousers out of a "loyalty and piety belt," or items for daily use, like a pencil case that repurposed an old fan case.[35] Some articles offered more concrete advice on how to alter garments to suit the modern taste, providing instructions on how to adapt imperial garments to Western cuts.

The "Method for refashioning Chinese garments into Western style" (*Huafu gaizhi xishi fa* 華服改製西式法) published by Tong Canghuai 童蒼懷 under the pseudonym Ailou 愛樓 in 1913 states that among common people, "there is not one who does not cut off their queue" and starts wearing Western-style garments. With this, Tong Canghuai, who was also editor of *Liberty* (*Ziyou zazhi* 自由雜誌), laments that Qing garments are treated like trash, which is unfortunate and wasteful.[36] For adapting a men's robe, he instructs, one must remove the overlapping lapel, create a straight placket and add flat bone buttons to it. One takes the length of the original garment as reference and measures five *cun* (about 16.5 cm) from the bottom to cut the skirt portion of the robe off; one must shorten the sleeve by three *cun* (about 10 cm), and "just like that, you have a Western style garment." The reader also receives instructions on how to alter sleeves, so they become tight-fitting and no longer have horse hoof cuffs and on how to alter drop-shoulder robes and trousers to resemble Western garments. In a humorous note, he adds that altering underwear is not necessary. The author encourages readers to try this and study ways of altering old clothes, which makes for elegant garments and saves money.[37] Eventually, Qing material cul-

34 Original text: 自製足球。吾國之帽戴，過一年以後，每苦軟熟無用。棄之殊爲可惜。茲有一用。取廢帽二頂。去其頂子，用線對縫。中塞以鷄鵝毛或敗絮，使之堅實。然後封其口，外幔以布。用以鞠蹴，反抗力與眞球無異。亦廢物利用之一也. This entry was submitted to the newspaper column by Chen Huang 陳璜. *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News). 1918. "Jiating changshi 家庭常識," 16290 (June 24, 1918): 14. The identity of the author could not be established based on the name alone.

35 Original text: 頂子改作彈弓子、花翎紮成鍋刷子、朝帽用作盆盖子 、馬蹄袖改成天足女子的襪套、子補子縫成椅墊子、 朝珠穿成兜鍊子 、硬領改為小孩兒的項圈子、 忠孝帶改成妓女的褲帶子、 扇套子改為筆袋子 、朝靴子改成大花臉的戲靴子、 帽罩子改為姑娘的馬片子。*Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), "Feiwu liyong 廢物利用 (Putting Waste to Good Use)," 14118 (June 12, 1912): 10.

36 Although *Liberty* was a humorous publication, it also aimed to help readers navigate changes toward modernization. This earnest advice was published in the final section, "Compiled miscellanea" (*Bianji yutan* 編輯餘談) of the magazine. For an overview of the types of contents published in the *Liberty*, see Haiyan Lee, "'A Dime Store of Words': Liberty Magazine and the Cultural Logic of the Popular Press," *Twentieth-Century China* 33, no. 1 (2007): 53–80.

37 Ailou 愛樓, "Huafu gaizhi xishi fa 華服改制西式法 (Method for Refashioning Chinese Garments into Western Style)," *Ziyou zazhi* 自由雜誌 (Liberty) 1 (1913): 3.

ture would simply be called things from "the past" (*jiushi* 舊時 or *xishi* 昔時) that "have no use in the present" (*bu shiyong yu jinri* 不適用於今日), with instructions focusing on how to turn these outdated objects into modern items.[38]

After the official garment styles (*fuzhi* 服制) were established by the new government through regulations published in 1912, new Western-style clothes found increasing acceptance by the Chinese, who also associated foreign styles with modernity.[39] The Republican government decreed that men should wear Western-style hats with a brim, but these regulations did not deter men from continuing to wear traditional styles, and even encouraged their use if the garments were made out of nationally-produced cloth.[40] A part of the old material culture thus continued to be used, and could furthermore be refashioned into other useful objects. However, Qing garments and other objects from the imperial period were not always regarded as material resources. The symbolic meaning Chinese had attached to them lent them to be employed by intellectuals in their efforts to modernize the nation. By creating parodies of waste-reuse tips and household advice, intellectuals took symbols of authority from the former imperial government and used these to subvert what they considered outdated ideologies.

Dismantling a semiotic system

In an anonymous report titled "Miscellaneous observations on Shanghai" (*Shanghai guancha zatan* 上海觀察雜談) published in *Shenbao* in 1925, the reporter comments:

> Looking back at the sharp increase in exports of embroidery goods in recent years, the most surprising thing is that since the revolution, the attire of former bureaucrats and the shabby outfits from the opera house that have been discarded by the Chinese like rags are regarded by foreigners as rare items and are recycled by them. They take the embroidered parts and make dancing gowns, evening bags and the like, thinking they are beautiful. There are many who, around their plump and white powdered necks, hang necklaces made from Qing court beads. But the Chinese, when seeing this, are disgusted by the "smell of copper" and feel like vomiting.[41]

38 Qingjiang **晴**江, "Feiwu liyong 廢物利用 (Putting Waste to Good Use)," *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), issue 19040 (March 3, 1926): 11.

39 For a discussion of hats as fashionable items and how these became associated with ideas of modernity and nationalism, see Gerth, *China Made*, 53–54. Gerth also addresses Republican debates on male fashion in Chapter 2. Antonia Finnane shows that foreign cloth already appeared in novels and foreign garment cuts were depicted in the news during the Qing before the new regulations were issued in 1912; Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 64–77.

40 Gerth, *China Made*, 109–110.

41 Original text: 觀於年來出口繡貨之陡增、最可異者、革命以還、前清官僚之禮服、以及梨園中之破舊行頭、華人棄之如敝屣、彼方視為奇貨、廢物利用、取其錦繡部分、製舞衣錢囊之類、以為美觀。蝤蠐粉頸間、則備我華人前清所用之朝珠、為項鍊、此數事者、向為銅臭撲鼻、中人欲嘔。

The "smell of copper" was used to describe the flaunting of wealth, or in this case, pointed to the former court's opulence. During a time when the modernization of the country was a concern shared by many, all materials that reminded people of the past dynasty and its backward bureaucratic system were perceived as waste. One newspaper entry on waste reuse clearly states that "with the establishment of the Republic and the fall of the dynasty, all sorts of specially manufactured items are no longer suitable to be used during the modern era."[42] The answer to solving this problem of cultural waste that carried negative connotations was to completely alter the function of the original objects and assigning them new meanings through practices of refashioning.

A remarkable way to reuse Qing objects which stripped them of their meaning, was to simply blow them up. One article, published in 1915 by a regular contributor to *Entertainment* (*Yuxing* 餘興), a literary supplement of *The Times* (*Shibao* 時報), who published under the pseudonym "frank admonition" (*zheng yan* 諍言),[43] featured ten "groundbreaking ways" to put waste items to good use, focusing on celebrating the lunar new year:

> Take a hat's feather tube from the former Qing and fill it with some gunpowder. Then seal its bottom side with some mortar. Drill a small opening into the side of the tube and use a piece of fuse to light it. It will explode with a bang exactly like that of a firecracker! [44]

A second example featured in this article makes the disruptive character of the waste-reuse advice even more evident by suggesting that the reader, when celebrating the Lantern Festival, replace the drum that is beaten in celebration of the occasion with a Qing judge's gravel and gravel block, which "makes a loud and clear sound and will most certainly be exceptional."[45] Taking an object that symbolized discipline and order in the Qing judicial system to make a ruckus on the street did not even require the user to alter the object. Simply using it in a new context was enough to poke fun at the fallen dynasty.[46]

Shenbao 申報 (Shanghai News), "Shanghai guancha zatan 上海觀察雜談 (Miscellaneous Talk on Matters Observed in Shanghai)," 18766 (May 30, 1925): 23.

42 Shoudie 瘦蝶, "Feiwu liyong tan 廢物利用談 (Let's Talk About Putting Waste to Good Use)," *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News) 15503 (April 12, 1916): 14.

43 The real name of the author, who also published short stories with this penname, could not be identified.

44 Original text: (甲) 以前清之翎管裝入火藥少許，再以三合土封其底。於管旁鑿一小洞插以藥線，燃之成聲與爆無異。*Yuxing* 餘興 (Entertainment), "Xinnian zhi feiwu liyong 新年之廢物利用 (Putting Waste to Good Use on New Years)," 12 (1915): 124.

45 *Yuxing*, "Xinnian zhi feiwu liyong," 124.

46 A similar rhetoric which undermines the symbolic value of practices reminiscent of the Qing dynasty, such as the growing of the queue, is given in a satirical essay from 1913 from *Liberty* (*Ziyou zazhi* 自由雜誌). Lee, "'A Dime Store of Words'," 72.

The satirical tone of the ten entries for celebrating the new year with recycled materials of the Qing is blatant. The article was received positively, and a response to the piece was published in another magazine to complement the ten suggestions. The explosive reuse of a hat's feather tube, for example, was praised as marvelous (*miao* 秒), but the author adds that the hat's feathers are unfortunately not mentioned in the original article. His suggestion is to hang the feathers up, together with peach wood amulets hung on gates during the new year, which would make a beautiful sight to behold.[47] Such disruptive suggestions began to circulate early on, soon after the fall of the dynasty in 1911. Several short articles in the *Shenbao* in the years of 1911 and 1912 suggested refunctioning objects representing Qing culture in a manner that would fully discredit them as symbols of power. One article on "putting waste to good use" lists several such new uses:

> An overcoat can be made into a Western coat;
> An official's hat topper pearls can be made into an abacus;
> An official's hat tassels can be made into a mop to wipe shit;
> An official's hat feathers can be made into a broom;
> An official's rank badge can be made into a sitting cushion;
> A flagpole can be made into an electric pole;
> An official's lacquer rank plaque can be made into a hitching post for donkeys;
> An official's summer cap can be made into a cover for the feet of the deceased;
> Court beads can be made into a chain for a monkey's leash.[48]

The second installment of the article, published five days later, adds a few more examples:

> Hat topper pearls can be made into decoration for a chair's legs;
> An official's rattan cap can be made into a lamp shade;
> Horse-hove cuff sleeves can be made into sock covers;[49]
> Officials' lacquer rank plaque can be made into parking signs;[50]
> A hat's feather tube can be made into a cigarette holder;
> An opium pipe can be used as a crochet needle;

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47 Shuangxing 雙星 (Double Star), "Tanhua hui 談話會 (Forum)," 2 (1915): 42.

48 Original text: 外套可以改大衣、頂子可以改算盤珠、帽纓可以改拖糞、翎子可以改掃帚、補子可以改坐墊、旗杆可以改電杆、銜牌可以改驢馬停留牌、凉帽可以改死人足上套的斗、朝珠可以改牽猴猕的練條。Liegui 劣鬼, "Feiwu liyong 廢物利用 (Putting Waste to Good Use)," *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), 13945 (December 11, 1911): 24. This text is later reproduced in other humorous sources, such as *Liberty* (*Ziyou zazhi* 自由雜誌) in 1913. See Lee, "'A Dime Store of Words'," 72–73.

49 Most likely a type of leg warmer, with the "hoof" portion going over the foot. In another article listing a similar use, it is specified that these covers are meant for "girls with natural feet" (*tianzu nüzi* 天足女子), reminding the reader of yet another backward trend – foot binding; *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), "Feiwu liyong 廢物利用," 14118 (June 12, 1912): 10.

50 News of the period report that with the circulations of trams in cities, designated areas for parking were established to avoid blocking the trams. Signs were put up for areas where parking was permitted; *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), "Genghuan tingche mupai 更換停車木牌 (Replacement of Parking Signs)," 15790 (February 1, 1917): 11.

A soldier's club can be used as a laundry pounding stick;
An old cangue can be used as a table for a wash basin;
The queue braid can be used as a horse whip.[51]

It is obvious that most of these items, which functioned as signifiers for imperial rule, have their value subverted by the new uses. Symbols of power and oppression were refashioned by modern practices of reuse into items that come into contact with feces, dirty laundry, corpses or animals. Items of the dynastic period were not perceived as waste to be disposed of, but as matter that could be taken apart and a semiotic system that had to be discredited and overwritten by modern ideas and functions, such as "electric pole" or "parking sign." Other similar articles appeared, suggesting methods to "make the old become new" by using Qing embroidered robes to make modern skirts or tablecloths, to turn opium lamps into alcohol lamps, or to use the wooden parts of the cangue to craft modern toilet seats.[52] These suggestions for reuse, although humorous, could be enacted, if the reader wished to do so. The humorous connection of Qing material culture to the narrative of "waste reuse" would be exploited even further, going beyond the notion of material reuse and developing fully fledged parodies that picked up on other accepted modern practices to present disruptive ideas.

Satirical use of the past

A taste for satirical cartoons and humorous literature developed at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when cartoons and entertainment columns began to appear in newspapers, such as the *Shenbao*, and periodicals specializing in entertainment and humor were published, such as *Play* (*Youxi bao* 遊戲報), *Liberty* (*Ziyou zazhi* 自由雜誌) and *Shanghai Puck.*[53] Internationally, for example in Edo or

51 Original text: 頂子可作椅脚轆轤、緯帽可作電燈罩、馬蹄袖可作襪蓋、帽纓可作拖糞、銜牌可作停車牌、翎管可作香煙嘴、烟扦子可作結絨線之針、軍棍可作搗衣捧、舊枷可作面湯檯、辮子可作馬鞭子。Kongxianzi 空閒子, "Feiwu liyong (xu) 廢物利用 (續) (Putting Waste to Good Use [Continued])," *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News) 13950 (December 16, 1911): 25.

52 *Yuxing* 餘興 (Entertainment). "Jiuwu fanxin: feiwu 舊物翻新: 廢物 (Transforming the Old into New: Waste)," 3 (1914): 118–119.

53 The Shenbao publishing house included short satires and entertaining literary pieces in its daily newspaper and began publishing a literary supplement in 1911, which also welcomed satirical content. It also sought to publish satirical novels for Chinese audiences; Catherine Vance Yeh, "Recasting the Chinese Novel: Ernest Major's Shenbao Publishing House (1872–1890)," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015), 171–289. Cartoons and visual satire also became a wide-spread critical medium during the 1910s; Kuiyi Shen. "Lianhuanhua and Manhua-Picture Books and Comics in Old Shanghai," in *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books*, ed., John A. Lent, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 100–120, 109. *Youxi* 遊戲, which was first published in 1897, was also dedicated to humorous and entertaining content. See Catherine Vance Yeh, "Shanghai Leisure, Print Entertainment, and the Tabloids, xiaobao 小報," in *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870–1910*, ed., Rudolf G. Wagner (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 201–233.

Paris, the publication of entertainment periodicals had accompanied the development of entertainment centers, and Chinese editors proudly acknowledged the Western origin of their ideas for their new Chinese publications.[54] In a study of the *Shanghai Puck*, which began to be published in 1918, Wu I-Wei argues that satire and cartoons, as literary and visual formats, were part of a global trend, which connected news readers across borders. The visual repertoire and new symbols employed in satire prepared the Chinese audience "metaphorically, for a new world order."[55]

The narrative of "waste reuse" (*feiwu liyong* 廢物利用) had become so common in popular media of the early twentieth century, with its connection to modernization and progress, that humor pieces also employed it when setting the stage for jokes. One satirical essay makes use of the question-and-answer format commonly published in newspapers to address questions by readers. The account pokes fun at the notion that everything can be recycled if one only knows the proper scientific methods, and the assumption that Western countries had developed superior scientific methods to do so. In the second question presented in the essay, a fictional reader asks: "It comes with a loud and sudden sound, which causes people to pinch their noses. I would like to ask: how can this be put to good use?" To this the fictional columnist provides the following advice: "You can store it in a glass bottle and mail it abroad. There it will be refined and processed into 'fart essence' [*pijing* 屁精] which can be gifted to moneyed merchants or high-up politicians."[56] By imitating the informative and prescriptive tone of the "putting things to good use" texts, the audience familiar with the predominant positive narrative surrounding the concept of waste would understand the exaggeration. They would be reminded of Western countries (which purchased Chinese waste to use as industrial resource)[57] and chuckle at the idea of mailing their imperialist enemies farts.

When addressing Qing material culture in satire, authors also relied on new tropes and concepts to strip these objects of their symbolic value. Besides the trope of "putting waste to good use," new types of institutions that were conceived as modern means of educating the people and unifying the nation, such as museums and ex-

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Another example is *Liberty* (*Ziyou zhazi* 自由雜誌), which came out in 1911, and later continued to be published under a different name. See Lee, "'A Dime Store of Words'," 53.

54 See Yeh, "Shanghai Leisure, Print Entertainment, and the Tabloids, *xiaobao* 小報," 205.

55 I-Wei Wu, "Participating in Global Affairs: The Chinese Cartoon Monthly Shanghai Puck," in *Asian Punches: A Transcultural Affair*, eds., Barbara Mittler and Hans Harder (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 365–387, 372–279, 382.

56 Here the "fart essence" refers to flattery or the practice to eagerly please powerful people. The *Red Rose* magazine published mostly novels, short stories and humorous content geared more toward entertainment. Wu Zhenqi 吳真奇, "Feiwu liyong 廢物利用 (Putting Waste to Good Use)," *Hong meigui* 紅玫瑰 (Red Rose) 2, no. 4 (1925): 1.

57 Rags were imported from China by European countries to produce paper. Later during the Republican period, initiatives to prevent waste from being exported to European countries were launched and discussed in the news. See, for example, *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), "*Qing jin pobu luchun* 請禁破布輸出 (Please Ban the Export of Rags)," 22835 (November 25, 1936): 12.

hibition halls, became elements used to construct parodies. In his study on nationalistic consumption in China, Karl Gerth highlights the importance the Chinese placed on spaces dedicated to exhibiting national products for creating a unified and patriotic consumer society, describing it as the Chinese "exhibitionary complex." A turn to industrial fairs and educational exhibits had already started in the late nineteenth century, imitating European and Japanese events.[58] Advocates for the creation of such spaces of display "underscored the usefulness of exhibitions in teaching Chinese to identify everyday opportunities to practice patriotism."[59] In effect, exhibits taught people how to associate consumer goods with the concept of nation. Tamara Hamlish, in her study on the establishment of the imperial palace museum, argues that if China were "to be recognized as an equal participant in a global community of modern nations, it required the re-collection of a distinctive heritage."[60] This strategy was also modeled after foreign nations, who had successfully forged unified societies by constructing a coherent collective memory and putting it on display.[61] As Lisa Claypool describes, exhibits fostered a circular monologue of nationalistic self-praise and presented national identity itself as consumable good.[62] Besides commodities and cultural goods that highlighted the nations achievements, waste and reuse practices were also regarded as things worthy of being exhibited for pedagogical reasons. The museum permitted physical interaction with objects, which made it easier to reach and impart nationalistic lessons to different audiences, including women and children. In a lengthy essay from 1918, titled "Putting waste to good use and household life" (*Feiwu liyong yu jiating shenghuo* 廢物利用與家庭生活), Wang Yunzhang, the editor of *The Ladies' Journal* mentioned above, argues that organizing exhibits and lectures that promote frugality for housewives, who could implement the things seen and heard at these events at home, would greatly contribute to the nation's economic well-being.[63]

58 Gerth, *China Made*, 205–206.

59 Gerth, *China Made*, chapter 3, especially 252.

60 Tamara Hamlish, "Global Culture, Modern Heritage: Re-membering the Chinese Imperial Collections," in *Museums and Memory*, ed., Susan A. Crane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 137–158, 157. Lisa Claypool argues that at the turn of the century the loss of cultural artifacts was perceived as a threat to Chinese national identity, and that museums could prevent this loss; Lisa Claypool, "Zhang Jian and China's First Museum," *Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 3 (2005): 567–604, 569–570.

61 Hamlish, "Global Culture, Modern Heritage," 149.

62 Lisa Claypool, "Ways of Seeing the Nation: Chinese Painting in the National Essence Journal (1905–1911) and Exhibition Culture," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 19, no. 1 (2011): 55–82, 66–67.

63 Xishen 西神, "Feiwu liyong yu jiating shenghuo 廢物利用與家庭生活 (Putting Waste to Good Use and Household Life)," *Funü zazhi* 婦女雜誌 (The Ladies' Journal) 4, no. 12 (1918): 188. New notions of gender that empowered women and tied them to nationalistic ideals began to be introduced early during the twentieth century, mostly lifted from Japanese sources. See Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 111–112, 117. Louise Edwards also discussed how women and children were, alongside farmers, identified as the main audiences for educational programs devised by intellectuals. Louise Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," *Modern China* 26, no. 2 (2000): 115–147, 122.

One parody that mimicked these modern exhibition spaces in order to displace values from the Qing dynasty was most likely authored by Zhu Xinpei 朱心佩 (style Bing'an 冰盦), a Shanghai-born businessman and painter who was active in art circles in the 1930s and 1940s. The article was published in a literary section of *Shenbao*, "Independent talk" (*Ziyou tan* 自由談), under the rubric of "Playful articles" (*Youxi wenzhang* 遊戲文章) on November 30, 1911, less than a month after Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916) had been appointed prime minister of the new constitutional monarchy and while uprisings against the Qing continued to take place in different provinces. The essay was a spoof advertisement for a "Memorial Hall for the Fallen Dynasty" (*Wangguo jinianpin chenliesuo guanggao* 亡國紀念品陳列所廣告). The short satirical piece claims to be a call for objects related to the fallen dynasty to be put on display in the fictional memorial hall "to be remembered for all eternity" (*yongyuan zhi jinian* 永遠之紀念), eagerly anticipating the definitive end of the Qing. The call for memorial objects divides these into two categories: natural and man-made. Items that fall under the "natural" category are, for example, the queue braid and opium, while the list of man-made objects compiles many items seen in the previous section, from officials' caps and hat toppers to lotus shoes and opium pipes, which symbolize both the abuse of power and the failure of the Qing government. The creation of such a fictional memorial hall established that the Qing government, along with its symbols, belonged in the past and that its memory would be defined by reformist intellectuals.[64] The parody understood the power of relocating the objects into a memorial hall, labeling them as useless to current society and creating a distance between the viewer and the objects that could disrupt the connection between the object as signifier and the symbolic meanings it carried. Even a fictional historicization of Qing material culture was sufficient to claim a position of power.

The fictional creation of a distant past, at a time when the definitive downfall of the Qing was not yet clear, reflected modern attitudes toward history. In his work on Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), Tang Xiaobing identifies this as the "modernist problem," which was defined by the intellectual who "keeps history alive and dead, present and removed, at the same time by constantly rereading and rewriting it," forcing it to submit to the present.[65] The displacement of Qing material culture and its transfer to the museum or memorial hall declared the objects useless and marked the loss of their original function. The method to put this "waste" to good use was to subjugate it to the present and keep it as a reminder of a shared and shameful past.

A similar parody published in 1915 by Zhang Jian 章鑒, another author who contributed regularly to *Entertainment* (*Yuxing* 餘興) and *The Times* (*Shibao* 時報) newspaper, makes explicit use of the term "waste" in connection to Qing material culture. This text is also composed as an advertisement and revisits the idea of an educational

64 *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News), "Wangguo jinianpin chenliesuo guanggao 亡國紀念品陳列所廣告 (Advertisement for the Memorial Hall for the Fallen Dynasty)," 13942 (November 30, 1911): 24.
65 Xiaobing Tang, "Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' and a Chinese Modernism." *PMLA* 107, no. 5 (1992): 1222–1234, 1232.

exhibition.[66] Like the previous essay, it opens with the announcement of the new exhibition, followed by a list of items that are to feature in the show, now with descriptive labels. The satirical tone can be felt in the opening announcement:

> Beijing Waste Exhibition Hall opening advertisement
>
> I am overjoyed to inform that China's territory is vast and its resources abundant. During the past thousands of years, it was the first to develop civilization. Waste matter handed down from the past is abundant. It is only that people reject and are bored by the past, seeking new things. This has led our historic waste to be almost completely sucked up and gathered by foreigners. Today, one or two in ten museums abroad specialize in taking waste and displaying it as memorabilia. If we do not take immediate action to preserve and display our waste ahead of them, I fear that after several decades there will be nothing left of this type of waste to preserve. The supporters of this exhibition hall are deeply concerned by this matter. We first encouraged the collection of funds to establish the Waste Exhibition Hall in Beijing, in the Qianqing Hall, inside the palace walls by the Jingqian gate. We want to encourage the crowds to visit it. However, because the scope of the project is unclear, preparations are not fully complete. The descriptive signs for waste matter that have been completed are recorded in an explanatory pamphlet, which we provide here for the people to study. It has been determined that the Hall will open on the second Sunday of the week, from 1 to 6 in the afternoon. We respectfully invite everyone to grace us with their presence and correct any shortcomings. Our joy to be putting out this announcement has no boundaries.[67]

The organizers of the "Waste Exhibition Hall" are listed as Wang Kaiyun 王闓運 (1833–1916), Liang Dingfen 梁鼎芬 (1859–1919), Rong Naixuan 勞乃宣 (1843–1921) and Song Yuren 宋育仁 (1857–1931), all scholars and officials from the former dynasty. With the exception of Wang Kaiyun, who only attained a *juren* 舉人 degree, all held *jinshi* 進士 degrees, the highest degree for imperial scholars. Wang Kaiyun had been hired by the newly appointed prime minister Yuan Shikai as curator of the National History Museum in 1913 and the other three "organizers" had held important posts during the imperial period and continued to advocate a monarchy in China after the *Xinhai* Revolution in 1911. All "organizers" named in the satirical essay, maintained connections to the Qing dynasty and continued to uphold values associated with the former regime. They too, the author seems to suggest, were outdated individuals that could be taken out of circulation and placed in a museum.

This section is followed by the texts used to describe the "waste" matter in the exhibit. Four items are listed, starting with the "yellow dragon banner," which is said to

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66 Zhang Jian 章鑒, "Beijing feiwu chenlie suo kaimu guanggao 北京廢物陳列所開幕廣告 (Beijing Waste Exhibition Hall Opening Advertisement)," *Yuxing* 餘興 (Entertainment, literary supplement of *Shibao* 時報) 11 (1915): 119–121.

67 Original text: 敬啓者中國地大物博數千年來開化最早廢物之留貽隨在皆有惟人心不古厭古喜新致我國歷來之廢物皆爲外人吸收殆盡至今東西洋博物院十猶有一二流傳爲廢物之紀念品若不及時保存陳列於先竊恐數十年後此種廢物將無遺跡之可留本所同人怒焉憂之於是首先提倡糾集資本建設廢物陳列所於北京乾清門內之乾清宮俾衆參觀然而規模粗具設備未詳所有廢物名目略載說明書以供世人之研究茲定於星期八下午一時起至六時止敬請諸君惠臨以匡不逮無任歡幸之至此告. Zhang Jian, "Beijing feiwu chenlie suo kaimu guanggao," 119–120.

be so large that, if spread out, would cover an area 66 km wide, blocking the sun and bringing darkness. If cut into pieces to make a garment, it would clothe all those who are cold. The second item comprises hat toppers of precious minerals, out of which the red ones are the most valuable. This vivid red color, the description claims, was achieved when Qing officials simmered the yellow, less valuable toppers, in the blood of revolutionaries. In turn, when these red toppers are simmered to make tea, they are beneficial for one's health and replenish the blood. The third item, the opium tray, which includes all accoutrements required to smoke, is described as "our nation's uniquely powerful weapon" (*woguo tebie zhi liqi* 我國特別之利器). The author relies on puns to claim that the opium pipe (*yanqiang* 煙槍), which contains the character *qiang* for gun, can take down two Western guns. The opium bubbles (*yanpao* 煙泡), which are formed on the pipe when burning the opium paste, carry a homophone character for cannon (*pao* 炮); they would explode an entire foreign warship. The final item describes the "three-inch arc shoes," the pointy, finely embroidered lotus shoes worn by elite women of the Qing. The description boasts that 361 pairs of shoes have already been collected, and that a big drinking party could now be hosted twice every year, inspired by the "refined" Yuan poet Yang Weizhen 楊維楨 (1296–1370), who used to drink wine out of lotus shoes. This, the author says, would be a big hit with shoe fetishists (*xiepizhe* 鞋癖者).

The essay ends with common statements used in waste reuse texts, claiming that there are much more items that can be reused in a beneficial way, but that not all of them could be included, in this case, because the rooms of the new museum are not big enough to accommodate more items for the first exhibit. The piece closes by stating that the day for the opening was carefully selected to be the first day of the first month of the sixth year of the useless Xuantong emperor's reign,[68] according to the useless calendar of the fallen Qing. To be admitted to the exhibit, visitors must bring old copper coins, and no silver currencies would be accepted.

Like other authors of satirical fiction before the 1919 May Fourth Movement,[69] the writers of these two parodies relied on verisimilitude or mimicry to question and hollow out outdated values. The inclusion of exhibition spaces in these parodies instrumentalizes these new practices of display as symbols for newfound authority. The museum and memorial hall are related to modernity and nation-building efforts, spaces sanctioned by the new government and reformist intellectuals. It was not necessary to create such exhibits in real spaces to convey the idea that intellectuals had the moral upper hand and the necessary understanding of China's position in the international stage to combat outdated concepts.[70] The objects "put on display" should speak to the

68 Here the dating makes use of the last reign name of the Qing dynasty, which was no longer in use.
69 David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 46–47.
70 The dominant position of textual description in asserting cultural value and authenticity of material culture for intellectuals is also addressed by Lisa Claypool in her study of a contemporary journal, *National Essence Journal* (1905–1911). She argues that readers were expected to "take the

nation, not to individuals or elite groups. The narrative of waste made it possible for intellectuals to represent material remains of the Qing dynasty as symbols of imperial rule that had to be physically deconstructed or placed in "exhibitions" that removed them from society and rendered them useless in order to strip them of past cultural values.

Conclusion

Early narratives on waste and reuse that appeared in the 1910s and 1920s continued to develop and change in the following decades. When the nationalist government established itself in Nanjing in 1928, for example, and a new publishing office was set up to disseminate educational literature, among the published materials was a booklet titled "Putting the six wastes to good use." In it, following the address of the president Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975), the compilers urge citizens to commit to the reform and join the effort to rebuild the country, explaining that in the period of crisis faced by the nation, it would be impossible to finance the reconstruction of society on a grand scale, and that China had to rely on the efforts and strengths of individuals who could engage in activities to support the reconstruction.[71] By avoiding the "six wastes," individuals could contribute to strengthening the nation without wasting money. The "six wastes" referred to wasted things, wasted space, wasted time, wasted money, wasted people and wasted efforts, which are further explained in the booklet with examples.[72]

Unlike the intellectual efforts to re-signify material culture from the former dynasty by resorting to satire and parody and deconstructing values and symbols, the nationalist booklet gives concrete examples for how to literally dismantle symbols of imperial power or religious belief. Citizens are instructed to take apart governmental or temple structures that are damaged, and reuse bricks, tiles and beams to construct new buildings that would benefit the nation, such as lecture halls. Valuable items contained in temples, such as religious figures or bronze bells, should be moved and placed in museums for study and education, also making room for activities that would benefit the nation, such as political discussions or group exercise for physical strengthening.[73] A concrete example of how these nationalist prompts were put into practice is recorded by Ma Boyuan 馬伯援 (1884–1939), who described

editor's word for it" whenever the quality of a painting was discussed, which gave editors the essential role of communicators of value and transmitters of national tradition. The poor quality of the reproductions of paintings "exhibited" in the journal pages did not allow readers to assess the works themselves, making them complicit with the editors; Claypool, "Ways of Seeing the Nation," 63.

71 The compilers are not named in the publication.

72 Guomin zhengfu neizheng bu 國民政府內政部 (Ministry of Interior of the Nationalist Government), *Liufei liyong* 六廢利用 (Putting the Six Wastes to Good Use), 1928, 1–2.

73 Guomin zhengfu neizheng bu, Liufei liyong, 4–5.

how a city god temple in Henan province was converted to an educational exhibition hall (*jiaoyu chenlieguan* 教育陳列館), "putting waste to good use" (*feiwu liyong* 廢物利用) and eradicating superstitious beliefs.[74] A further Nationalist campaign, launched in 1934, also aimed to disseminate knowledge on hygiene and waste reuse to improve social wellbeing.[75] While the optimistic view of reuse did not suffer from the shift of intellectual and political ideals during the period of 1900 to 1940, it was instrumentalized for a variety of purposes, depending on who promoted it.

As this contribution has shown, promoting the reuse of material culture became a prominent narrative in texts of the period across different media, which included women's journals, newspapers, or political pamphlets, leveraged by both intellectuals and political factions. To intellectuals trying to redefine how the population at large should handle Qing material culture, the deconstruction of the symbolic value, social ideals and practices attached to the objects lay in the foreground. Their audience should learn how to recognize and handle this "waste" in the context of their home and by doing so, discredit outdated values. In contrast, the Nationalists' approach demanded less intellectual involvement from the audience, razing spaces of ritual to the ground to establish new sites and practices. In both cases the epistemic category of "waste" and the practice of categorizing things as "waste" offered a malleable framework for reconceptualizing the past and impart new meanings to material culture. The category of "waste," or the strategy of targeted "wasting," lent itself to be used simultaneously by intellectuals and the Nationalist Party in their attempts to distance themselves from the former dynasty and write histories with a modern outlook.

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74 Ma Boyuan 馬伯援, "Wo suo zhidao de Guominjun yu Guomindang hezuo shi 我所知道的國民軍與國民黨合作史", 1931. Facsimile reprinted in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* 近代中國史料叢刊 3, no. 27 (Wenhai chubanshe, 1985). Dong also addresses the resignification of a site or space in her analysis of the Tianqiao district in Beijing. She refers to the new practices and habits that transform the meaning of space as a process of "recycling." See Dong, *Republican Beijing*, especially chapter 6, "Recycling: The Tianqiao District."

75 For a discussion of the philosophical foundations of the New Life Movement, see Daniel Stumm, "Revitalizing the Nation. Vitalist Philosophy in the Chinese Nationalist Party," *Parrhesia* 36 (2022): 201–221, 213–215. For a general overview, see Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement. A Study in Counterrevolution," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (August 1975): 945–980. For examples on how recycling was featured as part of the movement, see, for example, one article in the *Funü xin shenghuo yuekan* 婦女新生活月刊 (Women's New Life Monthly), which prompted women to rise and organize a recycling movement. *Funü xin shenghuo yuekan* 婦女新生活月刊, "Duiyu funü liyong feiwu de jixiang jianyi 對於婦女利用廢物的幾項建議 (Some Recommendations for Women to Put Waste to Good Use)," (1936): 17–18. Posters and educational materials issued by the Nationalist Party, also provided a positive view on recycling, depicting, for example, a man making a mop out of "waste" socks. See Shangwu yinshuguan youxian gongsi 務印書館有限公司 (Commercial Press). [n.d.] "Liyong feiwu 利用廢物."

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Mei Mei Rado

Folding, Unfolding, and Refolding

The Transcultural Remaking of Chinese Skirts in Western Fashion, 1890s–1950s

Abstract: Many late-Qing garments that circulated in Europe and the United States were remade in Western fashion styles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With their flat panels, richly decorated components, and multiplied pleats, the silk skirts of Han Chinese women in particular lend themselves to many possibilities of reconfiguration. This chapter contextualizes the trajectories of refashioned Chinese skirts: the forms and vicissitudes of the skirt in China, the international trade in secondhand Chinese textiles, the historical practice of reusing and modifying garments in Europe and the United States, as well as chinoiserie in fashion in the early twentieth century. Rather than looking at these Chinese-skirts-turned-Western-garments as "inauthentic" and "compromised" objects, this chapter examines their transformations as activating a new fashion cycle in a different cultural context, which infused new lives and meanings into cast-out items from another culture.

Keywords: Chinese skirts, Western fashion, fold, transcultural remaking

In 1929, the New York-based collector William Christian Paul (d. 1929), who bequeathed all his collections of Chinese garments to the Metropolitan Museum of Art upon his death, notes that

> thousands of beautiful [Chinese] coats have been cut up to make table runners to grace American homes. Sleeve bands, in infinite variety, have been made into table mats, or used to adorn a dress front, or to trim milady's hat. Sleeve bands and mandarin squares, singly or in pairs, are often framed under glass to make serving trays or dainty wall panels. Mandarin squares are often made into handbags. Embroidered skirts are used as piano scarfs or other draperies, or sacrificed to adorn the silken shade of a lamp. Persons of artistic taste have found a hundred ways to utilize these beauteous fabrics of a by-gone age.[1]

In art museums with their neatly separated display areas dedicated to Chinese art and fashion, historical Chinese garments remade into Western fashion styles, like those described by Paul, often sit uncomfortably with curatorial classifications and narratives. On the one hand, their cultural and temporal ambiguities defy the museum principle that tends to prioritize "authenticity" and "original settings" of artefacts in their "intact" conditions. Garments in Chinese art departments are more often than not collect-

1 William C. Paul, *Old Chinese Embroideries: A Brief Explanation of Their Symbolism* (New York: Kwong Yuen, 1929), 3–4.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-005

ed as fine textiles of China and valued for their artistry and symbolism instead of characteristics of fashionability, whereas fashion departments mostly focus on chronological overviews of changing styles in the West and celebrate the innovations of a few famed designers. Cut-up, manipulated, and restitched long after the pieces were first made, the remade Chinese clothes appear to have compromised the "integrity" of a "worthy" artwork or design that should supposedly embody the essence of a specific time and culture. On the other hand, in today's society with its heightened sensitivity towards aspects of "Orientalism" and practices of so-called "cultural appropriation" – two correlated concepts predicated on a rigid, essentializing view of power imbalance between white Europeans and Americans and the rest of ethnic groups – altered Chinese dresses seem to exemplify and materialize the "violence" that a "dominant power" inflicted on an "inferior other" by possessing and mutilating the latter's properties. Caught up in these dilemmas and occupying a gray interstice between clear-cut categories defined by nation and culture, repurposed and refashioned Chinese dresses exist as some kind of embarrassing object whose seemingly "inadequate," "derivative," or "stigmatized" status poses challenges to conventional frameworks of interpretation and display.

Silk skirts of Han Chinese women from the late Qing dynasty remodeled as Western fashion items, the topic on which this chapter focuses, exemplify this kind of "problematic" object. With their flat panels, richly decorated components, and multiplied pleats, such skirts lend themselves to many possibilities of reconfiguration. In the period from around the 1890s to the 1950s when a large quantity of Chinese skirts reached European and American consumers in ways I will describe further below, they were frequently converted into dresses, jackets, or capes – new constructions that retained little of the original shape and function of the skirt but resonated with the fast-changing silhouettes in Western fashion. If we free ourselves from the restrictive frameworks of analysis that focus on identifying markers of cultural authenticity and originality, these garments that transversed cultural boundaries and changed their physical forms over time offer a new window through which dress can be viewed as a palimpsest of disparate human experiences within a continuum of history. The practices of dismantling, fragmenting, and reconstructing garments shed light on fashion as a process of becoming and drive home textiles' materiality as something fundamentally fluid and mutable. Whenever the sartorial transformations involve cross-cultural reinterpretations and adaptations, the process and result show how garments acquire new meanings through a series of negotiations between different bodies, conventions, and contexts. "Appropriation," as art historian Robert Nelson explains by drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of myth, "maintains but shifts the former connotations to create the new signs." As a result, "what once was complete

and meaningful is taken over by the second system and made to stand for a new notion."[2]

As garments are deeply personal, contingent on multifarious individual circumstances, visions, and memories, to read power relationships into them based on an essentializing, binary view of cultural identities carries with it the great danger of over-generalization and misinterpretation. Fashion, after all, is not the straightforward byproduct of political thought or social atmosphere, no matter how pervasive this is at a particular time. Likewise, as the precise provenances of many extant pieces are impossible to trace, a hastily conducted discussion of presumed identity and agency risks premature assumptions and oversimplification. In this chapter, I exercise extreme caution concerning these aspects, and instead turn my focus to how garments themselves reveal the ways in which the material features of Chinese skirts generated transformations and reimagination in a new context.

This chapter contextualizes the trajectories of refashioned Chinese skirts from various angles addressing the forms and vicissitudes of the skirt in China, the international trade of second-hand Chinese textiles, the historical practice of reusing and modifying used garments in Europe and the United States, as well as chinoiserie in fashion in the early twentieth century. The notion of the fold (*pli*), as articulated by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the transformations of Chinese skirts. Deleuze proposes to comprehend the world of the baroque as infinite folds in constant movements. He refers to the fold quite literally when discussing baroque sculptures and costumes; on a more metaphorical level, he evokes the incessant process of folding in and folding out as a state of transformation that blurs the binary between the exterior and the interior.[3] Beyond the baroque context, the metaphor of the fold and the concepts etymologically related to the *pli* enable us to approach dress not as a self-contained object with fixed boundaries but as a process of becoming and meaning making. The making and remaking of Chinese skirts physically involved many actions of folding, unfolding, and refolding. Through these actions, the manipulated textiles were im*pli*cated with a rhizome of signs referencing the past, constructing the exotic, and expressing the present. The binary opposition between East and West as well as that between modernity and tradition collapsed, giving rise to a reborn object that emerged as a site multi*pli*ed with intertwined fragments and meanings.

2 Robert Nelson, "Appropriation," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds., Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 162–164.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). On this point, see also Anneke Smelik, "Gilles Deleuze: Bodies-without-Organs in the Folds of Fashion," in *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds., Agèns Rocamora and Anneke Amelik (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 176–177.

The fashionable history of skirts in Qing China

The Chinese skirts that were disassembled and remade in line with Western fashion are mostly silk skirts worn by Han Chinese women from the late Qing dynasty, that is, from circa 1850 to 1911. During the Qing dynasty, Manchu and Han Chinese women's dresses assumed different forms: the Manchu style featured a one-piece, full-length robe, while the Han Chinese style was characterized by two pieces – a jacket and a skirt (trousers were also worn towards the late nineteenth century). The skirt, referred to as *shang* 裳, had long been a part of the Han dress system in the past dynasties, worn by men and women alike. Women's skirts are also referred to as *qun* 裙. The basic structure of a Qing female skirt remained the same as the Ming-dynasty type: two identical halves were not stitched together but held in place by a wide waistband, each half consisting of a flat rectangular panel measuring approximately thirty to forty centimeters in width and a side panel formed by multiple pleats and/or gores (Fig. 1). The rectangular panel had acquired the nickname "horse-face" (*mamian* 馬面) in vernacular terminology by the late Ming dynasty and possibly earlier, and the pleats and overlaps were called *bi* 襞 and *ji* 積 respectively.[4] When joined together, the proper left half overlaps with the proper right half for the width of the measurements of the "horse-face" panel. In one mode of construction, the two halves could be completely detached, and when the skirt was worn, they could be connected by loops and buttons sewn on each half's waistband. In contrast to the bright and richly decorated silks for the skirt panels, waistbands were normally made of undyed cotton. Not tailored according to the wearer's body size, the skirt's waist was typically much larger than necessary. To wear the skirt, one wrapped it around the body and secured it with a string tied around the waistband. The two "horse-face" panels were then centrally positioned in the front and back.

The versatile literatus, playwright, and taste arbiter Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680) discusses the trends and aesthetics of women's skirt in great detail in his essay collection *Leisure Notes* (*Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶寄) published in 1671. For Li Yu, skirt is an embodiment *par excellence* of femininity and eroticized stand-in for the female body. In his view, "women differ fundamentally from men in terms of their lower body," and covering the "precious" and "private" part of the female body, a delicate, beautiful skirt simultaneously demonstrates a woman's decent elegance and tantalizes sexual imagination. According to him, the appropriateness and appeal of a skirt depends on the right number of pleats. Ample pleats enable a woman to walk at ease and cre-

4 The origin and signification of the term *mamian* is not clear. For an early use of this term for late-Ming period men's skirts, see Zhu Shunshui 朱舜水 (1600–1682), *Zhushi tanqi* 朱氏談綺 (Mr. Zhu's notes on fascinating topics) (Kyoto: ryūshiken, 1708), vol. 3, 36 verso. The basic structures for Ming and Qing skirts were the same. For an overview of Qing women's skirts, see Sun Yanzhen 孫彥貞, *Qingdai nüxing fushiwenhua yanniu* 清代女性服飾文化研究 (Research on Qing women's clothing) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), 55–61; Mary Hays, "Chinese Women's Skirts of The Qing Dynasty," *Bulletin of Needle and Bobbin Club* 72 (1989): 4–54.

Figure 1: Han Chinese Woman's Skirt, late nineteenth century, China, silk and cotton, L. 32 1/8 in. The John R. Van Derlip Fund. Minneapolis Institute of Art, 42.8.203.

ate seductive fluttering even when her movement is gentle; by contrast, insufficient pleats hamper the wearer's legs like a "fetter," rendering her attitude stiff and ungainly. Li Yu argues that eight widths of silk fabric are suitable for a domestic skirt, but ten are necessary for an elegant one to be worn in front of guests. In terms of color and decorative schemes, he advises the subtle and pure, not the saturated and variegated.[5]

Skirts served as a salient marker of regional styles in Qing commercial networks of fashion, a system sustained by merchants, peddlers, tailors, and popular prints.[6] Various types of fashionable skirts emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as evidenced in many passages in the literature genre of "miscellaneous notes" (*zaji* 雜記) that record social customs, events, and anecdotes and comment on arts and culture. Skirts proliferated especially in the affluent southern cities Suzhou and Yangzhou, whose clothing styles were eagerly followed by the rest of the country. The "moonlight skirt" (*yuehua qun* 月華裙) that originated in Suzhou was, for example, criticized by Li Yu as an item of over-the-top extravagance, having received its name due to its colorful opulence as each fold of the skirt was composed of silks in five colors.[7] The "phoenix-tail skirt" (*fengwei qun* 鳳尾裙), an invention of

5 Li Yu 李漁, *Xianqing ouji*閒情偶寄 [*Leisure Notes*], 1671 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 2008) reprint, 158.

6 On late Qing commercial network of fashion, see Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), especially chapters 3 and 4.

7 Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, 158.

Yangzhou, was made of many thin satin strips, which were individually embellished with embroideries and gold-thread edges.[8] The "hundred-pleat skirt" (*baizhe qun* 百褶裙), popular in both locations, consisted of full panels of fabrics folded into numerous fine pleats.[9]

Most of the unaltered skirts that have survived until today were made during the mid- to late nineteenth century. They exhibit a rich array of decorative methods and schemes. As the late-Qing jacket fell around the knees, the embellishments of the skirts concentrated in the visible part below the jacket. An 1865 photograph taken in Tianjin of a woman in seated position shows the graceful drape of the skirt's pleated side panels and the stiff "horse-face" panel that stays fully extended (Fig. 2). Such skirts could be made of patterned silk tapestry (*kesi* 緙絲) or velvet, but plain silks and damasks were most common, which provided a soft foundation for embroideries, trims, and appliqués. Skirts carried repertoires of decorative patterns and passementeries similar to those of jackets. Auspicious flowers and birds dominated among the embroidery motifs, but narrative scenes with figures were also featured; and commercially available woven ribbons, embroidered bands, pipings, and cloud-shaped *ruyi* 如意 heads (an auspicious symbol meaning "as you wish") completed the borders. As the visual focus of and the largest flat surface in the skirt, the "horse-face" panel constituted an area with the richest ornamentation in a skirt.

In an extremely ornate example (see Fig. 1), possibly intended for a festive or ceremonial occasion, each central panel features a red damask ground framed by six borders ranging from ribbons and blue satin to bands of counted-stitch embroideries and green satin. A butterfly textile appliqué in the lower center carries a semi-attached tablet composed of wave pattern, cloud, phoenix, and bat motifs; on both side borders, dramatically shaped and brightly colored gigantic butterflies made of textile cutworks are accentuated by woven ribbons manipulated into undulating shapes. The side panels add to the visual complexity – each triangular-shaped fold is made of a silk in a different color. The intermittent blue borders stand in bold contrast to the rest of the colors, simultaneously articulating compartmentalization of the decorative fields and lending a sense of unified rhythm to the entire skirt. In addition to the multi-layered trims along the hem, each pleat is attached with two staggered, dangling tablets anchored by a never-ending knot and a rosette, respectively. The tips of the tablets carry belts, pearl strings, textile cutworks and tassels, whose three-dimensional forms and sound introduce multi-sensory allure to the skirt beyond the visual engagement. Moreover, the inner overlap, which is hardly revealed when the skirt is wrapped around a body, shows yet another decorative scheme different from the other parts. The colorful and intricate composition of this skirt recalls the legendary "moonlight" or "phoenix tail" skirts mentioned in the eighteenth-century Qing texts cited above.

8 Li Dou 李斗, *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄 [A Record of Gaily Painted Pleasure Boats in Yangzhou], 1795 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995) reprint, 195.

9 Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, 158; Li Dou, *Yangzhou huafang lu*, 195.

Figure 2: *Woman in Garden*, Tianjin, 1865, photograph mounted on card, albumen print. University of Bristol – Historical Photographs of China, CH-s09.

In another less flamboyant example, the pre-embroidered side panels are pleated into thin, delicate folds (Fig. 3). Held loosely in place by stitches in large intervals, these folds can be gently expanded to offer a fuller view of the embroidered flowers, hereby eliciting the visual pleasure of chance glimpse. During the late Qing period, the innovative fashion of holding the pleats in place with small, controlled stitches at regularly staggered intervals became popular. Skirts with this treatment acquired the name "fish-scale hundred pleats" (*yulin baizhe* 魚鱗百褶), because the folds could slightly open to create a graceful pattern in continuous diamond shapes, reminiscent of undulating, glistening fish scales.[10]

In line with Lothar Ledderose's earlier and more general analysis of modularity as a key component in Chinese craftsmanship,[11] dress and textile historian Rachel Silberstein has proposed modularity as key characteristic of late Qing fashion. She suggests that embroidered components and trims produced by different commercial workshops circulated in the market as "modular accessories," which could be assembled into a full garment at home.[12] Although Silberstein's discussion focuses on Han

10 Xu Ke 徐珂comp. *Qing bai leichao* 清稗類鈔 (Categorized anthology of petty matters from the Qing period), 1916 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), reprint, vol. 13, 6203.

11 Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

12 Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 68 – 69.

Figure 3: Han Chinese Woman's Skirt, mid- to late nineteenth century, China, silk and cotton, L. 32 1/8 in. The John R. Van Derlip Fund. Minneapolis Institute of Art, 42.8.206.

women's jackets, the same system equally applied to skirts, which in particular boasted a wealth of small, separable sections, each a self-contained visual field in its own right. The structure of the skirt lends itself to facile transformation and deconstruction: through the act of wrapping and unwrapping, it can morph freely from a three-dimensional garment into a two-dimensional textile panel; the fine pleats allow themselves to be expanded, unfurled, and flattened; each fold with its own trim is a free-standing unit; and the "horse-face" panels can be easily detached.

From the 1880s onward, ornate skirts gradually fell out of fashion, when wide-legged trousers and unadorned black skirts became more in vogue, especially in the metropolis Shanghai and the urban regions of Jiangnan, adopted by cosmopolitan trend setters – Shanghai courtesans – and respectable women alike. Numerous illustrations in the popular journal *Touchstone Studio Pictorial* (*Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報) and depictions of courtesans' daily lives show ample visual evidence of this new fashion.[13] The fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 quickly rendered the clothing styles worn in the last empire outdated, and when sartorial practice became a highly contested field for ideological debates in a fast-changing society, late-Qing style came to sig-

13 On Shanghai courtesans' fashion, see Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850–1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), chapter 1.

nify backwardness.[14] Although in the 1910s and 1920s skirts designed in line with new fashion styles to an extent kept elements of the former skirt shapes, including, a defined field for decoration in the center front and a wide waistband unrelated to body measurements, skirts had become narrower, softer, simpler, and were constructed as one piece with panels sewn together.

Chinese skirts in the West

From the mid-nineteenth century through the Republican Period (1912–1949), a large quantity of Chinese garments reached Europe and the United States, including full skirts and unpicked parts of them. Following China's defeats in the two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), Western merchants and travelers could move freely in the newly opened treaty ports where they acquired used and unused skirts in the marketplace.[15] The uncertainty of lives that many Chinese families faced during that tumultuous century fraught with regime changes, wars, and social upheavals contributed to a robust network for circulating used garments. The fast changes of dress styles after the Qing dynasty also rendered late-Qing clothes out of place in Chinese life and resulted in their increased availability in the market. Silberstein's research on pawnshops and second-hand clothes retailing in China in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries shows that many Manchu and Han garments entered Western collections through this system.[16] In Beijing, for example, in the Qianmen (前門) district delineated by the city gate south of the Forbidden City, a hectic market for old clothing, furs, and embroideries with shops and stands was frequented by professional buyers and foreign tourists alike.[17] A 1939 journal photograph of Mrs H. J. Moysey's Studio in Shanghai shows a store display packed with Qing imperial dragon robes and Han women's ceremonial and casual ensembles alongside piles of detached "horse-face" panels removed from skirts.[18] Vendors also peddled old garments to foreign customers. The 1912 painting *Les Tentateurs—marchands de curios à l'Hôtel des Wagons-Lits de Pékin* (The seducers—Merchants of curios in the Hotel des Wagons-Lits in Beijing) by French illustrator Louis Rémy Sabattier (1863–1935), who sojourned in China in that year, captures a scene of Chinese peddlers attempting

14 On this aspect, see also the chapter by Monica Klasing Chen in the present volume, especially pages 60–66.

15 Verity Wilson, "Studio and Soirée: Chinese Textiles in Europe and America, 1850 to the Present," in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds., Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, 229–242 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 230–233.

16 Rachel Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes: The Secondhand Clothes Dealer and the Western Art Collector in Early Twentieth-Century China," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 26, no. 2 (2019): 164–187.

17 Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes," 174.

18 See Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes," 172, fig. 3.

to sell late-Qing robes, porcelains, and small bronze objects to an elegant crowd of Western travelers in the lobby of the famed hotel (Fig. 4). Some ladies enthusiastically try on the long gowns on the spot. The brilliantly colored and elaborately trimmed Chinese gowns in ample cut stand in sharp contrast to the narrowly silhouetted, pale-colored, and soft-textured Western dress of the early 1910s. For these voyagers and sojourners, used Chinese clothes enabled a haptic, embodied contact with China.

Figure 4: Louis Rémy Sabattier (1863–1935), *Les Tentateurs—marchands de curios à l'Hôtel des Wagons-Lits de Pékin*, oil painting, 1912.

On rare occasions, Westerners could also encounter elite Chinese women who travelled abroad and closely observe their outfits. In the 1904 report "Mrs Wong and Her Beautiful Clothes" in the journal *Good Housekeeping*, two photographs show the wife of Wong Kai Kah 黃開甲 (1860–1906), the Vice-Commissioner appointed by the Qing court for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (a.k.a St. Louis World's Fair), in her stylish jacket-and-skirt outfit, with one picture also showing her open wardrobe in the background. The reporter portrays the polite manner and elegant dress of Mrs. Wong as embodying a more intellectually advanced Chinese culture with its long history superior to the "trifle foolish" American one. She writes,

> Mrs Wong's gowns are always made of silk and they are all cut after about the same patterns. They are severely plain in outline and the richness of the silk is enhanced by the embroidery upon it, while, at the same time, the material forms a lustrous background that shows off to the very best advantage the flowers, vines and butterflies executed in marvelously skillful needle-

> work. The skirts are made with a view to comfort—light in weight, neither too scant nor too full, and short enough to clear the ground and show the feet.[19]

Many Europeans and Americans who admired such exquisite Chinese dresses with fine embroideries could also purchase them in department and trade stores specializing in East Asian imports without travelling to China. The influential New York-based companies A. A. Vantine and Yamanaka, for instance, primarily targeted at middle-class female customers with their rich selections of Japanese and Chinese textiles and crafts.[20] In the 1930s, the Chicago department store Marshall Field organized themed exhibitions such as "Pageant of Pekin" to promote the sales of old Chinese textiles and costumes.[21] The London department store Liberty, which catered to elite, bourgeois, and bohemian customers self-conscious about their artistic taste, sold Chinese dresses in the embroidery department, presenting them as art textiles with refined craftsmanship.[22] The wide availability and affordability of Chinese garments abroad is testified by the collection of William C. Paul, the collector mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, an insurance company clerk of modest income, who bequeathed over a thousand Chinese dresses and accessories to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1929, including a number of exceptional Qing imperial pieces and finely made nineteenth-century skirts. He never travelled to China and acquired the entire collection in the United States over a time span of twenty-two years.[23] In selling Chinese dresses and textiles, stores like Marshall Field and Liberty often evoked the Qing imperial court as part of their advertisements and product descriptions, despite the forced nature of this strategy due to many pieces' tenuous links to the court, thus promoting a romanticized view of mystery and luxury that appealed to the fantasy of the customers.[24] Even long after the fall of the Qing dynasty and when China had emerged as a modern nation state, sales discourses still harked back to the imperial past without registering China's modernity.[25]

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19 Florence Peltier, "Mrs Wong and Her Beautiful Clothes," *Good Housekeeping* (February 1904):161–164.

20 See Yumiko Yamamori, "Japanese Arts in America, 1895–1920, and the A. A. Vantine and Yamanaka Companies," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 15, no. 2 (2008): 96–126.

21 Christa Mayer Thurman, "Introduction," in *Clothed to Rule the Universe*, special issue of *Museum Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 10–11.

22 Sarah Cheang, "Dragons in the Drawing Room: Chinese Embroideries in British Homes," *Textile History* 39, no. 2 (2008): 238.

23 Alan Priest, "The William Christian Paul Bequest of Chinese Textiles," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 25, no. 7 (1930): 162.

24 Cheang, "Dragons in the Drawing Room," 237.

25 Sarah Cheang, "Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store," *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 1 (2007): 12; Cheang, "Fashion, chinoiserie, and the Transnational: Material Translations between China, Japan and Britain," in *Beyond Chinoiserie: Artistic Exchange between China and the West during the Late Qing Dynasty (1796–1911)*, eds., Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milam (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 141; Silbertein, "Other People's Clothes," 177–180.

From the late-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, it was in vogue for European and American women to wear unaltered Manchu robes and Han jackets indoors as dressing gowns and tea gowns, as opera coats and theater wraps, and as fancy dresses for costume parties and when posing for special photographic or painted portraits.[26] This rise of chinoiserie in fashion corresponded to the large wave of Japonisme in fashion that swept the West from the 1860s through the 1910s and also resulted from the wide availability of cast-off Chinese garments.[27] A 1907 article in the *New York Times* extols that "in only two styles of dress are the Chinese and Japanese costumes seen in all their glory, namely, for evening wraps and for all manner of negligée sacques and wrappers." The article reports that "for the opera and to wear over a ballgown, the longer mandarins [i. e. Manchu gowns] are most in favor but a theater wrap is generally shorter."[28] The silhouettes of Western fashion changed significantly every decade, but amply-cut Chinese robes could flexibly accommodate all variations, wrapping the hard-molded bust and large bell-shaped skirt in the 1890s, the curvilinear S-shape in the 1900s, or the column-like narrow silhouette of the early 1910s and the 1930s. The loose shape of Chinese gowns offered a radical alternative to the rigidly corseted Western fashion before the 1920s, and in reform-minded sartorial thinking of the time, this simplicity and lack of physical restriction often symbolized freedom and modernity. In other views shared in contemporary journals, such as the aforementioned report on Mrs. Wong's dress, the "true simplicity" in the cut of Chinese dress manifested the "innate refinement or genius" of "advanced civilizations." The same article exclaims that: "If, like the Chinese, we would decide upon two or three tasteful fashions and use them year after year, we would not only become skilful and accurate by long practice on certain lines, but the enormous energy we put into keeping up with the every-varying styles could be turned into other direction better worth while."[29] The flat cut of Chinese robes resonated best with the 1920s silhouette, when a dramatic turn to formal simplicity gave rise to a loose, tubular shape in two-dimensional construction. Lavishly embroidered Chinese gowns also echoed the preference of the 1920s for splendid surface decorations in the evening dress.

26 There are a few articles discussing this trend. For examples, see Verity Wilson, "Western Modes and Asian Clothes: Reflections on Borrowing Other People's Dress," *Costume* 36 (2002): 139–157; Wilson, "Studio and Soirée"; and Mei Mei Rado, "Imagery of Chinese Dress," in *China: Through the Looking Glass*, ed., Andrew Bolton (New Haven: Yale University Press; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 44–55. Research focusing on the role of skirts in this trend is lacking.

27 See Mei Mei Rado, "The Hybrid Orient: Japonisme and Nationalism of the Takashimaya Mandarin Robes," *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 5 (2015): 583–616. On the rise of chinoiserie fashion in Britain, see Sarah Cheang, "Fashion, Chinoiserie and Modernism," in *British Modernism and Chinoiserie*, ed., Anne Witchard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 133–155.

28 Anonymous, "Various Styles of Dress this Season Show the Influence of China and…," *New York Times* (December 29, 1907): X8.

29 Peltier, "Mrs Wong and Her Beautiful Clothes," 162.

In contrast to the versatile Chinese robes, Chinese skirts seemed much more difficult to wear. On the one hand, the two half panels left unstitched and the waist unrelated to the body size were at odds with the Western tradition of tailored and sewn-up skirts. On the other hand, the slightly flared Chinese skirt was not wide enough to envelop the bell-shaped skirt before the 1910s, and the stiff "horse-face" panel with rigid borders and multiple trims was unsuitable for the aesthetics of soft, flowy silhouettes in the 1910s and 1920s.

Accordingly, very few images represent Western women clad in full Chinese ensembles of jackets and skirts while many more show them dressed in Manchu or Han robes. In the 1910 painting *The New Necklace* by William McGregor Paxton (1869–1941), the sitter languishing in an interior suffused with Japanese and Chinese decorative objects pairs a pink Han jacket with a ruffled-trimmed full satin skirt in the Western style.[30] Such a combination, quite commonly seen in portraits and genre scenes of that period, represents how the taste for the East shaped a sense of genteel middle-class femininity and domesticity through fashion that delicately poised between exoticism and propriety.

The 1924 comic illustration "The Mantle of Wu" with an accompanying poem in the British satirical journal *Punch*, offers a rare depiction of a Western woman in a Chinese skirt (Fig. 5). In the imaginary story that nonetheless captures the gist of a historical trend and mentality, an ensemble of Chinese jacket and skirt, used to be worn by an old, fat, uptight, and pedantic man referred to as "Wu the Mandarin" (an impossible scenario as this was a Chinese woman's outfit), had "travelled around the teeming globe" through changing hands and ended up as the lounging wear of a young and slender British girl named "Joan" with bobbed hair, a key attribute of the "modern woman." Design and fashion historian Sarah Cheang has discussed how this image demonstrates "simultaneous convergence, confusion and the reaffirmation of difference that is produced by the strange inversion of gender, body, and modernity binaries."[31] Here the chinoiserie fashion lent itself as a salient marker of modern British femininity. Chinese women's demure attitude and fully covered limbs associated with this outfit, as seen in the photographic portrait of a Tianjin lady (see Fig. 2), had turned into the sprawling posture and exposed arms and legs of a modern British flapper. The skirt, now falling just below the knees of Joan, suggests that she must have tied its wide waist around her breasts. Indeed, in contrast to the impression of the languid stretch and svelte silhouette the image evokes, the skirt put on in this way would have been rather uncomfortable to wear, creating a bulky look underneath the jacket. Yet, despite the ultra-modern appearance and body language of the *garçonne*, the erotic undertone of the skirt in this representation seems to echo what the Chinese writer Li Yu implied in his text of 1671 discussed earlier in this chapter.

30 For the image, see Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, acc. no. 22.644.

31 Cheang, "Fashion, Chinoiserie and Modernity," 140–141.

Figure 5: "The Mantle of Wu," *Punch*, November 5. 1923.

Chinese skirts remade into Western fashion

Many extant examples show that Chinese skirts were creatively converted into Western-style fashion, a practice that spanned a time period of roughly seventy years from

the late nineteenth century well into the 1950s. It should be noted that cutting up and remaking used garments was not a custom unique to Chinese clothes recycled in the West, and that it was also in no way confined to Chinese skirts alone. In today's culture swamped by fast fashion made of cheap fabrics, we often forget how precious fine textiles were in the past and how clothing was constantly remade and reused for prolonging its lifespan. Many historical Western garments (luxury fashion and everyday wear alike) that have survived until today in museum collections and antique shops show traces of modifications, which often have considerable lapses of time in between them. Recent scholarship has paid increasing attention to processes of mending, alteration, and repurposing as an important angle to study the history and material culture of dress. Research on used and reworked textiles and clothing has greatly expanded our understanding of the economic, social, and cultural roles of such practices in disparate periods and societies, shedding light on issues such as the notion of the "new" in consumption systems, the role of sustainability in fashion, as well as global trade and locally defined cultural politics and identity issues.[32]

In Europe and the United States there were generally two major categories of remade old clothes. First, previously used personal garments or those handed down from a different generation were altered according to changing body shapes and new fashion styles. Second, clothes from a bygone era were remolded into fancy dresses for costume balls or theater costumes, a practice that was particularly popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Typical examples in museum collections world-wide include a dress of circa 1840 that had been remade from a mid-eighteenth-century *robe à l'anglaise* with a circa 1760 English silk fabric by turning its bodice back-to-front, adding a pointed waistband and a gathered neckline, and sewing the skirt panels closed. Another eye-catching example is a woman's vest made in the post-World War Two period that reuses the front panels of a late eighteenth-century man's waistcoat.[33] The changes were not limited to clothes. Fashionable dresses, household furnishings, and secular textiles could often be cross-reconfigured, which testifies to the innate fluidity and transformability of the textile medium, as it can be easily cut, pieced, and sewn into desired shapes. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries liturgical vestments were made of out-of-vogue fashion textiles donated to churches, and at the turn of the twentieth century, fragments of precious textiles

32 See, for example, Beverly Lemire, "Consumerism in Preindustrial and Early Industrial England: The Trade in Second- Hand Clothes," *Journal of British Studies* 27, no. 1 (1988): 1–24; Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal, The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), chapter 6; Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark eds., *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Ariane Fennetaux, "Sentimental Economics: Recycling Textiles in Eighteenth-century Britain," in *The Afterlife of Used Things: Recycling in the Long Eighteenth Century*, eds., Ariane Fannetaux, Amélie Junqua, and Sophie Vasset (New York: Routledge, 2015), 122–141; Jennifer Farley and Colleen Hill, *Sustainable Fashion: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), chapter 3.

33 Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology, acc. nos. P87.20.7 and 89.54.2.

taken from cast-off dresses and ecclesiastical garments were often pieced together and trimmed to serve as table covers or decorative panels. In addition to reusing old garments and textiles produced in the West, imported items were equally subject to remaking. For instance, from the 1860s to the 1880s, large cashmere shawls from Indian were often tailored as mantles for visiting or interior gowns in Europe.[34]

In light of this broader, prevalent practice that has continued for centuries in Western society, repurposing Chinese dresses in Europe and America was not an isolated phenomenon but constituted a part of this tradition of renewing old textiles into useful things of the date as illustrated by the lengthy quote from William C. Paul in 1929 at the beginning of this essay, which mentions embroidered skirts morphing into "piano scarfs or other draperies", coats turned into table runners, sleeve bands transformed to table mats as well as mandarin squares refashioned as serving trays, wall panels and handbags.[35] Similar processes of reuse took place in Britain, where, as Sarah Cheang points out, between the 1890s and the 1920s, the most common use of Chinese embroidered garments was "as a decoration for soft furnishings, involving the physical and conceptual dismemberment."[36] The same range of Chinese accessories and clothes were also converted into fashionable wear. The unseamed structure and modular components of the Chinese skirt made it particularly suitable for creative adaptions into different silhouettes. When unfolded, a skirt was transformed into a flat canvas, and its detachable parts offered many possibilities for recomposition. As seen in extant items, some of which I will discuss in the following, Chinese skirts have often been converted into jackets and dresses, a practice that both fashion houses and anonymous individual makers engaged in.

A short indoor jacket in the collection of Musée Galliera in Paris made around 1906 and bearing the label of the Parisian *maison* V. Babani is remade from a red pleated skirt with blue and gold embroideries and black trims (Fig. 6). The pleats in the side panels of the skirt form the front and back of the jacket to create a loose-fitting, expandable shape. Some part of the original borders become the collar band while the two straight "horse-face" panels, both featuring gold embroidery, are folded into the sleeves. The wide, square-shaped sleeves with their straight armholes would at the time be referred to as "kimono" sleeves. Vitali Babani (1858–1940), a female designer and entrepreneur born in Constantinople, founded the eponymous maison in Paris in 1892. Specializing in imported textiles and garments from China, Japan, India, and Turkey as well as those inspired by Eastern traditions and certain periods of the Western past, the house embodied the fashion zeitgeist in pursuit of exotic styles and aesthetic lifestyle. Babani appealed to a clientele primarily consisting of society ladies

34 For examples, see Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. nos. 2009.300.112 and 1985.39.3. For discussion, see Dries Debackere, "Domestic Kashmir: Forming and Performing Feminine Identities through Repurposed Kashmir Shawls in Late Nineteenth-Century French and Belgian Homes," *Dress* 51, no. 1 (2025): 1–18.

35 Paul, *Old Chinese Embroideries*, 3–4.

36 Cheang, "Dragons in the Drawing Room," 238.

and "modern" women with liberated minds and artistic interests, including the Parisian fashion icon Countess Greffulhe (1860–1952) and the American tennis champion and socialite Elenora Randolph Sears (1881–1968).[37]

The February 15, 1906 issue of *Le Figaro-Modes* publishes another jacket similarly converted from a different Chinese skirt in a lighter shade (Fig. 7). The French dancer of English origin Aimée Campton (1882–1930) models this jacket in a brightly lit interior with a book in hand, apparently lost in her thoughts. The staged setting is carefully arranged to echo the name of this type of jacket – the "liseuse chinoise" (Chinese reading jacket) – and its evocation of an artistic, cultivated modern woman, who embraces Eastern finery as an expression of her cosmopolitanism and aesthetic sophistication. Babani presented the jacket reconstructed in this manner as a "modèle" of her seasonal designs, although each piece would be one of a kind as they were made of used skirts of disparate colors and embroideries. The products thus achieved a balance between a standardized novel style and individualized expressions of exoticism that could gratify different clients.

There were many other ways to work around a skirt's structure and turn it into a garment for the upper body. For example, a cape advertised in an 1898 Yuletide (i. e. Christmas) gift catalogue from the Liberty store largely kept the central "horse-face" panels and the pleated side panels in their original position but gathered them with a turned-down collar.[38] The editorial "Simple Fashions" of the April 1096 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* introduces a "smart blouse made of Chinese skirt" with "mauve silk with narrow bias bands of black satin." The "horse-face" panel is refashioned into the thrusted monobosom shape in vogue at the time with its pleated side panels gathered into the "leg-of-mutton" shape with billowing top and narrow wrists.[39] Jackets made in the 1930s and 1940s from Chinese skirts tend to feature more intricately tailored forms to echo the contemporary style of structured jackets in angular shapes. Several examples show a consistent mode of remaking: the two straight "horse-face" panels serve as the two front flaps of a jacket with a central opening, and the panels' upper parts are cut into curved armholes. Part of the skirt's pleats are unfolded and tailored as set-in sleeves while the rest of the pleated panels, sometimes smoothed out, form the back of the jacket (Fig. 8a, b).[40]

A deconstructed skirt could also be combined with additional fabrics to make a fashionable dress. In a dress dated to the mid-1920s in the collection of Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology, the two "horse-face" panels of a pale-blue Chinese skirt move from the waist level to the shoulder line, their tops joined and scooped

37 Sophie Grossiord, "Babani ou 'le Palais des Soieries'" in Olivier Saillard et al., *La Mode retrouvée : les robes trésors de la comtesse Greffulhe* (Paris : Paris Musées Editions/ Musée Galliera, 2015), 200–201, 208.

38 This item is discussed in Sarah Cheang, "Fashion, Chinoiserie, and the Transnational," 248.

39 Anonymous author, "Simple Fashion," *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1906): 332.

40 Also see China National Silk Museum, acc. nos. 2021.58.73, 2021.58.85, and 2021.58.130. I am grateful to Sally Yu Leung and Yang Wenyan for assisting the viewing.

Figure 6: Liseuse chinoise (Chinese reading jacket), label " V. Babani," made circa 1906, France; original skirt, China, late nineteenth century, silk and metal-thread embroidery. Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode et de la Ville de Paris, 1964.20.119.

as a bateau neckline (Fig. 9). The remaining part of the skirt is sewn closed and attached to a strapped silk-satin bodice to form a slip dress, and a slit with clasp closure about twenty centimetre in length is opened along the seam of an original black border to allow for easy putting-on. The "horse-face" panels are not stitched down and would gently tap the body when walking or dancing. Soft, ethereal chiffon added to the left and right sides of the dress drapes around the upper arms, and such playful-

Figure 7: Illustration of the Babani model "Liseuse chinoise," *Le Figaro-Modes*, Feb. 15, 1906, 18.

ness is reinforced by dangling tassels at the tips of the chiffon panels. This clever construction creates a clean and straight silhouette while retaining the rich decorations of the original skirt. Forging an interplay of the textiles' contrasting textures and opacity, it lends the dress a sense of gaiety and movement. All these aspects encapsulated the spirit of fashion in the jazz age as they transformed a relatively cumbersome, hard-to-wear Chinese skirt into a stylish item commanding the trend. Here, the exotic signifier of China was not only harmonized with modernist expression but also prominently accentuated it.

A similarly constructed piece could also be worn as a tunic. An advertisement of the New York department store Bonwit Teller & Co. published in the May 1925 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* showcases an outfit with the exotic Chinese-sounding name "Pung."

Figure 8: Women's Jacket, made 1930s, United States, 1930 – 1935; original skirt: China, late nineteenth century, silk and silk appliqué. Royal Ontario Museum, acc. no. 2016.94.1.

(Fig. 10). It was priced 95 dollars, which equals to approximately $1,752 in February 2025.[41] According to the description, this ensemble, "designed and executed to special order" in the store's studio, combines a "pajama with slip-over coat of an entire Man-

41 The conversion is conducted on https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

Figure 9: Evening dress, made circa 1927, United States; original skirt, China, late 19th century; silk satin and chiffon. Gift of Alice B. McReynolds. Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology, 87.136.1.

darin skirt marvelously hand embroidered" and a pair of "satin tourers in a vivid hue to harmonize."[42] The model's straight, bobbed haircut in the style of the iconic Hollywood "it" girl Louise Brooks (1906–1985) and her bold pyjama pants – itself a symbol

42 *Harper's Bazaar* (May 1925), 5.

of "liberated" women – reinforced the message that in the 1920s Chinese style could serve as a saliant marker of the "new women," insinuating a sense of independence, sexual freedom, and rebellion.

Figure 10: Advertisement of Bonwit Teller & Co., *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1925, 5.

A dress dated to circa 1950 bearing the label of Mainbocher and belonging to Mrs. Winston Guest (1920–2003) offers a rare identifiable case of the collaboration between a

wearer and a couturier in remaking Chinese skirts. Mainbocher was the first American designer to open a couture house in Paris in 1929. His maison was reestablished in New York in 1940. Its society clientele included the New York-based socialite and fashion icon Mrs. Winston Guest, known by her acronym C. Z. In a 1990 interview in *Harper's Bazaar*, C. Z. recalled how she entrusted Mainbocher to make dresses for her using the fabrics her husband brought back from China, including "some peony pink silk."[43] A portrait of her by the fashion photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895–1989) published in the January 1950 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* shows her in "a dress made for her by Mainbocher from old Chinese panels which her husband brought from the East" (Fig. 11). The caption also praises her "as exquisite as a Chinese figurine."[44] The dress, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, features a silhouette of the post-war "New Look" period with a fitted bodice, a cinched waist, and a full skirt.[45] The simply cut bodice and skirt in pink and greyish blue Chinese silk damasks, respectively, serve as a background against which the central embellishments draw attention – a "horse-face" panel framed by narrower embroidered strips on the top and another full "horse-face" panel with wide blue borders on the bottom. These vivid decorations enliven the otherwise unassuming dress. As her portrait implies, although C. Z. did not travel to China, the indirect souvenir of the East as materialized in these Chinese panels offered her a temporary displacement through the embodied journey of dressing.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that only Caucasian women adopted remodeled Chinese garments. The reappropriation of used Chinese clothes was not limited to a certain racial or cultural identity. The outfits of renown Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (1905–1961) provide a notable case. In a 1928 photograph, she models a straight-cut chemise dress consisting of a back panel made of a "horse-face" panel and a front side featuring diagonal stripes of Chinese textiles with butterfly patterns (Fig. 12). In another mid-1930s studio portrait of her, she poses in a short-sleeved blouse remade from a red Chinese skirt, which in its unaltered state would look quite similar to the one converted into the *liseuse* at the Musée Galliera (Fig. 13, see also Fig. 6). In Wong's blouse, the embroidered parts of the pleated panels are flattened and then gathered into ballon-shaped sleeves fashionable during the 1930s. One "horse-face" panel forms the front of the bodice. Its top part above the embroidery is slit as the neck opening and fixed with Chinese-style fabric buttons.

43 Hamish Bowles, "C. Z. Guest," *Harper's Bazaar* (September 1990): 225.

44 *Harper's Bazaar* (January 1950), 74.

45 Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 1973.143.1a, b. For another dress also of C. Z and with the Mainbocher label, see Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 1973.143.2a, b. I am grateful to Shelly Tarter for assisting the viewing. For a discussion of these two dresses, see Ma Yuru 馬玉儒, Bian Xiangyang 卞向陽, and Zheng Yuting 鄭宇婷, "Jieji yu xingbie: 20 shiji Zhongguo mamian qun de xifang zaiyujinghua sheji – yi Meiguo Daduhui bowuguan de liangjian nüqun weili" 階級與性別：20世紀中國馬面裙的西方再語境化設計—以美國大都會藝術博物館的兩件女裙為例 (Class and gender: The western recontextualized design of Chinese panel skirts in the 20th century taking two women's skirts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the US as an example), *Yishu sheji yanjiu* 藝術設計研究no. 1 (2024): 45–53.

Figure 11: Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895 – 1989), *Portrait of Mrs. Winston Guest* (1920 – 2003), *Harper's Bazaar*, January 1950, 74.

During her first and only trip to China in 1936, Wong discovered the fashionable Chinese style then widespread in China – the one-piece fitted dress known as the qipao – which she would also showcase later in her portraits and in the film *Hollywood Party* (1937). Yet, the qipaos she presented did not display modern patterns popular among stylish ladies in China at that time, but instead featured embroideries of traditional

motifs such as dragons that evoked China's imperial past. They conveyed a vision of China as a mélange of signifiers to the new and the old reappropriated by a woman whose projected identities to Western audiences were deeply unstable, ambiguously oscillating between the Chinese and the American. Similarly, Wong's Chinese-skirt-turned-Western fashion featured contemporary sartorial shapes that reframed an image of China, which was equally remote and "inauthentic" to her as it was to the white women of the time.

Figure 12: Unknown photographer, *Photograph of Anna May Wong* (1905 – 1961), 1928.

Figure 13: Unknown photographer, Photograph of Anna May Wong (1905 – 1961), 1930s.

Conclusion

Some scholars may see collectors' and wearers' re-creations and reimagination of Chinese skirts (and Chinese clothes in general) in the West "deflect[ing] its original context" and "eras[ing]" "the Chinese woman who might once have been the owner of the

skirt."[46] Yet, if we adopt a different perspective that does not privilege the supposed "origin" as the preferable factor in the interpretation of the garments' values and meanings, we can view their transformations as activating a new fashion cycle in a different cultural context, which infused new lives and meanings into cast-off items from another culture. By unfolding and refolding Chinese skirts in this transcultural process, a garment in its wholistic state is shattered into fragments. When such fragments were carefully selected, shuffled around, and recombined, their indications multiplied, signifying a filtered vision of the garments' original culture while simultaneously drawing connections to the stylistic and cultural vocabularies of their new context.

In addition to providing a malleable material for dismantling and reconstruction, Chinese skirts also lent inspiration to European and American fashion designs on the conceptual level in terms of structural and decorative aspects. The article "An Oriental Fillip to Occidental Modes" in the February 15, 1913 issue of *Vogue*, for instance, presents a suit with a skirt that is fashioned as one-piece fabric wrapped around the body and trimmed with a heavy cord and tassels. The author claims that it draws inspiration from "the perfectly straight, seamless" Chinese skirt. [47] Another example, a 1923 dress by French couturier Jean Patou (1887–1936), extracts the structural elements of a deconstructed Chinese skirt and remaps them as the decorative scheme of a straight-cut chemise dress (Fig. 14a, b): a large rectangular frame with pronounced ornamental borders placed in the central front alludes to the inverted "horse-face" panel of the Chinese skirt, while the vertical decorative strips on the back and the sides resemble the embroidered pleats of Chinese skirts. The embroidered floral sprigs are, however, executed in the Mughal style, which, like many other Asian-inspired couture creations of the period, synthesized elements from diffused cultural sources. Here, the very process of the deconstruction and recomposition of the Chinese skirt becomes a visual language in its own right, guiding the design of an entirely new piece, whose conceptual references to a fragmented Chinese skirt highlight the essential nature of fashion as in a constant state of transformation across time and cultures.

46 Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes,"175; and Sarah Cheang, "Fashion, Chinoiserie, and the Transnational," 248.

47 Anonymous author, "An Oriental Fillip to Occidental Modes," *Vogue* (New York) (February 15, 1913), 45.

Figure 14: Evening dress "Musardise Robe," label Jean Paton, 1923, France, silk satin, silk tulle, glass beads. Photographs courtesy of Francesca Galloway, London. Christine Ramphal ed. *An Eye for Couture: A Collector's Exploration of 20th Century Fashion* (Prestel Publishing, 2024), cat. 24.

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II Contemporary Positions

Marcela Godoy

Re-Make

An Artist's and Pedagogue's Perspective from Shanghai

Abstract: Over the last few years, art that is critical and socially engaged has played a significant role in exposing how the globalized economic system has contributed to social inequality, labor exploitation, and the production of over a billion tons of waste each year. Incorporating this approach into art and new media art education is essential for bringing attention to these social and environmental issues, raising awareness, and motivating collective action for changes that can lead us to a more sustainable future. However, while recycling and repurposing are often presented as solutions to environmental problems, it is evident that simply teaching these skills is not enough. This chapter explores the act of re-making as an artistic medium and a method for addressing environmental challenges through educational experiences, particularly in the context of Shanghai and global education. The development of a course called "Re-Made in China" serves as a case study to illustrate how critical-making and community-engaged learning enable students to develop social responsibility and citizenship skills. Moreover, it considers how service-learning is essential in driving students to complete projects that they consider meaningful and, by doing so, adds value and quality to their learning experience.

Keywords: recycling, critical pedagogy, art education, community engagement, service-learning

Before moving to China in 2015, I lived in New York for five years. While living in the United States, I started an art project in which I recycled electronic waste, specifically cables, turning them into pieces of jewelry. I initially worked with trash because of my restricted budget, but I quickly realized that what I was doing could potentially raise awareness of important environmental concerns among beholders and buyers of my works. As an artist and educator, I decided that rather than develop this project as a profitable product, it would be better to find ways to share the ideas and skills around my practice. Later, as an Artist in Residence at the Lower East Side Ecology Center, I designed my second series of upcycling works based on knots. Knotting techniques, usually used with ropes, can be replicated using wires and cables since the materials share similar characteristics. During that time and the following years, I offered free workshops, including one at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and published open-source *Do-It-Yourself* tutorials on platforms, like Autodesk Instructables[1] and my

1 Marcela Godoy, "Elle, e-Waste Jewelry." Instructables, October 15, 2017. https://www.instructables.com/elle-e-Waste-Jewelry/.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-006

own website,[2] for people to replicate and create their own version of my designs. Through this project, I wanted to encourage people everywhere to experiment. They could use their own discarded cables to create beautiful and environmentally conscious jewelry.

After moving to China in 2015, I noticed that electronic waste had a different value here and was challenging to find. In China, recycling has constituted an integral part of the culture, as Joshua Goldstein's research demonstrates. Using Beijing as a case study, he illustrates how recycling and reusing practices have evolved over the last century, shifting across Republican, Socialist, and Postsocialist eras, reflecting the historical context and China's social and economic changes.[3] As consumerism increased the amount of waste produced, daily life wastes became less and less valuable. However, among the most common types of waste, metals have continued being one of the most profitable to recycle. Therefore, metals inside electronic waste are considered a valuable material for trash collectors. This made me shift my research focus towards one of the most commonly discarded materials in recent years: plastic.[4] Two years before that, Dave Hakkens released his master's thesis project, *Precious Plastic*, as a student at the Design Academy in Eindhoven.[5] The project consisted of a series of machines that anyone could build and use to recycle plastic on a small scale. After sharing the machine blueprints online as an open source[6] only two people replicated them, one from Germany and another one from Spain. Hakkens then worked with a machine builder and a mechatronic engineer to improve the machines and created video tutorials to make sure people could understand how to build them. In 2016, when he published improved drawings and instructions online, I discovered his project and started building a shredder with a group of people at 新车间 (*Xinchejian*), the first hackerspace in China. This iconic space founded in 2010 was inspired by the maker movement booming in the West. It was the first of many maker spaces supported by the Chinese government to discourage product copying and promote invention and innovation. For a long time, this was the place in Shanghai where Chinese and foreign makers met to collaborate and build their ideas. The group of people interested in recycling plastic at the time consisted of six members, including artists like myself but also designers and engineers from Chile, France, Spain, and China. We concentrated our efforts on building the shredder and conducting experiments recycling discard-

2 Marcela Godoy, "Elle, e-Waste Jewelry." elle, eWaste Jewelry. Accessed October 2, 2024. https://elle.godoymarcela.com/.

3 Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua Lewis Goldstein, eds. *Everyday Modernity in China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 260.

4 World Bank. "Distribution of municipal solid waste generated worldwide in 2016, by material type." Chart. September 20, 2018. https://www.statista.com/statistics/916666/global-generation-of-municipal-solid-waste-share-by-material/.

5 Dave Hakkens, "Precious Plastic History." Accessed October 2, 2024. https://www.preciousplastic.com/about/history.

6 Dave Hakkens, "Precious Plastic Basic Machines." Accessed October 2, 2024. https://www.preciousplastic.com/solutions/machines/basic.

ed plastic. After getting some experience, we were eager to share and teach other people what we learned and we named the group *Precious Plastic Shanghai*. By 2017, the group began offering educational services to companies and other organizations. Meanwhile, I focused on designing a new course to teach at the New York University (NYU) campus in Shanghai called "*Re-Made in China*," which I offered once a year from 2018 to 2021.

The New York University Shanghai was established in China in 2013 and currently enrolls around 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Half of the students are local, the rest from the United States and about seventy other countries. The school offers nineteen majors in arts and sciences, business and finance, engineering, data, and computer science, all taught in English. The course *Re-Made in China* was designed to be offered by the Interactive Media Arts program, an undergraduate major in the Arts and Sciences department. However, the course had no prerequisites, and students from any major could enroll due to the institution's focus on liberal arts education. Furthermore, since NYU provides opportunities for students to study abroad at various global locations, this enriched the course enrollment with students from Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, and NY campuses.

In addition to my experiments as informed by Hakkens' instructions and my own practice, China-specific incentives further informed the development of my course outline. Over the past few decades, China has established itself as the world's leading manufacturer,[7] and it is crucial to educate art students (as well as other members of society) about the consequences of consumerism and the problem of waste. Assuming a critical view on this issue, Chinese artists have been bringing this topic to the public eye through their artwork in order to raise social awareness, stimulate public discussion, and foster collective actions, as noted by scholar Meiqin Wang.[8] For the Chinese photographer and video artist Wang Jiuliang, for example, more important than seeking solutions such as implementing garbage recycling, is to become aware of the source of waste generation and prevent the problems from being created.[9] As such, it is crucial for educational institutions to instill critical-thinking and conscientious decision-making in future generations. In addition, a body of pedagogical literature on strategies of reuse in higher education has been developed. For example, the scholar Kyungeun Sung has provided an extensive literature review focused on the exploration of upcycling for and in higher education, emphasizing its relevance to contributing to sustainable development and educational practices on sustainability. Sung

7 *Quarterly Report, Q1 2024 – world manufacturing production*. Accessed December 14, 2024. https://stat.unido.org/sites/default/files/file/publications/qiip/World_Manufacturing_Production_2024_Q1.pdf.

8 Meiqin Wang, ed. *Socially Engaged Public Art in East Asia. Space, Place, and Community in Action*, Delaware: Vernon Press 2022, 7.

9 Meiqin Wang, "The Socially Engaged Practices of Artists in Contemporary China." *Journal of visual art practice* 16, 1 (2017): 15–38, 25.

notes the limited attention given to the ways in which universities have integrated upcycling into their teaching and learning methods.[10]

Tailor-made for the New York University students at the Shanghai campus, in the course *Re-Made in China*, students learn on a practical level how to create new materials from discarded ones through a combination of traditional and new fabrication technologies. They can use this material to design artifacts using molding, extruding, or woodworking techniques. By learning how to re-make, students become independent from pre-determined capitalist structures, assuming active roles in art-making rather than passive consumers by actively creating reinterpretations of (parts of) prefabricated items rather than passively using or merely reproducing them. Yet, recycling waste or repurposing it into something new is merely a symbolic act rather than an actual solution. As Finn Arne Jørgensen points out, recycling "is not the panacea that will solve all environmental problems in the world."[11] To educate environmentally aware and conscious artists it is therefore not sufficient to teach students the activity of re-making alone as a critical-making approach is necessary on top. According to Matt Ratto, critical-making is a form of goal-oriented material work, distinct from the intellectually and linguistically grounded approach of critical-thinking. When implementing a critical-making approach, prototypes are viewed as a means to a goal and are valuable since they were created collaboratively as the result of discussion and reflection.[12] In this way, the activity of re-making can be understood as *Do-It-Yourself* activism which provides students with the opportunity to participate in new civic engagement modes. Furthermore, through community-engaged education and service-learning that were implemented in the course layout, students develop essential approaches to recognize, embody, articulate and share values to become responsible artists and designers in the future.

In this chapter, I will explore the concept of re-making, which involves creating new materials and artifacts from discarded ones. Specifically, I will examine the concept of re-making in higher education for a culturally diverse student body in China, focusing on the role of the course *Re-Made in China* I taught at New York University Shanghai from 2018 To 2021 in teaching students how to re-make while raising awareness of environmental concerns and promoting civic engagement. In order to do that, I will offer an historical perspective to understand the cultural context of recycling in China, a practice that has always been an integral part of the culture and throughout history has been influenced by various political contexts and economic conditions. To highlight the importance of including critical pedagogy in art and design education, I will provide context on how Chinese artists have used art as a tool for social criticism, community building, and personal growth, playing a significant role in raising social

10 Kyungeun Sung, "Upcycling for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Literature Review." In *Universities as Living Labs for Sustainable Development*, 371–382 (Cham: Springer, 2020), 372.

11 Finn Arne Jørgensen, *Recycling*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, 161.

12 Matt Ratto, "Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life." *The Information Society* 27, 4 (2011): 252–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2011.583819.

awareness about consumerism and waste. As an artist and educator, I will also discuss how these insights influenced the creation of the course *Re-Made in China* and other initiatives to inspire others to engage in sustainable practices beyond the school environment. Furthermore, I will share valuable lessons learned from offering the course multiple times, including adjustments to the syllabus and the incorporation of service-learning and community engagement. Finally, I will explain why recycling waste or repurposing it into something new turned out not to be the only focus of the course and the necessity of pairing community-engaged education and service-learning with a critical-making approach.

Re-making in China's context

Similar to the recycling system in Beijing during the period between 1978 and 2011 described by Joshua Lewis Goldstein, currently in Shanghai, there are thousands of collectors who work in the informal waste system, many of whom are migrant workers.[13] It is easy to spot several types of collectors on the streets. The ones working full-time at designated trash and recycling stations sort the trash and sell the recyclables to recycling facilities. Some individuals, such as residents or people collecting recyclables from public trash bins, will likely sell them to full-time collectors. Additionally, itinerant collectors go around the city and residential compounds, collecting waste and announcing over speakers that they are buying old appliances or electronics. Lastly, it is common to spot collectors on the streets loading or carrying large piles of recyclables like styrofoam, plastic bottles, or cardboard in their tricycles. What I see in Shanghai differs from what I experienced in New York between 2010 and 2015. In New York, trash was a common sight, as people and businesses often left it on the streets for the city's waste management system to handle. However, the presence of trash pickers was minimal compared to China. For reference, in 2023 New York is estimated to have around 8,000 waste pickers,[14] while in the 2010s, Beijing had an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 informal waste pickers and recyclers.[15]

China has a long-standing tradition of reusing, reselling, and recycling items instead of throwing them away. During the Republican era, recycling was characterized by a "stewardship of objects," where reused goods retained their original forms and were integrated into local economies. Instead of transforming objects into raw materials, the focus was on reusing, repairing, and repurposing goods. Waste trading net-

13 Joshua Lewis Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday: One Hundred Years of Recycling in Beijing," in *Everyday Modernity in China*, eds., Madeleine Yue Dong and Joshua Lewis Goldstein (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 260–302.

14 Wapner, Jessica. "Who owns our trash-and why does it matter?," May 10, 2023. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/premium/article/who-owns-our-trash-why-does-it-matter-waste-pickers.

15 Guo Chen, Jia Feng, and Liwen Chen, "Dharavi in Beijing? A Hidden Geography of Waste and Migrant Exclusion," *The Professional Geographer* 75, 1 (2022): 187–205. doi:10.1080/00330124.2022.2112965.

works and patterns of reuse were crucial for urban residents, showcasing the interconnectedness of social and economic life. Goldstein explains that, in this era, the value of waste depended on people and context: what one person considers trash, another might consider treasure.[16] Furthermore, recycling sustained communities and attracted many rural migrants to big cities like Beijing, eager to acquire secondhand goods from the more prosperous urban residents.[17] After the Communist government took over in 1949 reusing became highly promoted to economize and increase production. Furthermore, these practices have not always been linked to environmental concerns. In fact, the Chinese term (*huíshōu* 回收) that scholars nowadays translate as "recycling" literally means "take back" which has no environmental implications. The idea of making the most out of materials has always been associated with "knowing how to live" (*huì guòrìzi* 会过日子).[18] In her book *Mao's War against Nature*, Judith Shapiro discusses how Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign, despite promoting reusing and repairing, ultimately damaged the environment and caused widespread starvation.[19] Mao incorporated ideas of waste elimination and practicing thrift from socialist economies that conceived waste as a "gift from nature".[20] Thus, during his regime he promoted the famous slogan "turn trash into treasure" (*biàn fèi wéi bǎo* 变废为宝) among the people to support building the socialist nation.[21] In contrast with the Republican era, during this time the collectivization of recycling efforts led to a more structured but less personal system, reshaping recycling into a component of industrial production rather than a community-driven practice.

Later, between the 1980s and 1990s, the transition to a market economy saw a surge in disposable culture, with recycling becoming a profitable venture for rural migrants who filled the gaps left by state-run systems. Migrant collectors established a robust informal recycling network, generating significant economic benefits while operating outside formal regulations. This informal waste management system has helped to efficiently divert a large amount of waste from landfills.[22] However, in the past decades, China's cities have undergone unprecedented economic and population growth, resulting in higher levels of consumption and waste production. In line with this, the recycling business became very lucrative; what is more, it was no longer limited to domestic waste. For instance, in the 1990s China's "queen of trash" Zhang Yin started importing waste paper from the US and Europe into China. She recycled

16 Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday," 265.

17 Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday," 262.

18 Adam Liebman, "Reconfiguring Chinese Natures: Frugality and Waste Reutilization in Mao Era Urban China." *Critical Asian studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 537–557, 542

19 Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

20 Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 22.

21 Adam Liebman, "Reconfiguring Chinese Natures: Frugality and Waste Reutilization in Mao Era Urban China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 537–557, 550

22 Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday," 281.

it into corrugated cardboard, which was then used for packing "Made in China" products that were mostly shipped back to Western consumers. With this incredible venture, in 2006, her company became the largest paper recycling company in the world, making Zhang the wealthiest woman in China.[23] She was named "Queen of Trash" for her success in turning waste into wealth. Although recycling paper seems to fit seamlessly into the circular economy model, other waste, like plastic, does not follow the same logic. Because plastic is made out of many different additives, recycling it is much more complex, and the reality is that only nine percent of the plastic produced globally is recycled.[24]

Figure 1: Left: "We must be frugal to make revolution" "Repair the old, reuse the waste, and tap the potential of increasing production and saving" poster, increase-production-labor-competition movement of the industrial front, 1952. Right: Illustration to an article celebrating "Throwaway Living" published in 1955 by Life Magazine stating: "The objects flying through the air in this picture would take 40 hours to clean—except that no housewife needs to bother."

A brief comparison with the United States highlights different economic and political tendencies in China and the US during the 1950s as illustrated by the two illustrations. While Mao promoted thrift and actively sought ways to support industrialization by

23 David Barboza, "China's 'queen of Trash' Finds Riches in Waste Paper – Business – International Herald Tribune." *The New York Times*, January 15, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/worldbusiness/15iht-trash.4211783.html.

24 Laura Parker and Kennedy Elliott, "Plastic Recycling Is Broken. Here's How to Fix It," June 20, 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/graphics/china-plastic-recycling-ban-solutions-science-environment.

using waste as a resource and creating recycling (take-back) businesses, the United States embraced "Throwaway Living" as a symbol of modernity (Fig. 1).[25] At this point, after the Republican era, China was dealing with a challenging economic and social situation. The new socialist government focused on solidifying its regime and reviving the economy, promoting frugality, reuse, and repair as acts of patriotism. By contrast, in the United States the development of low-cost man-made materials made creating cheap and disposable products possible following World War Two. With an economic system based on mass production and consumerism, the American economy rebounded better than anyone expected.[26] Goldstein states that unlike in the United States, where industrial production created new consumption patterns that displaced handicrafts and led to the end of the "stewardship of objects," socialist industrialization in China did not follow the same trend. The difference can be explained by the fact that the Chinese communist economy was not oriented towards consumerism, and money played a much smaller role in daily production and consumption.[27]In the following years, the amount of waste generated per person in the United States increased dramatically as a result of consumerism. To deal with this problem, the United States and other developed countries facing the same issues adopted a recycling system that involved shipping their trash to poorer countries. As a result, by 2016, China imported 56 percent of the world's solid waste for recycling.[28] According to the ecological humanities scholar Meng Yue, this approach of recycling and disposal is not actually recycling but rather a way of relocating trash "from one place to another place, from where it is visible to where it is invisible, and from those with the discursive power to the subalterns who can't speak."[29] While China saw an opportunity in buying waste such as plastics from wealthy countries to recycle it, this was only profitable in the short term as the human and environmental cost of this practice was not taken into full account. Although cheap labor made it seem profitable, after years of processing locally produced waste in addition to imported garbage, recycling became a major source of pollution and severely impacted human health.

25 Atiq Zaman and Peter Newman. "Plastics: Are They Part of the Zero-Waste Agenda or the Toxic-Waste Agenda?" *Sustainable Earth* 4, o. 1 (2021): 1–16, 5.

26 Tom Szaky, *Outsmart Waste: The Modern Idea of Garbage and How to Think Our Way out of It* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2014), 19.

27 Goldstein, "The Remains of the Everyday," 271.

28 Yue Zhang, "Solid Waste Imports Face Stricter Controls in Boost to Environment," China, August 8, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-08/08/content_30368615.htm.

29 Yue Meng, "Shengtai Weiji yu 'Renleiji' de Wenhua Jiedu: Yingxiang, Shige he Shengming Buke Chengshou Zhiwu," (Awareness of the anthropocene: Poetry, photography and the unbearable things of life)" *Qinghua Daxue Xuebao* 31, no. 3 (2016): 5–25, 13.

Why re-made in China?

In 2010, the Beijing Songzhuang Art Museum hosted a public photo and installation art exhibition called "Beijing Besieged by Waste: The Observations from Wang Jiuliang." The exhibition showcased three years of Wang's work that documented and exposed hundreds of legal and illegal landfills around the Chinese capital. The artwork also highlighted the struggles of individuals with fewer opportunities who are trying to make a living by recycling waste. While it remains speculative that the government specifically responded to Wang's work, the same year, the municipal government announced an investment of 10 billion RMB in the construction of forty waste-treatment facilities, including four building waste recycling plants.[30]

In 2016, Plastic China, Wang's second documentary about waste, was released. The film shed light on the issue of waste and how the global economic system allowed wealthy nations to transfer the burden of their pollution to China. The documentary brought to the fore issues such as labor exploitation, poor living conditions, and limited access to healthcare and education. It revealed that the problem of Chinese waste imports went beyond environmental pollution, corresponding with the Hong Kong-based scholar Haoming Gong's argument that waste is an environmental, social, and cultural issue product of modern urbanization, commercialization, and consumerism.[31] Despite the fact that the documentary faced censorship and could not be shown in public in China anymore, in 2017, the Chinese government announced a ban on the import of most domestic recyclables that were previously coming from a significant number of countries. The government made this decision to enforce environmental laws to improve the environment as well as the quality of life in China.

In an interview Wang explained that the title of his documentary has a dual meaning. While it does refer to plastic waste, on a deeper level, the word "plastic" also refers to the fragility beneath a superficial layer of prosperity. He states: "Years of rapid growth have made China appear prosperous, but pollution is having a huge impact on health. If your life is at risk, what use is earning money? Smog, water pollution, soil pollution … while China's growth appears incredible, it is actually cheap and fragile."[32] Through his films, Wang has sparked a public discussion about the waste problem, as many other Chinese artists have done to raise awareness of injustices and encourage people to become more conscious of environmental and social issues.

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30 Shih-Yang Kao and George C. S. Lin. "The political economy of debris dumping in Post-Mao Beijing," *Modern China* 44, no. 3 (2017): 285–312, 303. https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700417745013.

31 Haomin Gong, "Place, Animals, and Human Beings: The Case of Wang Jiuliang's Beijing Besieged by Waste," in *Chinese Environmental Humanities. Practices of Environing at the Margins*, ed., Chia-ju Chang (Cham: Springer, 2019), 167–188, 171.

32 Liu Qin, "Film: How China became the world's rubbish dump." *China Dialogue*, May 14, 2020, https://chinadialogue.net/en/pollution/6947-film-how-china-became-the-world-s-rubbish-dump/.

As an educator in the Interactive Media Arts (IMA) program at the first Sino-US research university New York University Shanghai these events and the emergence of socially aware and ecocritical art in China significantly influenced my decision to offer a course on sustainability. The IMA program is an undergraduate program that is inspired by the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) in New York, where I received my master's degree. The ITP program is a pioneer in pushing the boundaries of interactive technology, art, and design. It was founded in 1979 and led by Red Burns, an academic who gained recognition for advocating for creative uses of communication technologies. Red was interested in using technology to connect people. She promoted learning through collaboration rather than competition and encouraged students to look for the question, not the solution. "Why are you trying to do this?" "Why is this important? This isn't just making something that's technology," she used to tell students in her classes.[33] Before attending ITP, I pursued a degree in architecture and was introduced to the work of Buckminster Fuller, whose visionary combination of art and science influenced my capstone project. His belief that technology should enhance human experience rather than replace it and that people should learn through experiences,[34] has deeply resonated with artists working with technology, especially with many media pioneers, most likely including Burns. The IMA program follows Burns' interdisciplinary approach engaging students critically and creatively with art and new technologies. Being a graduate student, I was fortunate enough to have Red Burns as one of my professors. Later, I had the opportunity to play a significant role in building the IMA program and shaping its curriculum by creating courses that encourage critical and artistic exploration.

In 2018, I introduced *Re-Made in China* – a seven-week course aimed at educating students on waste and analyzing China's status as the world's largest importer of waste.[35] The course garnered significant interest from both students and faculty, leading me to expand it to a fourteen-week course which I offered the following three years. The expansion of the course allowed for more in-depth discussions, research, and experimentation with materials. In every version I offered, students started learning and discussing sustainability from the definition of sustainable development published in 1987 by the United Nations, also known as Brundtland Report, which states that sustainability implies "meeting the needs of the present without compromising

33 Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, "Red Burns's plan to serve humanity through technology," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 25, 2013, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/news/the-lives-they-lived/2013/12/21/red-burns/.

34 Allegra Fuller Snyder and Victoria Vesna. "Education Automation on Spaceship Earth: Buckminster Fuller's Vision. More Relevant than Ever," *Leonardo* 31, no. 4 (1998): 289–292, 291.

35 Shen Qu, Yuhua Guo, Zijie Ma, Weiqiang Chen, Jianguo Liu, Gang Liu, Yutao Wang, and Min Xu. "Implications of China's Foreign Waste Ban on the Global Circular Economy," *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 144 (May 2019): 252–255, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2019.01.004.

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[36] This report, signed by commissioners from twenty-one diverse countries, established sustainable development as a critical component of international development due to the inequalities, especially in developing countries, which were exacerbating poverty, depleting natural resources, and contributing to global warming. The definition of sustainable development in the report considers three overlapping elements: Environment, Equity, and Economy. We thus collaborated with local communities and invited guest speakers so that our students could comprehend this broad concept in the context of China. Guest speakers included sustainability experts with various experiences and viewpoints. The Department of Environmental Studies at the university connected me with experts from organizations such as Collective Responsibility and Green Initiatives. I also contacted individuals I met through colleagues who had learned about my research when the university advertised the course on their website. Other guest speakers included Precious Plastic Shanghai, designers, and entrepreneurs working in the field of sustainability. In addition, I aimed to provide my students with insights from individuals involved in street garbage collection, so I invited a local trash collector every semester to talk about his job revealing first-hand information on what is being discarded or recycled in Shanghai. To ensure a rich and varied learning experience, for every version of the course, I carefully selected a diverse range of speakers, encouraging students to embrace different viewpoints with an open mind. Students learned about waste and recycling throughout the semester while discussing how capitalism, economic progress, and technological advancements impact equity and justice in contemporary Shanghai. The incentive of the course was that, in addition to technical skills and creative development, students would acquire a critical and broad understanding of sustainability, a stronger attachment to possibilities of civic engagement, and a deeper understanding of aspects of social responsibility.

In the first two versions of the course, students were tasked with researching local communities outside the school to better understand their waste management practices and explore innovative ways to repurpose discarded materials or products around us into something new and precious. During the first weeks, they created local maps to track trash routes in their dorms and on campus, interviewed cleaning staff, and even cleaned a nearby beach to gain a better understanding of the waste cycle in their immediate environment. After experimenting with different techniques to recycle plastic, including learning from a workshop led by Precious Plastic Shanghai, they proposed sustainable design ideas with the potential of being shared online and replicated by other people. The outcomes were very diverse, ranging from a plastic bag-to-thread spinning machine to fashion, industrial design, and art projects, utilizing techniques such as weaving, molding, and pressing. However, I noticed a crucial element was missing — real-world experience. Without this, projects lacked a genuine

36 G. H. Brundtland, "Our common Future—Call for action," *Environmental Conservation* 14, no. 4 (1987): 291–294, 292. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0376892900016805.

understanding of people's needs. Therefore, the next time I offered the course, I redesigned it in collaboration with the Office for Community Engaged Learning as a service-learning program. The new version that I offered in 2020 and 2021 enabled students to work consistently throughout the semester with a community to create projects that would directly benefit them.

Community engaging education

Since I moved to Shanghai, I was curious about why trash in China was perceived as more valuable than in other countries. So, before teaching *Re-Made in China* for the first time I approached Yan and Liu, a couple who were collecting garbage in my residential compound and invited them to speak to my class. They knew me as I used to give them my sorted household and work garbage. Yan was pleased to accept my invitation, even though I didn't speak Chinese, and we had to use a translator on my phone to communicate. In the following years, he continued to participate as a guest speaker every semester I offered my course. His talks helped us understand the recycling business and waste management in Shanghai from 2018 to 2021. Most importantly, he helped us to understand what really happens with our trash after we leave it in the garbage bins.

During these talks, we learned that Yan and Liu are migrant workers originally from Anhui Province. They moved to Shanghai in 1994 with the intention of having more children, as the city was not as strict with China's one-child policy. He said that Shanghai was not strict with this policy. Upon further research, I learned that many people from rural villages escaped to the big cities, where it was difficult to track them after giving birth to more than one child. In this way, they could avoid fines or arrest by the local police.[37] Friends from Anhui helped them to find a job in Pudong, which at that time was a less developed area of Shanghai at the East of the Huangpu River, recently set up by the Chinese government as a special economic zone. They negotiated a mutually beneficial arrangement with the management company of a residential compound and have been working there ever since. When one of the students asked his feelings about working in this city for so long, he said: "Every year the city is changing so fast, I have seen Pudong from farms to skyscrapers, and the trash increases so much with the increase of the population."[38] Yan and Liu work seven days a week, more than fifteen hours daily cleaning buildings and sorting trash to find materials they can sell to the recycling facilities. Yan said they mainly take cardboard, water bottles, and cans. Occasionally, they also collect glass and wood, but they only do that when there are large amounts of them. It is important to note that when

37 Wu Ka-Ming and Jieying Zhang, "Living with Waste: Becoming 'Free' As Waste Pickers in Chinese Cities," *China Perspectives* 2, no. 117 (2019): 67–74, 71.

38 Yan Xinyu, statement in conversation with NYU Shanghai course *Re-Made in China*, Shanghai, October 2, 2019.

Yan shared this information, we learned an important lesson: not all items that we thought were recyclable were actually being recycled. For instance, we thought that all paper was recyclable, but he explained that recycling facilities only received clean paper, such as cardboard, from packaging. Therefore, the napkins the school separated in the canteen were not recycled. We also thought that glass was recycled, but due to its weight, trash collectors will not collect it unless there is a considerable amount worth carrying to the recycling facilities.

In 2019, Shanghai blazed a trail by implementing garbage classification regulations, requiring citizens to not only sort their waste, but also deposit it in designated locations at specific times. In the beginning, people did not know how to sort trash correctly and resisted trash sorting, especially Shanghainese people, as Yan shared. He also told us that during the first months of implementation, the government paid residents 8 RMB per hour to stand by the bins. This payment was to monitor the bins and ensure that waste was correctly sorted. Failure to comply with the new policies could result in fines for individuals and companies. Students asked Yan about the differences before and after the regulations took place. He said: "[n]ow there is a lot less trash that has to be sorted, and everything is much cleaner."[39] Upon hearing that many residents used to sell their trash to Yan and Liu in the past, I understood why they looked so happy when I offered them my sorted trash free of charge. Since the implementation of regulations, they no longer needed to purchase trash as it was already sorted. However, some Shanghainese families still contacted them to buy and sort their trash.

It was quite surprising and disheartening to learn that recyclers often experienced incredible hardships despite performing essential work. Yang highlighted the stringent policing of trash collectors on city streets. Many of them were stopped by the police on their way to recycling facilities during daylight, often resulting in their tricycles being dismantled and requiring costly repairs afterward. To avoid this, many collectors resorted to transporting materials late at night when police presence was minimal, resulting in much longer working hours and the possibility of receiving a less severe 100 RMB fine. These obstacles added unnecessary strain to an already demanding profession.

During Yan's talks, we gained a better understanding of what actually gets recycled in our city. In one of our brainstorming sessions, some students suggested that we could use a shredder to reduce the volume of plastic bottles and make it easier for trash collectors to transport them. However, when we discussed this idea with Yan, he told us that recycling facilities only pay for undamaged plastic bottles. If the bottles were shredded, they couldn't be recycled or sold. This made us realize how little we knew about the recycling system and how important it was to learn from experts like Yan. Despite not having the educational background of the guest speakers

39 Yan Xinyu, statement in conversation with NYU Shanghai course *Re-Made in China*, Shanghai, October 2, 2019.

we usually invite to our school or a formal education in waste management, Yan was able to provide valuable information and teach us a lot about waste management in our local community during every talk he gave (Fig. 2). Having Yan as a guest speaker made the problem of waste and its environmental impact more visible to our students. One of them reflected: "In most people's minds, trash just disappears immediately after they throw it into the trash bin, but trash is something that cannot be separated from us at all. We don't see where trash goes, and this is because there are people like Yan and Liu who deal with the trash for us."[40] Jørgensen indicates that consumers do not know what happens to their waste once it leaves their homes. In many countries, waste management infrastructures have become invisible, and our ignorance about where the trash is going tends to generate more trash. He quotes Douglas Adams' famous statement, "something that we can't see, or don't see, or our brain doesn't let us see, because we think that it's somebody else's problem."[41] Adams used this statement to explain a technology capable of generating a "Somebody Else's Problem Field" in the context of a science fiction novel.[42] However, it also precisely portrays our real-life waste management issues, reflecting people's tendency to distance themselves from issues that seem too complex or overwhelming to address.

Figure 2: Trash collector Yan Xinyu giving a talk to NYU Shanghai students enrolled in the course Re-Made in China during the Fall 2019 semester.

Introducing a trash collector helped students acknowledge that waste management is not somebody else's problem and had a profound impact on them. In addition to this, the course also encouraged them to engage with their community in various ways. They created local maps to track trash routes in their dorms and on campus, interviewed cleaning staff and documented their daily work, and even cleaned a nearby beach to gain a better understanding of the waste cycle in their immediate environment. These activities aimed to raise awareness and promote positive changes in

40 Joyce Zheng, statement posted in the *Re-Made in China* course blog in response to the guest talk, Shanghai, October 9, 2019, https://wp.nyu.edu/remadeinchina/author/yz4867/page/2/.

41 Finn Arne Jørgensen, *Recycling* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 156.

42 Douglas Adams, *Life, the universe, and everything* (New York: Random House, 1982).

their habits and decision-making with regards to waste. One student remarked after listening to Yan's talk: "His story not only helped me think about how plastic waste was sourced, but also how recycling should not be seen only as an environmental movement, but also about human rights and economic justice."[43]

Critical art, critical making, and service-learning

According to the Chinese art scholar Meiqin Wang, there has been a significant increase in the number of Chinese artists engaging in socially conscious art over the past decade. In their work, these artists utilize art as a means of social criticism, community building, and personal growth in their professional practice. Despite the challenges and risks associated with this type of work in China, these artists remain committed to direct social engagement and civic participation, believing in the potential of individual efforts for bottom-up social change, and recognizing the imperative to do so within the entire intellectual community.[44] Meiqin's examination of the practice of Wang Nanming, a Chinese art critic and curator, highlights his advocacy for contemporary art to engage with the real world and to create new spaces and forms of political participation that address concrete issues and problems. Wang argues that "In a country where problems abound, discussing social problems should become a crucial component of art."[45] Therefore, he has dedicated himself to creating a supportive infrastructure for critical Chinese artists.

As an artist and maker, I deeply resonate with these concepts. In my practice, I constantly ask myself: Why am I making things? How can what I am making be useful and not just waste? As an educator, I encourage my students to consider these same questions and to think critically about the intersection of technology and society. In my course, *Re-Made in China*, students learn how to use new media art as a powerful tool for exploring innovative design possibilities while also fostering social awareness and reflection. By doing so, they can come up with unique solutions to environmental and other social issues. These ideas are not new among artists and educators. As far back as 1991, the artist, critic and scholar Suzi Gablik emphasized that: "we need an art [and an art education] that transcends the distanced formality of aesthetics and dares to respond to the cries of the world."[46] She saw artists' main role as comparable to social workers by valuing those who clean up the environment, provide homes for

43 Amanda Zhao, "Finding Solutions to Plastic Waste," *NYUSH Magazine* (Spring 2019): 22–23, https://issuu.com/nyushanghai/docs/nyush_w19_english.

44 Meiqin Wang, ed., *Socially Engaged Art in Contemporary China: Voices from Below* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

45 Wang Nanming, *The Rise of Critical Art* (Shanghai: Alte Brucke Verlag, 2011), 32.

46 Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 100.

homeless people, and show kindness to marginalized groups such as garbage collectors, kids, street people or drunks.[47]

My teaching philosophy is based on learning by doing. I strive to create hands-on learning opportunities, cultivating a culture of collaboration rather than competition, which aligns with Red Burns' ideals. This approach aims to help students grow mentally and emotionally and prepare them for real-life experiences. My experiences teaching *Re-Made in China* have reinforced the profound impact of this approach. It closely resonates with the research of the scholars Amanda Alexander and Ross H. Schlemmer, who state that an art education curriculum integrated with service-learning can lead to a range of positive outcomes, including civil society, social justice, and artistic skills.[48] Drawing from their experiences as educators, they emphasize the importance of critical pedagogy in addressing the negative effects of neoliberal globalization, advocating for a curriculum that encourages questioning and critical thinking. However, they also acknowledge challenges in prompting deep critical reflections and suggest that structured guidance is essential for meaningful engagement. In overcoming similar challenges in my teaching, I found valuable support through collaboration with The Office for Community Engaged Learning. Their assistance helped me to structure the interactions between the students and local communities, written assignments, and in-class sessions to stimulate student discussion and reflection.

After I introduced community engaged learning and service-learning to *Re-Made in China*, I started preparing the course months prior to the start of the semester. The Office for Community Engaged Learning helped me to establish relationships with local community partners. These partners included campus staff members, retired individuals, and members of the residents' committee from a neighboring area near the Academic Building. To better understand the potential projects that students could undertake for these partners, we conducted research on their activities and the functioning of the community before the start of the semester. Our initial focus was forming a collaboration with residents in the neighborhood near the Academic Building and with the local elementary school. However, we encountered obstacles in connecting and scheduling events with these entities. As a result, we found it more feasible to work with retired community members and other individuals. This approach proved successful, as we discovered that students preferred serving individuals rather than organizations.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic control restrictions in fall 2020, the original plan for students to work with residents in a nearby neighborhood had to be altered. Instead, they focused on building relationships with often overlooked members of the campus community, such as staff from the campus store, cafeteria, and custodial staff. Through

47 Jill Johnston, *The Artist as Social Worker – The Reenchantment of Art by Suzi Gablik. Art in America (1939).* Vol. 81 (New York: Brant Publications, Incorporated, 1993), 39.

48 Amanda Alexander and Ross Schlemmer, "The Convergence of Critical Pedagogy with Arts-Based Service-Learning," in *Research Anthology on Instilling Social Justice in the Classroom* (Hershey: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2021), 1006–1028, 1006.

interviews with these individuals, the students gained insight into their work and ongoing challenges. They then used recycled materials to address one of their needs, brainstorming solutions together. One of the students who worked with one of the cleaning ladies (Huang Ayi) on campus reflected in an interview:

> This class opened my mind to designing for others … An important thing is that I know how to talk with people like Huang Ayi, people such as those essential workers: taxi drivers, bus drivers. Before this experience, I respected them, but I wouldn't talk with them much. I would think, 'Why should I talk with those guys?' But now I regularly chat with the driver if I take a taxi. Sometimes I chat with the workers in my neighborhood. It just made me a more friendly person.
>
> Working with different groups of people is really challenging but educational. Previously, I was just working with my friends or my other college students – people who are similar to me. But this time I was working with someone who was completely different from me – her job, her life, her social status, everything was completely different – and we still had a nice cooperation. It was really educational.[49]

After introducing service-learning into the course and comparing student reflections to those from previous versions of the course held in 2017 and 2018, I noticed a shift in their concerns. Although they still recognized the environmental damage caused by consumerism, they also demonstrated a newfound concern for their community partners and other people they did not usually notice. Their reflections also demonstrated personal growth achieved through experiences with people from different social strata and other generations than themselves. Throughout the semester, I encouraged critical analysis of these experiences and their connection to broader concepts discussed in class. To facilitate this, the Office for Community-Engaged Learning helped me incorporate intentional reflections through in-class discussions and redesign written assignments and presentations. Students found the in-class discussions particularly beneficial because they provided a platform for open dialogue and allowed them to share their thoughts on the collaboration with their community partner, including positive aspects and areas for improvement. These sessions fostered a feeling of responsibility and increased the motivation to complete their final projects as their work became much more meaningful.

For example, during the Fall 2021 semester students had the opportunity to collaborate with residents in a nearby neighborhood as part of their coursework. This service-learning course allowed students to embark on various projects such as designing a trolley to assist cleaning staff in transporting heavy equipment, creating space-saving bookshelves for the campus store, setting up a room divider for cafeteria staff to enjoy their breaks, making garbage tongs to help local volunteers with waste disposal, and constructing flower stands and a rainwater collection system to enhance a com-

49 Diane Geng, "Academic Service-Learning at NYU Shanghai: Voices from Course-Community Partnerships," NYU Shanghai, 2023, 41, https://cdn.shanghai.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/academic_service_learning_at_nyu_shanghai_en.pdf.

munity garden. To complete these projects, students were required to source their own waste materials. For instance, the team that worked on the space divider collected waste materials from a construction site. They opted for discarded plastic strips that they weaved into a screen and mounted on a wooden frame after experimenting with three different materials.

During their team discussion, the main point of debate was whether they should create something to benefit the cafeteria as a business or assist the staff directly. After conducting interviews, the team discovered that the cafeteria workers were frustrated with customers not returning metal reusable drinking cups, which were intended to be a sustainable option. There was also an issue with napkin waste. However, they realized that solving these problems would primarily benefit the business rather than the staff themselves. Ultimately, they concluded that sustainability wasn't just about waste reduction, but also about how people are treated, and decided to focus on creating something to benefit the workers' well-being and working conditions.

The team that consisted of three students – two female students from the Shanghai campus and one male student from the New York campus – observed a gender disparity in the workplace. They noticed that male workers were able to nap or use their phones in public sitting areas, while female workers could not due to the lack of private space. The team concluded that cultural norms and perceived gender constraints were contributing to this issue, leading to differences in how men and women behaved in public spaces. This observation further motivated them to address the issue and develop solutions to improve the working conditions for female staff. Additionally, they developed educational materials and crafts to teach staff about sustainability and recycling. The students frequently consulted with the staff throughout the prototyping process and received valuable feedback on the strip density and dimensions necessary to provide privacy and safety. Reflecting on the project, the students expressed that this service-learning experience helped them realize that the project was not only about helping the community partner but also about noticing, empathizing, and providing those around them with more opportunities (Fig. 3).

The incorporation of service-learning into *Re-Made in China* proved to be instrumental in facilitating critical-making. *Re-Made in China* embraced an open-ended approach, allowing students to partner with members of their community and work collaboratively to identify potential needs and problems. Through observation and interviews, students gained insight into the challenges faced by their community partners and used their skills and knowledge of material making to develop a project objective. In this process, some students discovered that the needs from their partners were rooted in larger systemic factors and power dynamics beyond their control, which led to feelings of disappointment and confusion. However, this experience also prompted reflection on their own values and beliefs, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of social issues from a perspective outside their social circle.

Throughout the semester, we facilitated various opportunities for students to engage with and gain a deeper understanding of our community partners – for example, workshops with local residents where students shared their expertise on repurposing

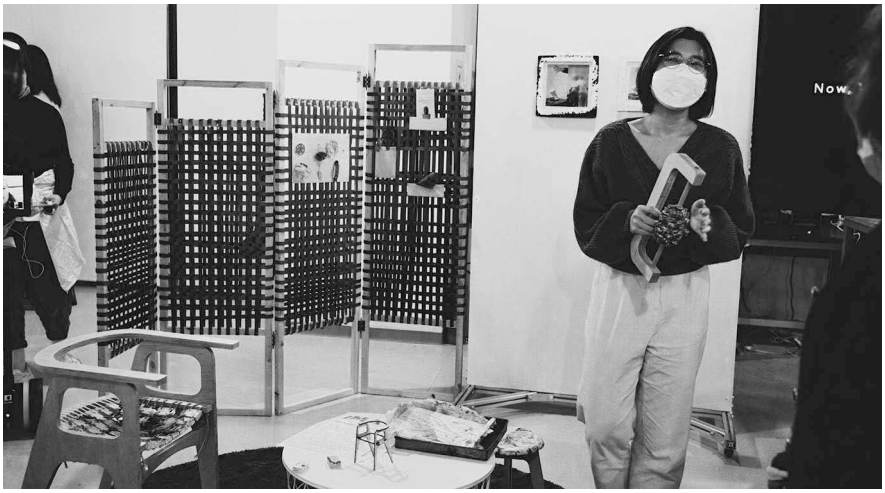

Figure 3: Interactive Media Arts (IMA) End-of-Semester Show Fall 2020: a space divider, a chair, photo frames, and a cart designed for staff members of NYU Shanghai.

waste with local residents. We also welcomed our partners to campus, inviting them to attend our class art exhibition during week five, the presentations of prototypes during week ten and the final presentations during week fourteen to provide feedback on student progress and final outcomes. These events fostered a natural and relaxed environment, allowing for genuine learning and collaboration between students and community members. Additionally, to prepare students for their service projects, we equipped them with guidelines to follow when interviewing partners. This included developing a set of questions and gathering essential information to ensure a productive collaboration (Fig. 4).

Incorporating service-learning facilitated students to achieve the learning objectives associated with sustainability and social responsibility, allowing them to go beyond merely understanding the technical aspects of creating materials and artifacts. The main goal of the course was to give students the knowledge and skills they needed to comprehend the implications of using new technology, what they could do when it becomes a problem, and to propose potential solutions or ideas that could benefit society. On top of that, I noticed that service-learning enhanced critical-making by exposing students to a range of challenging situations where they had to use their theoretical skills to solve practical problems. The combination of critical art and making, along with service-learning that the course offered in its last versions, sparked genuine interest in the topic and motivated students to successfully complete projects that they designed and felt were meaningful for them and their community partners.

Figure 4: Students enrolled in the *Re-Made in China* course, fall 2021 semester.

Conclusion

My journey from New York to China has been marked by a deep commitment to sustainable design practices and education. Starting with the upcycling of electronic waste in the United States and later transitioning to plastic re-making in China, I have striven to create awareness and promote environmentally conscious practices through my art and educational initiatives. I strongly believe that art and education are critical in exposing, criticizing, and raising awareness of social and environmental issues. Max D. Woodworth argues that being aware of injustices and contradictions, although it might not automatically result in desirable civic actions, can work on people's consciousness and foster disparate practices of non-conformity.[50] Therefore, after becoming aware of the problem of waste, the injustices, and inequalities caused by the current global economic system, the result of my own practice of non-conformity is the design of *Re-Made in China* at the New York University in Shanghai, a course that empowers students to become responsible artists and citizens through critical making, service-learning, and community engagement.

Meiqin Wang observes that socially engaged art has gained traction globally, with artists adopting community-based approaches and scholars producing a growing body of publications to discuss the history, methods, potential, and limitations of art, aiming to engage citizens who may not be familiar with the art world. Wang also highlights the increasing practice of socially engaged art in East Asia, bringing a variety of case

50 Max D. Woodworth, "Inner-City Culture Wars," in *Reclaiming Chinese Society: The New Social Activism*, eds., You-tien Hsing and Ching Kwan Lee (New York: Routledge, 2010), 207–224.

studies from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and China together in her edited volume. These examples showcase how artists engage with ordinary citizens to stimulate awareness of existing societal issues and foster collective actions for real-life changes.[51] In this context, *Re-Made in China* serves as a compelling case study of socially engaged art in the realm of education. The evolution of this course over the years illustrates how educational programs can effectively combine critical art and practice to foster self-reflection and personal growth through experiences with real people rather than only attaining knowledge from textbooks and readings. Moreover, being offered in Shanghai, a globally connected city where students can attend a Sino-American University, the course provides unique opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to address a global problem in a locally defined real-world setting, developing empathy and a sense of social responsibility.

Teaching *Re-Made in China* has provided an avenue to further disseminate my sustainable art practices and engage not only students, but ordinary citizens in hands-on learning about new media art, recycling, and sustainability. In partnership with Monika Lin, a colleague from the Visual Arts Department, I co-founded the Re-Makerspace in 2018 to support *Re-Made in China* and future courses, a space on campus where individuals from diverse social backgrounds can gather to create, learn, and experiment through a variety of workshops, talks, and panels of discussion we organize. These events are led by faculty, students, or experts in sustainability. Unlike traditional makerspaces, the Re-Makerspace prioritizes environmental sustainability and waste reduction. Due to its innovative approach, The New York University Office of Sustainability provided funding for this pilot project, with the intention of replicating it at the New York campus.

The Re-Makerspace entailed the creation of an innovative space equipped with state-of-the-art machinery and tools. It was intended to serve as a classroom, but also for hosting talks, panel discussions, and workshops where people could experiment with a wide range of materials. As the managers of this space, we keep it open to all members of the school community, providing a platform for discussion and exploration of innovative solutions to social and environmental issues while promoting a culture of sustainability. Since its inception, the space has provided opportunities for staff, faculty, and students to engage with local communities and collaborate with partner institutions. *Re-Made in China* utilized this space as a hybrid classroom, allowing students to learn, meet with community partners, and experiment with materials for their projects. Furthermore, events organized to be part of the course like Yan's talk, a workshop taught by Precious Plastic Shanghai, and a beach cleanup activity, have all been available for the entire school community to join.

In this Re-Makerspace, I have been experimenting with recycling different materials and using fabrication techniques to create what I prefer to call "ideas" rather

51 Meiqin Wang, ed., *Socially Engaged Public Art in East Asia. Space, Place, and Community in Action* (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2022).

than products, in contrast to the traditional capitalist approach. Through Do-It-Yourself online tutorials and free workshops, I share these ideas as an open source for inspiring and motivating people to replicate or remix them using their own trash. Over the past years, I have conducted workshops both on and off campus at various events and venues in Shanghai, such as Art and Design Education: FutureLab for high school teachers, as well as the Museum of Glass and the Power Station of Arts for the general public. In these workshops, I encourage participants to reflect on their perception of garbage and explore different ways to repurpose materials. In addition to teaching about re-making, as in my course *Re-Made in China*, these workshops are the medium to raise awareness and foster discussion on waste, sustainability, and social justice. Knowing that the resulting creations are merely symbolic and will not solve significant environmental issues, I discuss this with attendants. However, the main purpose of making them is to empower people to re-make, reflect on their habits, and stimulate collective actions for a more sustainable future.

To me my artistic practice is a form of critical art that extends beyond galleries and museums to engage with communities and bring education to ordinary citizens. In doing so, I believe it has the potential to make a significant difference in the world. I hope that this chapter provides valuable insights demonstrating how re-making may be used as both an artistic medium and a method to address environmental challenges. Furthermore, I would like to encourage educators to create more impactful and relevant learning experiences and inspire art practitioners to incorporate sustainable practices into their work and use art as a tool for social change.

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Evelyn Kwok

Used and Reused

Cardboard as the Unlikely Hero in Creative Space Making in Hong Kong

Abstract: In the dense streetscape of Hong Kong, cardboard can be seen transporting commercial goods, piled up for recycling and reselling, and reused by rough sleepers. While reusing cardboard is common in many cities around the world, one specific reuse that is unique to Hong Kong is temporary domestic spaces used by a marginalized group – migrant domestic workers. These workers are legally obliged to live and work in the homes of the employers, which curtails their autonomy and privacy. Every Sunday on their day off work, thousands of workers can be seen in public space inside these temporary cardboard structures. Inside these spaces, the workers engage in activities they would otherwise be doing if they have a home of their own. This chapter looks at how cardboard has become the unlikely hero for a population in Hong Kong who have the least socio-economic resources to afford one of the most highly valued commodity in the city – space.

Keywords: cardboard, Hong Kong, space-making, public space

Hong Kong, a city that is known as one of the most expensive cities to live in the world,[1] has a total useable land mass of 1,089 km^2 and a population of 7.34 million.[2] The city's geographic terrain is mountainous with only 25 percent of its land available for urban development. This means both public and private spaces are small and limited, creating many tightly developed high-rises with high property value. There is a common saying in Cantonese that appropriately describes this condition is 寸金尺土, which translates to "an inch of space is gold." This statement certainly rings true when one experiences the myriad of creative and efficient use of space throughout public and private spaces. Hong Kong's urban density may also seem complex and chaotic as shopping malls, hotels, office skyscrapers, and residential towers ascend in quick succession with intense proximity, merging and blurring spatial and programmatic boundaries. Apart from its urban vertical density, on the street level, Hong Kong has a unique urban material culture to enhance the sensorial experience in

1 According to global consulting firm Mercer, Hong Kong is the number one city in the world with the highest cost of living in 2023. Over the last decade, it is always in the top ten most costly cities in the world, alongside cities like New York City, Zurich, and Singapore; Mercer, "Cost of Living City Ranking 2023," 2023, https://www.mercer.com/insights/total-rewards/talent-mobility-insights/cost-of-living/#full-ranking.

2 Hong Kong SAR Government Census and Statistics Department. 2023. "Year-end Population for 2023." https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/press_release_detail.html?id=5386.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-007

which three site-specific elements stand out: neon lights, bamboo scaffolding, and cardboard boxes. Neon lights have long captured the imagination of people in Hong Kong and worldwide, as it is symbolic of a bygone era of prosperity and urban visual identity.[3] Bamboo scaffolding, is a common sight, namely the traditional practice of scaffold made entirely out of bamboo rods that scale skyscraper façades, which ascend and descend in a matter of days of construction and workmen climb up them almost completely unattached. This urban phenomenon is also at the precipice of becoming a legend from the past. This chapter focuses on one of the three site-specific elements, one that is plentiful – cardboard boxes – and their creative uses in Hong Kong; from being discarded by commercial enterprises after holding commercial goods for transportation, to its collection and resell by "cardboard grannies," to being the key ingredient in creative space making for an ethnic minority group whose legitimacy as residents is contested and their physical footprint in the city is spatially marginalized. This ethnic minority group consists largely of Indonesian and Filipino women, who are in Hong Kong as domestic workers, legally known as Foreign Domestic Helpers. The proportion of the two main ethnic groups are approximately an even split within the total number in Hong Kong, with Filipino workers of Catholic faith while the Indonesian workers are of Muslim faith.[4] This group stands apart from the fraction of expatriates from western countries and the communities of Hong Kong-born people from South Asian and African descent. They are live-in domestic workers who on their one day off work each week, appropriate and transform the 'loose' public spaces of the city with group activities, many of which are facilitated by the creative reuse of cardboard boxes to carve out spaces for them to do so.[5]

This chapter is organized in three parts. The first section demonstrates the creative reuse of discarded cardboard by the migrant workers and how they repeatedly construct their temporary spaces once a week in some of the most prominent public spaces in Hong Kong. The second section moves to focus on the migrant domestic workers, providing the background on their labor conditions in Hong Kong and how important space is for them as an expression of personhood and creativity that is limited in their everyday life. The third section gives context to the prevalence of cardboard boxes used in Hong Kong, particularly as a resource that sustains the livelihoods of some of the poorest citizens of the city. Overall, the chapter emphasizes the importance of the spatial constructions by the workers and how cardboard boxes have been the key ingredient that afforded something that is both scarce and valuable in Hong Kong that is not easily accessible to the contingent of migrant workers, yet can be so readily created – space.

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3 Brian Sze-hang Kwok, *Fading Neon Lights: An Archive of Hong Kong's Visual Culture* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2023).

4 Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, "Statistics on the number of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong," 2022a. https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-immd-set4-statistics-fdh.

5 Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens, eds., *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Little Manila and the use of cardboard every Sunday

Every Sunday morning, migrant domestic workers emerge from their employers' homes into the public spaces of Hong Kong. In the Central Business District on Hong Kong Island, the workers' gatherings temporarily transform the popular district to Little Manila. The term has often been referred to by various scholars as a "well-known spectacle" and a "carnivalesque gathering,"[6] while many Filipino workers affectionately refer to the Hong Kong district Central as Little Manila, as it is their home away from home.[7] As there are different ethnic minority groups residing in the city, many of the areas where the groups gather in and have shops or facilities at that provide specific cultural products and services have been nicknamed as Little Manila by the community as a home away from their origins.

Inside Little Manila, migrant domestic workers appropriate and transform 'loose' or seemingly ordinary public spaces into semi-public private spaces that facilitate their socio-spatial expression and autonomy, doing all kinds of activities as they wish. Some Filipino workers affectionately dubbed their gatherings in Central as their home away from home:

> At least we can be who we want to be once a week here [Little Manila/Central]. We can talk about who we are not just as workers, just be us like we are back home. When we are at work, sometimes we are just being workers, not really us, you know what I mean?![8]

While the popular shopping malls and commercial towers remain unstirred in the early morning, in World Wide House, a plaza that sits two levels above a main transport station, Filipino women bustle about, socializing with the Filipino retailers and purchasing homemade Filipino food to share with their friends for the day. Many of them wait for their friends at the intersection of World Wide House and the Central Elevated Walkway, before moving to their weekly gathering areas. Nearby on Chater Road, a couple of enterprising Hong Kong locals can be seen pulling a trolley of flattened cardboard boxes, offering them to groups of Filipino women to construct temporary home-bases for the day. It is common for Filipino women to gather according

6 Jeffrey Hou, "Making Public, Beyond Public Space," in *Beyond Zuccotti Park: Freedom of Assembly and the Occupation of Public Space*, eds., Ron Shiffman, Rick Bell, Lance J. Brown, and Lynne Elizabeth (Oakland: New Village Press, 2012), 89–98, 89. Daisy Tam, "Little Manila: The Other Central of Hong Kong," in *Messy Urbanism: Understanding the "Other" Cities of Asia*, eds., Manish Chalana and Jeffrey Hou, 119–135 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 119.

7 Evelyn Kwok, "Little Manila: An Unlikely Crowd of Resistance in Hong Kong." *Architectural Theory Review* 23, no. 2 (2019): 287–314. Evelyn Kwok, *Spatial Agency and Occupation: Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

8 BS, personal communication, May 15, 2022.

to their regional origins and return to occupy the same area every week.[9] On a section of Connaught Road Central in front of World Wide House, some Filipino women use the cardboard in a different way. They pack goods to make up what is known as a *balikbayan* box, to send everyday necessities back to their families in the Philippines. A freight truck is usually parked in front of the packing area, with people unloading more flat-packed cardboard boxes onto the footpath (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Balikbayan boxes being packed on the footpath off Connaught Road Central, Hong Kong, 2023.

In *Marginalia*, an exhibition held in Hong Kong (May–June 2024), sixteen artists, collectives and migrant and labor groups presented artworks and public programs that used textiles and found materials, music and dance, food and cooking, drawing and painting to reflect on the diasporic experience in Hong Kong. One of the artworks, by Sharu Binnong Sikdar and Dhafney Dela Cruz Pineda, titled *Hand2Hand* draws inspiration from the *balikbayan* box (Fig. 2). *Balikbayan* is a Tagalog word that translates to "return to country" and *Balikbayan* is also used to refer to Filipinos returning to the Philippines after working overseas for a long time. The *Balikbayan* boxes are large

9 Kwok, "Little Manila." Jasmine Susanna Tillu, "Spatial Empowerment: The Appropriation of Public Spaces by Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011.

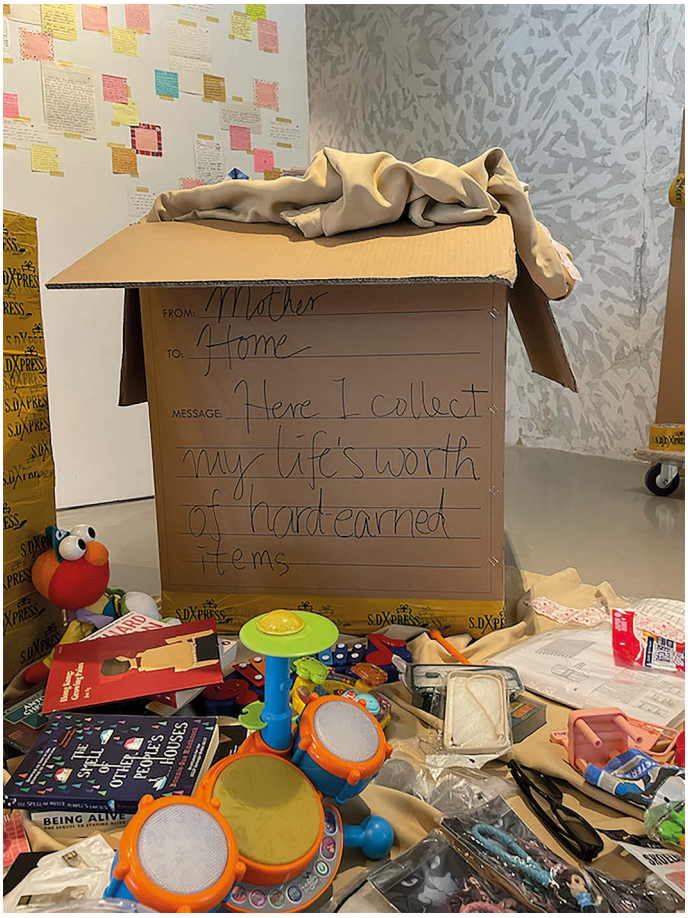

Figure 2: Hand2Hand, installation by Sharu Binnong Sikdar and Dhafney Dela Cruz Pineda exhibited in Marginalia in Current Plans, Hong Kong, 2024.

cardboard packages that are filled up with gifts, hand-me-downs, and essentials for loved ones. The size of these packages, the abundance of their contents, and the personalized, hand-picked nature of the items connect the long-distance relationships between the workers and their loved ones back home. By drawing inspiration from this tradition of collecting and packing, the artists simulated a courier company, like the one seen on Connaught Road every Sunday. They collected new and second-hand items from the public, alongside handwritten messages from the items' senders for the next person who will own them. The artists packed the items into two balikbayan boxes and then activated them on-site by opening the boxes and unpacking and inviting participants to take an object. In reality, every Sunday, hundreds of *Balikbayan* boxes are packed and transported away in this area and other areas of Hong Kong where workers gather. As Sunday ensues, pedestrians going about their day in the surrounding streets and shopping complexes witness this packing process and negotiate

their way through this small junction filled with people and cardboard boxes that has become an informal Filipino postal exchange. Directly above this area on the network of elevated walkways, cardboard boxes have a different use than housing items.

The Central Elevated Walkway is a network of footbridges that connect over twenty-five buildings above street level in Central. These walkways vary from 5 to 8 meters in width. Some are enclosed like arcades, while others have various roof structures and balustrades, offering outlooks onto the streets and varying degrees of protection from the weather conditions. The first conduit of the Central Elevated Walkway was built between the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and the second level of a shopping complex within the Prince's Building in 1965. It was designed as a pedestrian connection between the two buildings and consequently increased the rent value of the retail spaces within.[10] In direct contrast to the usual conventions of retail rental, suddenly the mall's second-level units became more valuable than those on the ground level. This opened a new logic of real estate value, but more significantly, it sparked a phenomenon that shifted the way people moved around the city to an above-ground circulation. Over the last four decades, many commercial buildings in Central (and beyond) were designed to include an air space connection, enhancing pedestrian flow and maximizing commercial opportunity and value.

Every Sunday, contrasting this capitalist logic, these elevated passageways provide prime real estate for migrant workers to make a temporary home, almost freely. These spaces are attractive as they are away from vehicular traffic, protected from the elements at various points, and are close to public bathrooms and free wireless internet from the shopping complexes the walkways are connected to. They are also structurally suitable to create temporary 'units' with cardboard, string, tape and cheaply available resources with the various fixtures such as handrails and balustrades that are instrumental in making spaces that can be semi-private, which is desirable, as privacy is something that many workers are deprived of in their home that is also their workplace.

Throughout the day, hundreds of temporary cardboard units appear on the elevated walkway, resembling a village of domestic spaces inside a very public thoroughfare. In some cases, these units occupy both sides of the walkway, shifting pedestrian thoroughfare to the middle. During my field research, as I was analyzing these cardboard spaces and observing the activities that occur within, such as communal eating, sleeping, grooming, etc., I recognized that these makeshift cardboard spaces were akin to temporary living rooms, dining rooms and bedrooms. These weekly domestic spaces made from reused cardboard boxes can be understood as a response and resistance to the socio-spatial condition that occurs in their workplace. Their lack of privacy and a home of their own beyond their employers' motivate their appropriation and

10 Kwok, *Spatial Agency and Occupation.*

transformation of public spaces.[11] These cardboard units become spaces that are inversions of the interior spatial conditions the migrant domestic workers experience in the workplace – and facilitate their freedom to do as if they have their own home, albeit temporarily.

Throughout my years of fieldwork in Hong Kong spending many Sundays observing the spatial formations and creative reuse of cardboard, public spaces and other materials, I have also noticed the unlimited variations of sizes, shapes and formation of the cardboard structures and how they were modular, with ease of expansion and contraction depending on the number of people inside the spaces. On one Sunday afternoon in 2015, I was meeting one of my interviewees and her friend, and they invited me to their cardboard unit on the elevated walkway near Exchange Square. Their space was made up of flattened cardboard three pieces wide by five pieces long. They had created vertical barriers with three cardboard pieces that separated their space from the pedestrian thoroughfare. The vertical pieces were held up by sticky tape and hinged with string on the corners connected to the top of the balustrade of the elevated walkway. Their temporary space was approximately 1.5 meters by 3 meters, and the vertical pieces stood approximately 80 centimeters high. They informed me that their structure was sometimes twice as large to accommodate more friends, which meant they would expand the space by extending the floors and walls with a few extra pieces of cardboard. They negotiated with their neighbors to keep a reasonable separation between them, which was important for everyone to have reasonable privacy between the unites. Compared to the collapsible mattress my interviewee slept on in a bedroom shared with her employer's child for six days of the week, this temporary living room-cum-bedroom on Sunday on the elevated walkway was nearly three times as large, with flexible potential to expand. They said,

> This size of space here would be perfect for me in the home … not too big or small. I just want some space to myself and [I] can close the door away from them when I sleep. But I know it is just not possible.[12]

The majority of temporary cardboard homes have elements that resemble a standalone house, with entrances, floors, walls and roofs that protect the occupants from external weather conditions and separating them from pedestrian traffic. The cardboard floors and walls are reinforced with packing tape and cable ties, while string or rope is used to reinforce the vertical rigidity of the walls by connecting the edges of the cardboard to the balustrades of the elevated walkway. Plastic sheets are draped over and above the interior of the units as roofs for extra privacy, and umbrellas are

11 Evelyn Kwok, "Agency in Appropriation: The Informal Territory of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong," *IDEA Journal – Urban + Interior* (2015): 102–117. Kwok, "Little Manila." Kwok, *Spatial Agency and Occupation.*

12 CC, personal communication, April 9, 2023.

used to reinforce the roofs on rainy days. In winter, the floors are sometimes lined with cloth for warmth and during the hotter times of the year, plastic beach mats are added on top of the cardboard. When entering these makeshift spaces, shoes are taken off and left on the exterior edges of the structures, resembling the common Asian custom of removing shoes when entering the home. Smaller cardboard boxes are made to be used as tables for sharing food and drinks. They can also be seen used as side tables for video calls while some workers lie down to relax while speaking to their families back home. Cardboard boxes, flattened or constructed, are adopted and used in many ways that facilitate the functions of a domestic environment that workers intend to create for themselves every Sunday. Furthermore, the variety of usage of cardboard demonstrates the workers' resourcefulness and creativity in establishing spaces of their own (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: In Admiralty, a suburb away from Central, the elevated walkways also have workers erect cardboard structures on both sides of the walkway, sheets of plastic hinged to the railing to protect from the outside weather, cardboard upright at the edges to create a sense of division between spaces, shoes left on the outside of the units, with just enough room for pedestrian thoroughfare down the middle. Hong Kong, 2023.

Creativity, or entrepreneurship, can also be seen inside the cardboard villages in Little Manila. The cardboard pieces that are central to the making of makeshift spaces, are mostly sourced from the discarded piles from retailers and supermarkets. However, most workers do not have space to store them inside their employers' homes throughout the week, so they collect them in the beginning of Sunday, however, not always with guaranteed success, especially with the presence of cardboard grannies or other recycling companies. A few local entrepreneurs have noticed this demand for

cardboard pieces throughout Sunday, and they pay the retailers in advance a small fee to set some aside for them to collect and resell them to the workers. They distribute them directly to the workers throughout different areas in Little Manila and charge the workers a small price for each, while making a profit. Each piece, depending on the size and quality (e. g. cleanliness and thickness) costs around HKD$5 per piece. This is an amount that is affordable for the workers, especially if it can be shared, and be used to create a space for themselves for the whole day. By Sunday evening, as the workers prepare to go home and dismantle their cardboard spaces, many leave them in a pile for the collectors to retake. This cycle of selling and collecting disused cardboard has been ongoing for many years, prior to my first year of research in 2012 and continues presently. Street hawking is illegal in Hong Kong, yet this particular activity in Little Manila has not been stopped. When I speak to workers who purchase cardboard pieces every week from these locals, they speak about it as a secret that everyone knows, that even the authorities turn a blind eye to.

The cardboard units are not exclusively located in the Central Business District or in Little Manila. As the workers continue to be a part of Hong Kong society, they continue to create their own spaces on their day off to construct spaces in the in-between spaces such as elevated walkways, underpasses and pedestrian tunnels where they can use cardboard, combined with readily available and cheap materials to regain and activate the social and spatial freedoms that are curtailed inside their employers' homes.

Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong

There are approximately 340,000 migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, making up 5 percent of the population.[13] Migrant domestic workers are live-in domestic workers employed on a two-year contractual basis, earning a minimum wage HK$4,870 each month, which is approximately US$622.[14] According to their contract, they have one weekly rest day and other specified working conditions.[15] They are responsible for a wide range of domestic duties within the home, including caring for the children and elderly who reside in the home. Their legal monthly wage is substantially below the Hong Kong citizens' minimum wages of HK$40 per hour which equates

13 Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, "Statistics on the number of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong," 2022a, https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-immd-set4-statistics-fdh.

14 Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, "Increase in Minimum Allowable Wage and food allowance for foreign domestic helpers," 2023, https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202309/29/P2023092900298.htm.

15 Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, "Guidebook for the Employment of Domestic Helpers from Aboard," 2022b, https://www.immd.gov.hk/pdforms/ID(E)969.pdf.

to a monthly salary of HK$16,300, approximately US$2,083.[16] From fieldwork data collected between 2012 to 2023, nearly half of the eighty-seven workers who were formally interviewed earn less than the legal minimum amount or 10 to 20 percent below that, many due to private negotiations with recruitment agencies and employers. The overwhelming majority of the people entering into Hong Kong as migrant domestic workers under the Foreign Domestic Helper visa are women. Many of these women leave behind their families in their home country to come to Hong Kong alone, and work as live-in domestic helpers for middle to high-income families.

Migrant domestic workers from the Philippines first entered Hong Kong in 1975.[17] As Hong Kong's economy continued to grow, migrant domestic labor continued to be in demand, with the number of migrant domestic workers growing from 30,000 to 380,000 between 1990 to 2020, thus supporting the economy indirectly by fulfilling the domestic roles of local women.[18] Despite the importance of their roles, migrant domestic workers are one of the most marginalized workforces in Hong Kong due to their low income, inflexibility over their work, no choice over their place of accommodation and no right to permanent residency, no matter how many years they have worked in Hong Kong, repeating their two-year contracts. From the ethnographic fieldwork data, the majority of workers I met have exceeded the seven-year requirement to apply for permanent residency in the city-state that is afforded to all expatriate workers, with the only exception being migrant domestic workers.[19] Some people appreciate that the workers have provided the freedom for local women to pursue careers and for households to have double income streams, however, popular opinions reflect that the workers' labor are seen as another commodity that is easily available, affordable and replaceable.[20] Thus, their identity, status and occupancy are marginalized and contested.

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16 Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department, "Increase in Minimum Allowable Wage and food allowance for foreign domestic helpers," 2023, https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202309/29/P2023092900298.htm.

17 Lisa Law, "Defying Disappearance: Cosmopolitan Public Spaces in Hong Kong," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1625–1645.

18 S. W. K. Chiu, "Recent trends in migration movements and policies in Asia: Hong Kong region report," paper presented at Workshop on International Migration and Labour Markets in Asia, Japan Institute of Labour, February 2003, Tokyo. Philippine Overseas Employment Administration. 1992. "Deployment Statistics per Skill per Country per Sex 1992," https://www.dmw.gov.ph/archives/ofwstat/deppercountry/1992.pdf . Philippine Overseas Employment Administration. 2020, "Deployment Statistics per Skill per Country per Sex 2015–2020." https://www.dmw.gov.ph/archives/ofwstat/percountryperskill/2015-2020%20NH%20per%20Country%20per%20Skills%20%20per%20Sex.pdf. Hong Kong SAR Immigration Department. 2022a, "Statistics on the number of Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong." https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-immd-set4-statistics-fdh.

19 Kwok, *Spatial Agency and Occupation.*

20 Patricia Cortés and Jessica Pan, "Outsourcing Household Production: Foreign Domestic Workers and Native Labour Supply in Hong Kong," *Journal of Labour Economics* 31, no. 2 (2013): 327–371. Raquel Carvalho, "Study finds Hong Kong domestic helpers subjected to employment terms abuse by more than 70 per cent of agencies," *South China Morning Post* (October 20, 2017). Nicole Constable, "Migrant

One of the most problematic specifications within their contract that is relevant to this article concerns the migrant domestic workers' live-in requirement. Due to the limitations of apartment sizes in Hong Kong and very little specifications about the provision of private spaces stated in the contract, the most common sleeping arrangement for domestic workers is a makeshift bed on the floor of the children's bedroom or one that is temporarily placed in communal areas of the home that can be used only when the rest of the family have retreated to their bedrooms. In rare occasions where workers have their own room, these are often windowless spaces that have been divided from an existing, larger room. Such architectural restrictions and lack of separation between home and the workplace have a significant impact on the workers' capacity to have privacy, autonomy and refuge. Experiencing this in their so-called home significantly contributes to the expansion of space that occurs in public space, as they invert the socio-spatial conditions they experience in their employers' homes – transient, disciplined, and truncated spaces – to demarcate areas where they can regain a sense of agency, often with cardboard boxes that are readily available, facilitating a temporary domestic interior of their own.[21]

Cardboard: Temporary, multipurpose, and supporting livelihoods

Cardboard is universally known as a packaging material that can come in numerous shapes, sizes and volumes. In its recycled and readapted forms, it can be seen as a popular material for many creations: arts and crafts for children, toys for pets, handmade signage in market stalls, shelter for rough sleepers, and even reconstituted into other materials. This universal and seemingly unremarkable material has also been used in architectural projects, as it is lightweight, easy to manipulate, low in costs compared to other building materials and completely recyclable.[22] Japanese architect Shigeru Ban is a pioneer in using cardboard in temporary and semi-permanent structures. In 1986, he began using cardboard tubes to create indoor partitions and after multiple tests for its structural integrity, began creating larger structures for indoor and outdoor use.[23] In 1994, Ban consulted in a United Nations project which developed shelters made from cardboard tubes for refugees. While these cardboard tubes were made specifically for these structures, it is nonetheless a good example of how cardboard can be reconstituted as a building material. In response to an earthquake disaster in Kobe,

mothers, rejected refugees and excluded belonging in Hong Kong," *Population, Space and Place* 27, no. 5 (2021).

21 Kwok, "Agency in Appropriation."

22 Mick Eekhout, Fons Verheijen, and Ronald Visser, eds., *Cardboard in Architecture* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008).

23 Eduardo Souza, "Cardboard: From Industrial Workhouse to Shigeru Ban's Master Material" (*O papelão como estrutura: da indústria às obras de Shigeru Ban*), *ArchDaily* (March 24, 2019).

Japan in 1995 that left over 300,000 people without homes, Ban created the Paper Log House, which used cardboard tubes as walls, and re-purposed beer cartons weighed down by sandbags as foundation.[24] Since then, Ban and his firm have created numerous disaster-relief architecture using cardboard tubes and other paper and cardboard architectural solutions around the world. After the earthquake disaster of Christchurch, New Zealand in 2013, Ban famously designed a cathedral made from cardboard tubes with an expected shelf life of fifty years. The Christchurch Cardboard Cathedral serves as a temporary replacement for an iconic cathedral that was one of the city's most valued historic monuments.

In Hong Kong, cardboard is yet to be used in establishing a semi-permanent structure, however it is a prominent part of the city's material culture. On a daily basis, cardboard can be seen used in transporting goods throughout commercial and industrial areas. In food markets, pieces of cardboard are reused as containers for fresh produce, handwritten signage for prices, makeshift seats for the workers, even temporary housing for pets. Once they are no longer used, they can often be seen piled up high in the corners of the markets awaiting collection, by the building's rubbish collectors, or senior citizens known as 'cardboard grannies.' In Sham Shui Po District, one of the oldest and poorest districts located in the Kowloon peninsula with a majority of working-class population, many senior citizens collect discarded materials like cardboard boxes and plastic bottles to resell in order to subsidize their low social security income.[25] They can be seen picking up pieces of flattened cardboard, usually transporting them in trolleys, to local recycling plants, through all times of the day and no matter the weather conditions. This unofficial labor is a visible indicator of the lack of sufficient social welfare for senior citizens of a city that has a global reputation of being one of the wealthiest cities in the world.[26] The housing condition of these cardboard collectors are also a reflection of their insufficient welfare support from the government, as many of them live in congested subdivided flats that costs up to HK$5000 (approx. US$640) per month, while the Old Age Living Allowance under the Social Security Allowance Scheme that provides a monthly allowance to legible citizens above the age of 65 is HK$4195 (approx. US$537).[27] The allowance may just cover the housing rental, however, to obtain the allowance requires a stringent process that many elderly citizens do not have the resources or capacity to do so, which means many of them take on multiple so-called jobs like collecting cardboard or materials to sustain a living. The payment for the collected cardboard largely depends on the

24 Shigeru Ban Architects. n.d. "Works – Shigeru Ban," https://shigerubanarchitects.com/works/paper-tubes/paper-log-house-kobe/.

25 Yueyi Tan, et al, "The Mechanism of Street Markets Fostering Supportive Communities in Old Urban Districts: A Case Study of Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong," *Land* 13, no. 3 (2024): 289.

26 Matthew Keegan, "Hong Kong's 'cardboard grannies': the elderly box collectors living in poverty," *The Guardian* (April 24, 2018).

27 Hong Kong SAR Social Welfare Department, "Old Age Living Allowance," 2024, https://www.swd.gov.hk/oala/index_e.html#s2.

weight of the cardboard, with more weight indicating a higher price.[28] Hence, it is common to see collectors dipping cardboard into water before selling to add extra weight for a higher price.

Reincarnated after its initial use as a temporary container for products, cardboard holds a particular significance as a provider of security to some of the most vulnerable people, albeit it comes with a lot of hard work and precarity.

Conclusion: Cardboard as the unlikely key ingredient

In the context of Hong Kong, cardboard is used to supplement the livelihoods of some of the most marginalized socio-economic groups; rough sleepers, cardboard grannies and migrant domestic workers. As a symbol, it has become culturally synonymous with these groups too, as seen in cultural reproductions and publications. A recent example of this is the design of the dust jacket of the publication, *Ingat: An Anthology of Works by Migrant Domestic Worker Creatives in Hong Kong*, which resembles the exterior of the cardboard *Balikbayan* box.[29] I spoke with the graphic artist, Daniella Solmiano Bilo who designed the cover of the book, with the intention of providing the reader with the experience of receiving and opening a *balikbayan* box as they open the book. She states,

> *Ingat* means take care in Tagalog and the *balikbayan* box is an expression of care and love from the workers to their families back home. I was thinking about how the reader could open it, much like how the workers' family back home would open the boxes with anticipation and excitement when they receive these boxes.[30]

The use of an image of cardboard with packing tape and hand written graphic language creates the exterior of a parcel and the experience of opening a *balikbayan* box with the works inside the book akin to the gifts inside the box bought by the workers for their loved ones. For migrant domestic workers and their families, cardboard pieces and boxes symbolize care, love, family, and community (Fig. 4).

In the daily domesticity of middle-class households in Hong Kong, cardboard appears simply as an ordinary material, likely in the form of a disposable container for items. Yet, from the perspective of 'trash as treasure,' it is in those same households that employ the upwards of 340,000 migrant domestic workers, that cardboard holds

28 Crystal Kwan and Tam Ho-Chung, "Leaving No One behind in Healthy Ageing: A Unique Sub-Group, the 'Cardboard Grannies of Hong Kong,'" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 15 (2022): 9691.

29 Migrant Writers of Hong Kong, *Ingat: An Anthology of Works by Migrant Domestic Worker Creatives in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Small Tune Press, 2024).

30 Daniella Solmiano Bilo, personal communication, August 22, 2024.

Figure 4: *Ingat: An Anthology of Works* by Migrant Domestic Worker Creatives in Hong Kong, compiled and created by Migrant Writers of Hong Kong 2024.

significance as the precious ingredient that can be reused and transformed to afford the very thing that is restricted and sometimes non-existent in their work – freedom and autonomy. As every aspect of the workers' lives in Hong Kong is governed by their labor conditions, which gives power to the employers to determine their lifestyle and behavior, their public gatherings, using cardboard and other readily available materials to carve out spaces of their own interrupt the city-state's hegemonic spaces of financial capital and the regular spatial programs of public space. Over time, their spatial transformation has become a temporary domestic network where they seek refuge and resist the socio-spatial oppressions they endure in their labor. As a seemingly disposable yet abundant material, cardboard is a key ingredient that can be reincarnated endlessly, aiding the resilient living of marginalized groups in unexpected and creative ways.

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Tseng Shao-Chien

Regenerating Taiwan's Cultural Memory

Waste Reimagined in the Artworks of Rahic Talif and Yeh Wei-Li

Abstract: In recent decades, studies on global junk-related art have primarily emphasized ecocritical themes in response to the environmental crisis. This chapter, however, shifts the focus to the significance of reusing waste in generating social memory and fostering communal relations in Taiwanese art. Among the artists employing discarded materials, Rahic Talif (拉黑子．達立夫, b. 1962) and Yeh Wei-Li (葉偉立, b. 1971) stand out for their long-term engagement with marine and urban rubbish, as well as their aesthetic interventions in creating alternative memorials dedicated to the vanishing aspects of Indigenous and vernacular cultures. Rahic's *Action Project for Typhoon* (2008–2012) and *Space of Fifty Steps* (2013–) embody a yearning to revive the Amis survival skills of subsistence gathering along the Pacific coast. For Yeh, scavenging junk from abandoned sites provides fertile ground for retracing Taiwan's past and reshaping his migrant identity. It is illuminating to analyze how the artists reframe the materiality and semiotics of found objects to regenerate the cultural memory of Taiwan beyond the rigid frameworks of state-defined historical narratives.

Keywords: cultural memory, migration, repurposing waste, Taiwan

In recent decades, research on the interconnections between the role of art and the production of waste has grown significantly, driven by the global ecological crisis and environmental disasters. Scholars such as Jo Anna Isaak, Amanda Boetzkes, Mark A. Cheetham, Lea Vergine, and Anna Dezeuze have explored how contemporary artists worldwide address the theme of waste, utilizing junk materials and developing socially engaged projects.[1] In the context of art in Asia, Meiqin Wang has interpreted junk-related art as a byproduct of urban development and a critique of consumerism and the throwaway society while in her book on contemporary art and the drive to waste Amanda Boetzkes has, among other examples, also discussed projects in

Note: Research for this essay was supported by the National Science and Technology Council of Taiwan.

1 Jo Anna Isaak, "Trash: Public Art by the Garbage Girls," in *Gender in Landscape Art*, eds., Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins (New Brunswick.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 173–185; Mark A. Cheetham, "Bordering the Ubiquitous: The Art of Local and Global Ecologies," in *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018), 157–176; Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art: TRASH Rubbish Mongo* (Milan: Skira, 2007), 7–18; Anna Dezeuze, "Junk Aesthetics in a Throwaway Age," in *Almost Nothing: Observations on Precarious Practices in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 39–77.

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China and works by contemporary artists of Asian origin including the Chinese artist Song Dong (b. 1966) and the Taiwan-born Canadian artist An Te Liu (b. 1967).[2] Art in Taiwan also reflects ecocritical perspectives and socioeconomic concerns about waste. Since the 1990s, artists have addressed industrial pollution and environmental degradation through site-specific installations, happenings, and community activism.[3] This approach persists in exhibitions held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum: *Make Sense* (2015) curated by Su Chia-Ying (蘇嘉瑩) and Kat Hsiao (蕭淋蓁), and *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem—Taipei Biennial 2018* (2018) curated by Wu Mali (吳瑪悧) and Francesco Manacoda. *Make Sense* featured photographs, painting, and video works that portray the distressing presence of marine debris and animal carcasses on melancholic seascapes while also shedding light on the often-overlooked labor of waste collectors.[4] *Post-Nature* called attention to the collective efforts of Chao Jui-Kuang (晁瑞光) and Tainan Community University in monitoring beach waste in southern Taiwan, alongside Ke Chin-Yuan's (柯金源) long-term documentary films chronicling Taiwan's environmental movements since the 1980s.[5] By presenting compelling works that investigate the waste crisis, these exhibitions aimed to emphasize the significance of art in raising public awareness and driving sociopolitical change.

This chapter focuses on two Taiwan-based artists who use discarded objects as their primary materials to explore cultural memory extending beyond the ecocritical framework. Among the artists working with waste, Rahic Talif (拉黑子．達立夫, b. 1962) and Yeh Wei-Li (葉偉立, b. 1971) stand out for their long-term engagement with marine and urban garbage, as well as their aesthetic interventions in creating alternative memorials dedicated to the vanishing aspects of Indigenous and vernacular culture in Taiwan. As Aleida Assmann aptly suggests, garbage dumps can be seen as the remnants of civilization and as archives of both cultural memory and oblivion. Assmann has elucidated how artists create cultural memory by collecting the forgotten and the rejected, analyzing the historical and emotional value embedded in the rubbish archive of the artist Ilya Kabakov (1933–2023) within the context of the totalitarian system of the USSR.[6] Inspired by Aleida Assmann's observations, I examine how the repurposing of waste in Taiwanese art reflects efforts to recover both personal and social memories in the early twenty-first century. I choose the works of Rahic Talif and Yeh Wei-Li as focal points of discussion mainly because their work recog-

2 Meiqin Wang, "Waste in Contemporary Chinese Art," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 76 (Spring 2017): 32–33; Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 141–144, 19–195.

3 Yao Jui-Chung, "Installation Art of Discarded Objects: The Conditions of Taiwan Installation Art in the 1990s (part 4)," *Artco Monthly* 116 (May 2002): 82–87; Lu Pei-Yi, *Art / Movement as a Public Platform: A Study of Contemporary Art and Social Movements* (Taipei: Artco Books, 2024), chapter 6.

4 Su Chia-Ying and Kat Hsiao, eds., *Make Sense* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2015).

5 Wu Mali and Francesco Manacoda, eds., *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem—Taipei Biennial 2018* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2018).

6 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 369–384.

nizes and elevates the cultural role of waste in fostering relationships, the meaningfulness of memories, and the power of imagination. Moving beyond simply highlighting environmental concerns, their artistic practices represent a search for cultural belonging in marginalized regions of Taiwan and offer small-scale alternatives to the memory formations promoted by political parties and election campaigns. Rather than reducing memory to a specific social function or a political agenda, these artists explore the aesthetic and affective dimensions of waste, reflecting on how discarded things materialize memory across time.

The succession of colonial and political regimes since the seventeenth century has put the Taiwanese on a long quest for sovereignty and cultural identity. The rise of the "return-to-reality" intellectual movement in the 1970s, fuels, along with the development of nativist currents after the lifting of the martial law in 1987, the desire to understand Taiwan's complex history and multicultural society.[7] According to Wang Horng-Luen's sociological research, waves of "memory booms" emerged over recent decades. Within this mnemonic landscape, two competing paradigms of memory have coexisted that are highly polarized and controversial. One is the China-centered narrative, which emphasizes the Nationalist government's victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1945; the other is the Taiwan-centered perspective, which highlights Japanese colonialism and the February 28 Massacre of 1947, an event that led to the decades-long martial law and White Terror period.[8] Although these two historical narratives are incompatible and irreconcilable, both stress memories of wars, suffering, and repression, which form the basis of the current ideological conflicts between the Nationalist Party and the Democratic Progressive Party.

In contrast to politicized versions of historical memory on a national level, Rahic Talif and Yeh Wei-Li reframe the materiality and semiotics of discarded objects to regenerate the cultural memory of Taiwan beyond state-defined historical narratives. Their practices stand apart from those by other artists who also incorporate junk materials to evoke the past in several ways. Fang Wei-Wen (方偉文) and Liu Shih-Tung (劉時棟), for example, composed beautiful paintings and installations using fragments of magazines, ephemera, and toys from their personal collections. Ni Xiang (倪祥) and Sim Chang (張哲榕) transformed exhibition spaces into labyrinthine environments filled with myriad used items hoarded by their fathers. These artists draw upon childhood memory and family history activating and harvesting the potential of preowned objects to carry subjective emotions and recuperative capacities. By contrast, Rahic and Yeh dedicate significant amounts of physical labor and aesthetic experimentation to redefining waste as portal to cultural memory rather than as vessel of biographical narratives. This chapter argues that Rahic and Yeh share several distinctive features – migrant identities, collaborative approaches, and a dedication to re-

7 Hsiau A-Chin, *Politics and Cultural Nativism in 1970s Taiwan: Youth, Narrative, Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 46–60.

8 Wang Horng-Luen, "Can We Live Together? Reflections on Transitional Justice and Collective Memory in Taiwan," *Reflexion* 42 (April 2021): 1–61.

thinking value systems – that set them apart from other Taiwanese artists. First, I situate the two artists' waste-related work in the broader context of their migration and relocation experiences and their quest for cultural belonging. Then, I analyze Rahic's Indigenous perspectives embodied in his ocean projects along Taiwan's east coast, exploring how he revives ancestral survival skills, treating marine waste items as "gifts." This is followed by an examination of the curatorial and restorative aspects of Yeh's projects, which combine garbage, antiques, and art in multimedia installations and in happenings at various sites in northern Taiwan. Both artists foreground the materiality and meanings of the displaced waste, preserving while transforming the heritage of vanishing Indigenous and vernacular culture.

The wastescapes of migration and belonging

The inhabitants of Taiwan are commonly divided into people of four ethnic groups: Aboriginals, Hoklos, Hakka, and Mainlanders. However, recent migration trends have complicated this typology, leading scholars of Taiwanese society to reconsider these classifications.[9] Similarly, this essay examines the impact of ethnic diversity and transcultural encounters on art aiming to move beyond the essentializing tendency to understand Taiwanese art as a homogeneous entity. I will analyze the works of Rahic Talif and Yeh Wei-Li, focusing on how their migration experiences shaped their artistic practices. Both artists spent extended periods away from their places of origin and later grappled with the challenges of rediscovering a sense of belonging upon returning to their hometowns.

Rahic Talif, a self-taught artist from the Amis (also known as Pangcah) tribe in Hualien, eastern Taiwan, belongs to the island's largest Indigenous ethnic group, with a population of approximately 140,000. The Amis speak an Austronesian language without written tradition and have preserved their cultural heritage through naming systems, oral transmission, and ritual practices, despite enduring Qing-dynasty conquest, Japanese colonial rule, and assimilation policies under the Chinese Nationalist Party.[10] Rahic left home at the age of sixteen to work on a distant-water fishing fleet for three years. In the 1980s, he moved to Taipei seeking better employment opportunities, which he found in construction and interior design. However, he often concealed his Amis ethnicity and accent to avoid discrimination by members of the Han Chinese society.[11] In 1991, during the rise of the Indigenous movement, Rahic

9 Chiu Kuei-Fen, Dafydd Fell, and Lin Ping, eds., *Migration to and from Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1–10.

10 Huang Shiun-Wey, *Images of Others, Regional Variations and History among the Amis* (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology: Academia Sinica, 2005), 172–220.

11 Lu Mei-Fen, "Observations of the Wakening and Ambivalence of Taiwan Aboriginal Creation Consciousness in the 90's from Gi Lahatz's Process of Creation," *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum* 6, no. 11 (November 2003): 105–124.

Talif returned to his ancestral village, Makotaay, near the Siuguluan River in eastern Taiwan, to reconnect with his Amis heritage and launch his career as a driftwood sculptor. Upon returning home, he found the once-natural rocky shorelines replaced by concrete wave breakers, and the beaches littered with broken glass, plastic, fishing nets, and other discarded items. Drawing on the traditional Amis practice of gathering, known as *miopodpod*, he began collecting flip-flops and other marine waste. Since 2008, he has used these materials to explore his identity and create ocean-themed art installations.[12] His artworks often interweave Amis people's ocean-defined worldview, resilience, and adaptability with a vision for a sustainable environmental future, while questioning the assumed positive impacts of industrial progress and capitalism on his homeland.

Yeh Wei-Li, born in Taipei, emigrated to the United States with his family in 1982, where he spent two decades studying and working. This migration was part of a trend in which a growing number of Taiwanese moved to Western countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia in search of better education and business opportunities from the 1980s onward.[13] Yeh gradually assimilated into the host country, expanding his identity from Taiwanese to Taiwanese-American. Upon returning to Taiwan in 2002, he faced challenges readjusting to the language and customs of his country of birth. In order to acquaint himself with Taiwanese social history, he soon began engaging in collaborative art and spatial renovation projects in historical settlements and deserted sites across the island's northern regions. Yeh collected everyday objects from abandoned buildings and systematically archived debris found along rivers and beaches near his temporary studios at Treasure Hill in Taipei (2003–2007), New Day Cinema in Taoyuan (2010–2012), and a warehouse in Tongluo (2013). He transformed these weathered spaces, located far away from urban centers, into eccentric museums of found objects as part of art residencies and public art programs.[14] Through careful classification and juxtaposition, Yeh not only assembled discarded items as symbols of local culture, but placed heterogeneous objects in close proximity to each other to achieve uncanny and surrealist effects.

The migratory journeys of Rahic and Yeh reveal the flexible and situational nature of their cultural identities, with ethnic boundaries under constant negotiation. The two artists have reconnected with their native places through wastescapes, exploring and reusing marine trash and urban garbage. As their works illustrate, everyday encounters with discarded materials offer opportunities to piece together past ways of

12 Rahic Talif, "Space of the Fifty Steps: The Prologue," *Art Accrediting* 62 (December 2015): 86–93.
13 Tseng Yu-Fen and Lin Pin, "Through the Looking Glass: Migration into and out of Taiwan," in *Migration to and from Taiwan*, eds., Chiu Kuei-Fen, Dafydd Fell, and Lin Ping, 12–25 (London: Routledge, 2014), 17–19.
14 Tseng Shao-Chien, "The Spatial Story and Aesthetic Use: Treasure Hill Tea + Photo Project," *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum* 15, no. 5 (May 2008): 11–38; Tseng Shao-Chien, "The Photographic Story-Telling of Yeh Wei-Li: On the Action and Art of Cultural Memory," in *Constellations: Yeh Shih-Chiang/Yeh Wei-Li*, eds., Chang Tsong-Zung and Yeh Wei-Li (New York: Rizzoli, 2023), 167–176.

living. Driven by a persistent desire to turn remnants of the past into meaningful expressions of the habits and relations of people outside of the art world, the works that this essay discusses propose alternative ways of rendering personal and communal memory beyond ethnic and regional stereotypes.

Gifts that typhoons and the ocean gave

The Pacific Ocean is essential to the livelihood of Taiwan's Amis people, supplying sea vegetation and fish. Using simple, traditional tools, the Amis way of sustainable fishing allows for natural replenishment and adheres to principles of restraint and respect for ocean life. Each year, it is an Amis tradition to celebrate the harvest season, holding the *ilisin* harvest ritual in July to express gratitude to ancestral spirits and the *misa cepo* (ocean reverence) ceremony to pray for peace on the sea and a high catch.[15] Rahic Talif learned in his youth to swim, catch fish and shrimp, and gather seaweed. After working in the fishing and construction trades for thirteen years, he returned to his hometown in 1991 to reconnect with the community and the ocean. The magnificence of the sea is a central theme in his writings, which describe the yearly northeast monsoon that fosters the growth of sea vegetation and the impact of typhoons on cleansing the coastal village.[16] Rahic observed that modern people have become alienated from the sea, while continuously demanding excessive economic and food resources from it. In contrast, the Amis have long adhered to the principle of frugal use of resources at a slow pace and to a small extent, interacting with nature through daily physical labor and in a sustainable way.[17]

Confronted with environmental degradation and rising sea levels, Rahic recalled his father's lament that their living space had been reduced to "only fifty steps," a narrow intertidal zone between the Makotaay village and the sea.[18] The phrase also points to the Amis' precarious existence along the Pacific coast, marked by a long history of colonial violence, social exploitation, and climate emergencies. After a decade of learning Aboriginal customs from Chief Lekal Makor and the elders, and through dedicated social engagement with the Amis community, Rahic was honored in 2002 with the prestigious title of "Father of Youth." This rank holds significant importance within the Amis societal structure, which is organized into a male age hierarchy comprising eight levels. As youth leader, Rahic was entrusted with guiding young men in learning

15 Futuru C.L. Tsai, "Beyond the Fifth Wave: Traditional Marine Knowledge among Amis Spearfishing Men of 'Atolan, Taiwan," *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2022): 139–184.

16 Rahic Talif, *Mangotaay* (Taipei: Wheatfield, 2006), 194–199.

17 Ting Wen-Yu, "Interview with the Contemporary Artist Rahic Talif: The Blue Ocean in Memory," *Farmers Magazine* 329 (July 2017): 14–19.

18 Rahic Talif, "Artist Statement—O saaw no lipaan limapolo / Fifty Paces Remaining," in *The Space of Fifty Steps by Rahic Talif*, exhibition catalogue, ed., Mei-Chen Tseng (Kaohsiung: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 2016), 24–27.

about their cultural history, tribal tales, and ritual practices. He also played a vital role in helping them develop practical skills, such as mountain climbing, carpentry, rattan weaving, and house building.[19]

Rahic especially sought to revive the ancient gathering skill *miopodpod* as a sustainable Indigenous approach to environmental adaptation and resilience. This practice is deeply rooted in the Amis way of living which involves the seasonal gathering of vegetables, fruit, seaweed, and other natural foods, simultaneously showing moderation and respect for the environment that sustains them.[20] Since 1991, Rahic has conducted fieldwork in Makotaay village and nearby river valleys, collecting fragments of broken ceramics once used as ritual vessels. Traditional pantheist beliefs and ancestral worship in the area were weakened by the spread of Christianity in the twentieth century, causing many of these ritual vessels to be abandoned and forgotten. Rahic also repurposed old wooden beams and posts from abandoned houses to create furniture, while collecting driftwood along the coast and carving it into geometric shapes and flowing forms. His sculptures convey dynamic energy, drawing inspiration from ancient myths and dancing figures, yet they deviate from conventional Indigenous art, which often features recognizable tribal totems and icons. His driftwood sculpture *Guardian* (2014) embodies the heroism of the ancestral siblings Sra and Nakaw, who, according to legend, first landed on the island thousands of years ago (Fig. 1). The sculpture's robust form represents the siblings' bravery, while its intricate geometric structure incorporates traditional techniques such as mortise joints and bolts used in tribal houses.

Rahic aspired to artistically express his notion of *palafang* with the sea. In Amis, *palafang* signifies the interactions among tribes and friends and the connection between humans and their environment.[21] This term embodies a living tradition that highlights the value of encounters and exchanges among organisms and materials in the world. His *Action Project for Typhoon* (2008–2012) reflects a profound dialogue with the ocean, as Rahic collected and repurposed thousands of flip-flops that had washed ashore after typhoon season (Fig. 2). The Amis people, attuned to the interdependence between humans and nature, view typhoons as forces of both destruction and rebirth. Typhoons (called *faliyos* in Amis) provide special moments of purification for the home, body, and environment, and the Amis are accustomed to gathering the "gifts" left on their doorsteps – driftwood, plants, and animals brought in by the

19 Liang Chin-Hsia, *Extension of Dreams: Innovation and Heritage of Makotaay Amis Ancient Houses* (Hualien: Rahic Talif, 2008).

20 My interview with Rahic Talif in Dulan Sugar Factory Studio, Taitung, 28 February 2024.

21 Rahic Talif, ed., *Palafang My Encounters: Reinventing Public Art Space Project of Council for Cultural Affairs in 2006: Alternative Practices of Civic Aesthetic* (Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs, 2007), 3–4; Rahic Talif, *Journey in the Space of 50 Steps lima polo'ko awas a mipalafang* (Taitung: Toko Studio, 2019), 16–23.

Figure 1: Rahic Talif, *Guardian*, 2014. Wood, 135 x 420 x 142 cm. Solo Exhibition: The Space of Fifty Steps. Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 2015.

storm.[22] Depending on the spatial features of exhibition venues, Rahic arranged the flip-flops and other discards into varied configurations evoking the shapes of boats, waves, rivers, fish, and mountains to invite viewers to experience the power of turbulent weather phenomena. In these monumental reenactments of *palafang* with the sea, the flip-flops reference not only throwaway merchandise but also the connection between discarded items and their former owners. Rahic imagined the feelings once associated with these "gifts" from the ocean such as certain aesthetic preferences attached to them and also paid attention to the materialized aspects of interpersonal relations. At the 9th Shanghai Biennale in 2012, he titled one of his installations *Objects of Love*, featuring six thousand flip-flops wrapped and compressed into a monumental fishnet bundle, hoisted high above the ground by a crane in a manner similar to the way fishing fleets handle a large catch (Fig. 3). When the net opened, the flip-flops dramatically cascaded to the floor, transforming the "catch" of ordinary footwear into something captivating and thought-provoking.[23]

Figure 2: Rahic Talif, *Typhoon Action Project.* Discarded flip-flops, nylon fishing line, reed, dimensions variable. The 9th Taishin Arts Award Finalist Exhibition, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 2011.

22 Wu Yin-Hui, "Tales from the Drifting Flips-Flops: Rahic's *Action Project for Typhoons*," *Performance Art Redefined* 206 (February 2010), 133; Public Television Station Kids, Driftwood, Flip-Flops, Typhoon Project. https://youtu.be/R7ZzlRWoFvw?si=oF1_YMNdoy3--Uyd. 20 August 2015.

23 Pi Li, "Interview with Rahic Talif: The Prequel of the 9th Shanghai Biennale," *The Artworld* 268 (Oct 2012): 103–118.

Figure 3: Rahic Talif, *Objects of Love*, 2012. Discarded flip-flops, wire, rope, crane, dimensions variable. The 9th Shanghai Biennale, 2012.

Discarded flip-flops, made from synthetic materials that pollute oceans, have been up-cycled by artists worldwide into sculptures, paintings, and installations. Since the turn of the century, artists across Africa, for example in Kenya, Nigeria, Mozambique, and the Republic of South Africa have transformed these shoes into colorful sculptures put

on display at global exhibitions.[24] In Asia, German artist liina klauss has spent over a decade collaborating with NGOs in Bali and Hong Kong to clean beaches and create large-scale land art from discarded flip-flops. Further examples of well established and lesser-known artists across Asia and Africa who work with flipsflop soles are countless. Rahic shares with these artists a commitment to repurpose thrown-away shoes into art that highlights the pervasive issue of plastic pollution. However, his practice is distinguished by its incorporation of Amis cultural concepts such as subsistence gathering, ancestral worship, and pantheism. Additionally, the semi-abstract forms of his works evoke the dynamic power of natural phenomena specific to the area where he made them, which set his art apart from more realistic sculptural representations in a global context.

The Amis consider most objects reusable. In their terminology, there is no word for "trash"; only a few disposable items, such as fallen leaves and shells, are referred to as "*lakaw*."[25] Observing an increase in industrial *lakaw* – flip-flops, glass bottles, plastics, wires, and fishing nets – Rahic began collecting these materials for sculptures and installations in 2008. He also taught craft techniques to young tribesmen and collaborated with artists Chen Jhao-Sing (陳昭興) and Lin Ke-Ji (林克己). In 2013, Rahic launched the *Space of Fifty Steps* series, embarking on a 150-km journey along Provincial Highway Route 11 to collect discarded objects on a daily basis with his collaborator Tsai Meng-Wu (蔡孟婿).[26] His travel journal reflects the deep connection he felt with the intertidal zone and describes the act of picking up litter as creating a personal experience which oscillates between clear consciousness and a subconscious state of mind. He wrote: "Unexpectedly, this opened up a path to childhood memories or even older legends I had long thought lost."[27] In his yearlong coastal odyssey, Rahic envisioned the story of each decomposed slipper, broken bottle, and tattered fishing net, treating each salvaged item as a sentient being and an essential partner in his art-making process. He depicted the daily encounter with flip-flops through rubbings, writings and drawings on the old packaging cloth found at a sugar factory in Dulan (Fig. 4), and sang traditional ballads on the beach and in caves, recorded by the Amis musician Anu Kaliting Sadipongan and the American ethnomusicologist D. J.

24 See Stephanie Gikkas, "The Art of Innovation in Action at Ocean Sole," *Smithsonian Folklife Festival Blog*, May 20, 2014, https://festival.si.edu/blog/2014/the-art-of-innovation-in-action-at-ocean-sole/; Susan Hoffman Fishman, "The Flipflopi Project," *Artists & Climate Change*, July 23, 2018, https://artistsandclimatechange.com/2018/07/23/imagining-water-11-the-flipflopi-project/; Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, K. Holmberg, M. Petersén, J. Stripple, and S. Ullström, "Making Visible, Rendering Obscure: Reading the Plastic Crisis through Contemporary Artistic Visual Representations," *Global Sustainability* 3, e14 (2020): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.10.

25 Rahic Talif, "The Artist Statement: A Beautiful Ocean?," https://rahictalif.com/project/2014a-beautiful-ocean/.

26 Email correspondence with Tsai Meng-Wu, November 8, 2024.

27 Rahic Talif, *Space of the Fifty Steps*, 40–41.

W. Hatfield.[28] Starting from 2015, Rahic also composed intricate pictures with *lakaw*, employing sewing and collage techniques to transform plastic fragments into vibrant, undulating forms. These works evoke his physical sensation of being in the sea and imagine the submerged faces of his ancestors (Fig. 5).

Figure 4: Rahic Talif, *fangcalay ko kaci'orip iso* (Your Way of Life Is Beautiful), from the series Journey, 2013. Pen drawing, acrylic, rubbing, used cloth, broken flip-flop, with inscriptions: Highway Route 11, 151.5k on December 7, 2013.

The practice of gathering *lakaw* has taken on multiple layers of meaning for Rahic. Psychological transference plays a key role: he draws parallels between the aimless, marginal existence of his earlier years and discarded items, finding healing and redemption in the act of cleaning and caring for these objects.[29] He likened gathering discards to finding his own shadows and recognizing his innermost self, often conversing with the various *lakaw* and depicting their forms in his sketchbooks. Moreover, the communal gathering of marine litter can serve as a collective experience of transnational exchange. Recent studies recognize Taiwan as the original center of Austronesian migrations across Southeast Asia and Oceania, highlighting linguistic and cultural

28 For an analysis of Indigenous voices, see D. J. W. Hatfield, "Polyphony and Ecocritical Discourse in Contemporary Pangcah Art: Journeying with Rahic in the *Space of 50 Steps*," *UNESCO Multi-disciplinary E-Journal in the Arts* 10, no. 1, (2023) *Taiwanese Indigenous Contemporary Art: Polyphony and Mipaliw:* 1–30.

29 Rahic Talif, *Mangotaay*, 50–51.

Figure 5: Rahic Talif, *Forgotten Faces* I, 2015. Discarded plastics, nylon fishing line, copper nails. 180 x 90 x 5 cm. Photo by Wu Shin-Ying.

similarities with regions such as New Zealand and Hawaii.[30] Rahic and Tsai traveled to Lingayen in the Philippines in 2008 and to the Bay of Manado in Indonesia in 2009 to conduct fieldwork on the broader Austronesian culture, observing how the inhabitants lived by the sea and managed the impact of typhoons. As a gesture of solidarity with Austronesian neighbors, Rahic worked with local residents and schoolchildren to gather plastic waste from beaches. Rahic further collaborated with Indonesian artists on junk installation works for the Jakarta Biennial and Biennale Jogja in 2021.[31] These experiences abroad attested to the fact that many nations in the Austronesian world face similar challenges related to marine waste pollution and climate change. Connecting Taiwan to other islands, Rahic's art evokes not only the Amis tradition of *miopod-pod* but also the history of maritime migration, trade, and cultural exchange across Southeast Asia.

Mending and curating transient objects

Unlike Rahic, who is committed to reviving Amis heritage, Yeh Wei-Li is drawn to historical sites and artifacts that evoke a sense of nostalgia for the Taiwan of his youth. He emigrated with his family to the States, where he stayed from 1982 to 2002, experiencing cultural difference, displacement, and assimilation amid tensions caused by

30 Frank Muyard, "Comparativism and Taiwan Studies: Analyzing Taiwan in/out of Context, or Taiwan as an East Asian New World Society," in *Comparatizing Taiwan*, eds., Shu-Mei Shih and Ping-Hui Liao, 13–32 (London: Routledge, 2014), 23–29.

31 Due to Covid-19, these two exhibitions were prepared, curated and displayed online. Email correspondence with Tsai Meng-Wu on May 8, 2024.

racial politics. Holding an MFA in Photography from Rhode Island School of Art, Yeh continues to deal with the subjects of memory and migration, expanding the potential of the photographic medium with his writings, videos, and installations. Since he returned to Taiwan at age 31, Yeh has adopted the roles of artist, curator and educator, appropriating the methodology of contemporary archaeology, i. e. scavenging and deciphering discarded objects found in his living and working spaces in the outskirts of Taipei, Taoyuan, and Miaoli.[32] Over the past two decades, Yeh has engaged in long-term architectural renovation, junk appropriation, and photographic storytelling in collaboration with art students, writers, and residents in those places that are undergoing processes of urban renewal and real estate development. He not only reorganized and repaired discarded objects, but experimented with various archival and curatorial methods to interpret and display diverse items used by people outside of the art world.

From 2003 to 2007, Yeh was engaged with the *Treasure Hill Tea and Photo Project* for an art residency program funded by the Taipei City Department of Cultural Affairs. It marked a pivotal period for Yeh's spatial practice and the transformation of Treasure Hill, a dilapidated village at the periphery of Taipei City. Most of the 500 residents had been evicted, but Yeh connected with those remaining by turning his studio into a public teahouse and photo salon. With the assistance of Wu Yu-Hsin (吳語心), Leo Wang (王相評), Liu Ho-Jang (劉和讓), and some art students, he developed four series of works: *Portrait*, *Delineations*, *Trash*, as well as *Garden and Archive*.[33] Going beyond the dominant logics of tourism and activism, the project enriched the historical understanding of the site through environmental improvement, photo-text series, and the curation of exhibitions and performances. Yeh and his team cleaned the area, salvaging items like wine jars, photos, diaries, statues, souvenirs, suitcases, and clothes left by former residents, poor veterans, laborers, and immigrants living there since the 1960s without property rights. Although the objects had lost their primary functions, they bore traces of personal use and human contact, evoking feelings of melancholy and visceral responses. Yeh and his team further transformed an abandoned house into an archive to store and display found objects imprinted with cultural memory (Fig. 6). They created a garden on a terrace formed by a landslide and hosted poetry readings and musical performances. In 2006, public events such as sound installations as well as exhibitions of paintings and photography took place in the darkroom, studio, rooftop, and around the pond. Although the archive and garden were dismantled by the city government in 2008, Yeh showcased a model activity of community engagement by repurposing the space and curating abandoned objects.

Yeh continued to foreground the importance of discarded objects in urban rezoning areas after leaving Treasure Hill. In 2010, he founded the *Antiquity-Like Rubbish*

32 See Tseng, "The Photographic Story-Telling of Yeh Wei-Li," 167–176.

33 Yeh Wei-Li, *The THTP Project/Phase Five/Oversight* (Vancouver: Center A Vancouver International Center for Contemporary Asian Art, 2008).

Figure 6: Yeh Wei-Li, *Archive Room*, from the *Treasure Hill Tea & Photo Project*, 2006. Four-color offset print, photography, text, 86 x 112 cm, 700 copies displayed at Taipei Biennial 2008.

Research & Development Syndicate, which remains active until today. Composed of fifteen to seventeen artists, writers, and curators, the collective operates in transitional spaces across northern Taiwan, such as the abandoned New Day Cinema in Yangmei (Fig. 7), an old warehouse in Tongluo, a defunct police station in Beitou, and a social housing unit in Nangang. Team members vary according to each location, task, and occasion. The ironically named "syndicate" holds dual significance. On the one hand, it establishes Yeh's social identity as the founder and CEO of an "enterprise" dedicated to collecting and reworking discarded objects. Early on, some townspeople referred to Yeh as an "antique collector," while others saw him as a "proprietor of rubbish." Thus, Yeh adopted this hybrid terminology to acknowledge the ambiguous boundary between antiques and trash. On the other hand, the term "syndicate" reflects the collective's shared goal of uncovering and expanding the value of seemingly useless waste items. Far from being a profit-driven corporation with a formal management structure or a crime syndicate, the team emphasizes networking and collaboration among people, encouraging individual members to develop unique perspectives and artistic approaches to the reinterpretation of found objects.[34]

34 Chiu Chun-Ta, "The Inspection of Relationship to the Syndicate: Yeh Wei-Li's *Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research and Development Syndicate in 206*," *Modern Art* 164 (2012): 66–76. The team of sixteen members comprises divisions in terms of research and creative work. The researchers include Chiu Chun-Ta (presently assistant professor at Tamkang University), Daisy Li (presently curator at Hongah Museum), Freya Chou (curator of the Taipei Biennale 2024), and Wu Yu-Hsin (collaborator and wife of

Figure 7: Yeh Wei-Li, *Yuhsin, Superman, and Melody at New Day Street*, 2010. Kodak Duraclear Transparency, wood and metal light box. 81 x 110 x 14 cm.

The diverse objects collected by the syndicate from 2010 to 2012 mainly stem from the Tayuan coastline, a local public cemetery, and roadside dumps. Sea waves brought in items like broken buoys, fragments of fishing boats, shoes, furniture, bric-a-brac, and kitschy souvenirs, while the reconstruction of the public cemetery yielded cracked altarpieces, tombstones, and ritual urns. Though the origins of these discarded items were often difficult to trace, the materials fascinate beholders as they carry an aura of mystery. Through mending and recontextualizing discarded things, the syndicate focused less on manufacturing "products" for financial return and more on exploring the traces of vanishing customs and lifestyles embodied by "antiquity-like rubbish."[35] In doing so the syndicate conferred historical and artistic value to the transient objects while conveying a response to the economic situation of Greece at the time. One of the syndicate's members, the writer and curator Daisy Li, states that the financial crisis in

Yeh Wei-Li). The creative group includes Chen Chi-Pan, Tsai Chi-Min, Liu Chi-Yi, Chen Ku-Ming, Feng Chih-Ming, Shih Pei-Chun, Yan Gang, Tsai Chia-An, Leo Wang, Gary Wang, Den Wen-Chi, and Chang Yu-Hon.

35 Yeh Wei-Li, "Project Statement: Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research & Development Syndicate at New Day Street", unpublished (2011).

2012 intensified a sense of uncertainty around long-held values and judgments when Greece – often regarded as the cradle of Western civilization – was downgraded to "junk status" due to high debt levels.[36] Anselm Franke, curator of the Taipei Biennial 2012, invited the syndicate to exhibit in room 206 of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, originally designed for the permanent collection (Fig. 8). He viewed their work as an homage to the uncertainty of classifications and the movement of objects across ontological and ideological boundaries. In Franke's assessment, this challenge to stable object hierarchies creates a space of hybridity and monstrosity, addressing the relationship between history and imagination, central to the biennale theme "Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction."[37]

Figure 8: Yeh Wei-Li, *Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research & Development Syndicate in 206*, 2012. Taipei Biennale 2012 at Taipei Museum of Fine Arts.

The syndicate has created experimental possibilities to explore the negotiation and juxtaposition of vernacular artifacts, developing two primary approaches to working with found objects. First, Yeh initiated a dynamic stage for displaying antiquity-like

36 Daisy Li, "Talking Rubbish," *Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research and Development Syndicate Quarterly* 1 (September 2012): 1–6.

37 Anselm Franke, *Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction, Taipei Biennial 2012* (Taipei: Taipei Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 92–93.

objects, featuring a wide array of scavenged items, documentary videos, sculptures, paintings, live music, and lighting design in public spaces and art venues. These installations, accompanied by several "happenings" that include lighting shows, music, and dance, attracted attention from both local residents and art enthusiasts.[38] In this process, discarded items such as buoys, shoes, toys, sports equipment, and wooden tablets with inscribed slogans were repurposed and reconfigured into new forms, distinct from their previous appearances and original practical uses. Even prestigious venues like the 2012 Shanghai Biennial, Eslite Gallery in Taipei, and Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong have invited the syndicate to showcase their compelling installations of revitalized artifacts (Fig. 9).[39] Their assemblages of vernacular items take on the appearance of a memorial to bygone eras and embodies an inventory of loss, while the carefully crafted *mise-en-scène* produces eerie and theatrical effects designed to respond to and revitalize the static white cube settings of museums and galleries. Hong Kong-based curator and art dealer Chang Tsong-Zung (also known as Johnson Chang) has pointed out that the large-scale installations by Yeh's syndicate evoke a visual experience akin to the ways ethnographic museums display their collections.[40] However, there are notable differences in intentions and methods between them. While ethnographic museums present artifacts as representative of specific cultures, the syndicate reworks found objects by altering their forms and establishing new connections and relationships between them and their beholders.

Furthermore, Yeh repairs objects through a series of physical and morphological alterations, reconstructing them and breathing new life into each piece and attributes it with new functions. For example, the *Sofa Prototype* (2015) was crafted from a faux leather couch found in an abandoned speaker factory in Tonglou in 2012 (Fig. 10). The factory's owner had migrated to China, following a trend of businesspeople and enterprises moving to China since the 1990s. Yeh and an assistant deconstructed the sofa's synthetic leather and straw linings, showcasing the cotton and linen fillings in transparent acrylic cases, and reusing the leather for making four footballs. In the installation, the furniture was enhanced with sturdy wooden frames, accompanied by black-and-white photographs of the sofa at the abandoned factory. The *Sofa Prototype*, originally an industrially manufactured sofa, was reimagined through a new design and carpentry as well as sewing, elevating the object to the level of a singular artwork showcased at exhibitions such as IT Park Gallery and Art Basel Hong Kong.[41] The

38 See the New Day Street open studio and happenings programs on the posters, September 2010, March and April 2011.

39 Daisy Li, "Talking Rubbish," *Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research and Development Syndicate Quarterly* 1 (September 2012): 1–6.

40 Chang Tsong-Zung, "Yeh Wei-Li the Entrepreneur: Antiquity-like Rubbish Research & Development Syndicate," brochure for *Yeh Wei-Li Solo Exhibition: Selected Works 2010 to Present* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2016).

41 Ether Lu, "A Note on Yeh Wei-Li's Philosophy in Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research and Development Syndicate Project," exhibition brochure for Art Basel Hong Kong (Taipei: Chi-Wen Gallery, 2015).

Figure 9: Yeh Wei-Li, *Antiquity-like Rubbish Research & Development Syndicate: Selected Works: 2010 to Present*, 2016. Solo Exhibition at Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, 2016.

Taoyuan Museum of Fine Arts acquired the *Sofa Prototype*, along with four chairs, faux-leather balls, and photographs, recognizing its significance in transforming discarded objects into unique works that blur the line between mass-produced merchandize and artwork.[42]

Through curation and repair, Yeh conveys his nostalgic longing for a material culture of the past by working with discarded objects. By selecting, sorting, and mending these items, he and his team give them new life, positioning them in the grey area between garbage and art, while infusing a sense of incongruity and humor. This aesthetic intervention contrasts with the ethos of preservation seen in Yeh's previous *Treasure Hill* project and in Chinese artist Song Dong (宋冬) and his mother Zhao Xiangyuan's (趙湘源) *Waste Not* (2005), a monumental installation featuring over 10,000 household objects from Zhao's possession. As Wu Hung noted, the power of *Waste Not* lies in Zhao's dedication to preserving family memories by meticulously saving each used item over decades, reflecting her struggle for survival and commitment to the virtue of frugality during the adverse conditions of the Cultural Revolution.[43] Rather than narrating a specific family history, Yeh's syndicate gathered discarded items that

42 "Sofa Prototype," artwork information, Taoyuan Museum of Fine Arts: https://collections.culture.tw/tmofa_collectionsweb/collection.aspx?GID=MR04MB.

43 Wu Hung, ed., *Wu jin qi yong: Lao bai xing di dang dai yi shu* (Shanghai: People's Publishing House, 2011), 4–23.

Figure 10a: Yeh Wei-Li, *Sofa Found in a Factory in Tonglou*, 2012.
10b: Yeh Wei-Li, *Sofa Test Drive*, 2015. Photograph, 70 x 90 cm.
10c: Yeh Wei-Li, *Sofa Prototype*, 2015. Wooden-framed chairs, faux-leather balls, photography. Art Basel Hong Kong, 2015.

moved across places and gained new meanings through displacement and curatorial work.

Regenerating memory

Contemporary junk-related art across Asia, Africa, and the West predominantly addresses ecological crises and the consequences of industrial development and consumerism, often aligning with environmental activism. Additionally, waste can be reimagined as a medium that preserves personal, familial, and collective memories. This chapter has highlighted how Rahic Talif and Yeh Wei-Li transform waste into mediums for creating mnemonic communities and public spaces for dialogue through the poetic restructuring of materiality. Their works transcend specific political agendas or moral incentives, crafting diverse, open-ended narratives from discarded objects. In doing so, they challenge the notion of a singular concensus or a monolithic version of cultural memory.

Both artists left their homelands during adolescence and returned many years later as outsiders. They navigated ethnic and linguistic differences, and experienced migration, displacement, and reintegration. For Rahic, the labor of gathering flip-flops washed ashore after typhoons reflects a yearning to revive Indigenous survival skills of *miopodpod.* His view of marine litter as "gifts" embodies the Amis perspective on cherishing natural resources in the critical zone along the Pacific Coast. For Yeh, the act of scavenging junk serves as fertile ground for an imaginary encounter with the Taiwan of his youth. Through archiving, curation, and restoration of heterogeneous objects, he redefines his migrant identity, while illuminating the transient nature of abandoned sites and artifacts across history.

We can detect several common features in Rahic's and Yeh's art. One is that their practices cross the limits of ethnicity and the boundaries of place. Instead of selecting the things that would typically represent their ethnic backgrounds and regional identities, they reused discards that came from other areas to their neighborhoods. Second, both have critically examined and creatively revised conventional classificatory systems by repurposing trash and rethinking the hierarchy of objects. Third, they democratized the creative experience by involving other artists, young students, and local residents in the processes of collecting junk and engaging in artmaking. This participatory approach has challenged the exclusivity and elitism often associated with the art world, enabling collaborators to actively subvert culturally defined dynamics of judgement. In sum, Rahic's and Yeh's artworks act as conduits for sensory interaction, encouraging viewers to re-enter history and serving as alternative memorials for disappearing elements of Indigenous and vernacular cultures in a world characterized by rapid change and memory loss. Both artists have developed poignant ways to reframe waste as both a symbol of transience and a medium for regenerating Taiwan's cultural memory.

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Meiqin Wang

On the Ground of the Discarded

Integrating Ecology and Socially Engaged Public Art in Chongqing

Abstract: This chapter explores the 2020 Chongqing Eco Art Festival (CEAF) as a case study in the intersection of contemporary art, community engagement, and environmental responsibility in China. Situated within the larger framework of China's ongoing urban transformation and the national eco-civilization movement, CEAF illustrates how contemporary Chinese artists creatively engage with discarded materials, neglected neighborhoods, and disenfranchised populations to foster a deeper ecological awareness. Through public interventions, community-based art projects, and participatory ecological initiatives, CEAF integrates creative reuse by repurposing discarded objects and revitalizing urban spaces. These efforts reflect a sustainable ethos grounded in traditional agricultural practices and local ecological knowledge. CEAF also highlights how Chinese eco art practitioners adapt their work to local environmental challenges while contributing to the broader global discourse on ecological awakening in contemporary art-making. The festival's focus on micro-urban renewal and grassroots social co-governance demonstrates art's potential as a catalyst for rethinking humanity's relationship with the environment. By reintegrating art into everyday life and addressing the often-invisible environmental consequences of carbon-intensive living and its disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities, CEAF fosters ecological visibility while empowering local residents to take active roles in the stewardship of their shared environments. Ultimately, the chapter argues that CEAF exemplifies the transformative potential of eco art to inspire collective ecological action, offering place-specific approaches to sustainable living through creative reuse, community regeneration, and socially engaged public art.

Keywords: sustainability, ecological consciousness, ecological sensibility, social regeneration, community engagement

On December 26, 2020, Jixing Farmers Market, a modest neighborhood market in Youdian Zhilu Community – an old, rundown area adjacent to Huangjueping Street in the Jiulongpo district of Chongqing – unexpectedly became the focal point of city-wide attention. It served as the venue for the opening of Chongqing's first community ecological garden, attracting visitors from across the city and beyond. They were presented with creative and artistic interventions of the less-than desirable environment, which had been characterized by the dull monotone of hard-core industrial architecture and unsightly litters of discarded objects around corners of terraces and corridors, spaces frequented daily by the community's residents. The transformation began at the entrance, set along a long staircase adjacent to a local kindergarten (Fig. 1). This placement imbued the entrance with a sense of formality as visitors ascended toward

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-009

the garden. The once drab concrete stairs and weathered walls, cracked and peeling, were now adorned with brightly colored paintings of flowers, plants, and animals – fitting references to the kindergarten nearby. Children's artworks hung on the walls, while vines and flowering plants, strategically placed along the narrow terrace, further enlivened the open space.

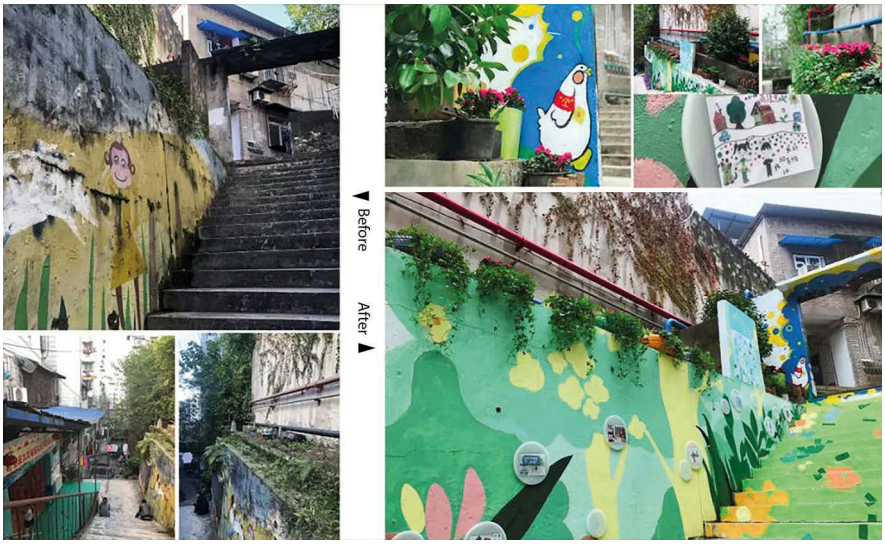

Figure 1: View of the staircase leading to the kindergarten before and after the construction of the eco garden. Photos taken in 2020.

Continuing beyond this welcoming staircase, visitors encountered a series of small gardens – each distinct in size, shape, and elevation – including the "climbing garden," "herb garden," "sky garden," "edible garden," and "planter garden." The tour culminated at the "ecological pool." These diverse gardens transformed an ordinary walkway into a verdant corridor, inviting visitors to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between landscape planning and organic growth. Named "Spring of Huangjueping," the garden embodied its creators' aspirations to infuse a sense of "green" renewal into this neglected neighborhood, symbolizing the potential for revitalization through ecological art. Conceived as a community-based ecological art exhibition, "Spring of Huangjueping" was curated by art professors Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (SFAI), Beijing-based landscape designer Gao Jian,[1] and

1 Gao Jian is the founder and chief designer of Gaia Design Studio, a landscape design expert with a Master's from Peking University, and co-founder of Gaia Nature School, with roles in various environmental and design committees in China.

Chongqing-based urban planner Ni Lan.[2] This project sought to engage the local community in efforts to rejuvenate their living environment. It involved 50 artists and art students collaborating with a dozen local residents to transform the neighborhood through painting and planting, with the goal of raising public awareness of ecological art's potential while fostering a sense of agency among ordinary citizens. The project encouraged grassroots collective actions to improve both the ecological and aesthetical conditions of the neighborhood.

As one of six parallel exhibitions of the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival (CEAF), "Spring of Huangjueping" exemplified CEAF's emphasis on environmentally conscious artistic practices, grounded in community participation. CEAF, led by SFAI faculty in collaboration with various experts from public and private institutions across China, spanned the megacity of Chongqing, offering exhibitions, performances, workshops, forums, and community-based projects centered on ecology. Under the banner of ecological art (hereafter eco art), the festival featured a wide range of creative endeavors by artists engaging with themes such as sustainability, regeneration, and environmental responsibility. In their work, eco art, an evolving category of contemporary art recently reconceptualized by some as planetary art,[3] manifests as a constellation of diverse practices that seek to "inspire caring and respect, stimulate dialogue, and encourage the long-term flourishing of the social and natural environments in which we live."[4] It can also be said that they are producing what Dipesh Chakrabarty conceptualizes as "habitability," making "a planet friendly to the continuous existence of complex life" through locally specific, ecologically charged interventions.[5]

This chapter situates CEAF within the growing enthusiasm towards the intersection of art and ecology in China, evident in both large and small ecology-themed exhibitions across the country.[6] This momentum is bolstered by the Chinese government's promotion of eco-civilization as a national discourse, aligning with the broader goal of "building a beautiful China" championed by the Xi Jinping administration. First introduced by Chinese scholars in the 1980s as a critique of state-led developmentism and its environmental toll, the concept of eco-civilization entered official discourse under Hu Jintao in the early 2010s, reflecting belated recognition of severe

2 Ni Lan, Deputy Chief Planner and Senior Engineer at China State Construction Design Group, researches the relationship between the art and cultural industries and regional development, with a focus on urban renewal and rural revitalization.

3 Hai Ren, Bo Zheng, and Mali Wu, "Planetary Art in the Sinophonecene," *Verge* 8, no. 2 (2022): 24–45.

4 Amara Geffen, et al, *Ecoart in Action* (New York: New Village Press, 2022), xx.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category," *Critical Inquiry* 46 (2019): 21; also see Ren, Zheng, and Wu, "Planetary Art." 25.

6 Notable exhibitions before 2020 include the 2016 "Ecology · Art · Human" in Shijiazhuang Art Museum, Shijiazhang, the 2019 "Global Exhibition of Ecological Art" initiated by the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the 2019 "Imbalance—Ecology · Environment · Art" in OCT Creative Exhibition Center in Shenzhen; the 2019 "Future · Garden · World—Ecological Art Festival" in Lixianghu Art Center in Chongqing, and the 2019 "Healing Land Exhibition" in the True Color Museum in Suzhou.

ecological degradation.[7] Under Xi's leadership, eco-civilization gained elevated prominence, becoming a cornerstone of environmental policies and being enshrined in the Constitution in 2018.[8] However, its political adoption has not necessarily translated into substantive environmental progress.[9] Additionally, Paolo Magagnoli notes that the discourse has led some to frame the environmental crisis as a non-Chinese issue by idealizing Confucian and Daoist traditions, releasing elites from their responsibility for ecological destruction since the Mao-era.[10] Nevertheless and regardless of whether this was intended or not, the state's endorsement of eco-civilization has also opened avenues for grassroots ecological mobilizations. Ecologically conscious artists, tapping into this official discourse, are now merging critical reflections on China's environmental challenges with public art projects aimed at embedding ecological awareness into the daily lives of citizens. Chongqing, a city that has undergone significant transformation from its industrial past, has emerged as a focal point for this artistic movement, due in part to many local art professionals actively pursuing ecologically charged public art practices.

Delving into the origin, programing, and key works of CEAF, this chapter explores how the festival's curators merge socially engaged public art with ecological sensibility to address pressing environmental and social issues in Chongqing while experimenting with grassroots social co-governance. Socially engaged public art, in this context, refers to creative practices situated in urban neighborhoods, rural villages, or everyday spaces, where community involvement, dialogue, collaboration, and social transformation are paramount.[11] Focusing on CEAF's reimagining of the discarded—whether objects or places—this chapter explores the environmental and ecological implications of artistic interventions that involve repurposing, renewing, and restoring discarded elements. It posits that such practices bring art, people, and nature together for mutually beneficial "metabolic exchanges,"[12] thus enhancing habitability.

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7 For an in-depth study of the transformation of ecological civilization from an intellectual discourse to a political discourse, see Maurizio Marinelli, "How to Build a 'Beautiful China' in the Anthropocene," *Chinese Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 3 (2018): 365–386. For an official account of it, see Zhang Yunfei, "Developing socialist ecological civilization," *China Daily Global*, August 26, 2019, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-08/26/content_37505503.htm.

8 See Arthur Hanson, "Ecological Civilization in the People's Republic of China: Values, Action, and Future Needs," 2019, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/545291/eawp-021-ecological-civilization-prc.pdf; PRC, "China's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2018," https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/China_2018.pdf?lang=en.

9 Marinelli, "How to Build a 'Beautiful China'," 378.

10 Paolo Magagnoli, "The Civilized Artist Beautifies Pollution: Zhao Liang's Water and Beijing Green," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 372.

11 See Meiqin Wang, "Introduction," in *Socially Engaged Public Art in East Asia*, ed. Meiqin Wang (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022), 1–21.

12 In referencing "metabolic exchanges," I draw on John Bellamy Foster's concept of the "metabolic rift," rooted in Marx's analysis of the disrupted relationship between humanity and nature under capitalism. This rift has contributed to the global ecological crisis by severing the vital, material interactions between society and the environment. Foster's work calls for a dialectical approach to

The chapter's title, "On the Ground of the Discarded," reflects this exploration: "ground" signifies both the physical terrain and the foundational principles that underpin material interactions between artists, recycled objects, aging communities, neglected places, and the deteriorating environment. "The discarded," whether tangible objects or intangible spaces, becomes a catalyst for critical artistic expressions that transcend aesthetic boundaries, contributing to a broader ecological narrative.

Chongqing Ecological Art Festival (CEAF) and regeneration of the discarded

The 2020 CEAF was a large scale, technically grassroots-initiated, and officially endorsed public art event that reflected the growing momentum of ecological art in contemporary China. It comprised a core, six parallel exhibitions, three special action plans in the form of community-based projects, workshops, and a diverse array of public talks and other educational programs as well as an academic conference focused on eco art and ecological agriculture. The festival was co-conceived by Wang Lin, a renowned art critic and curator of numerous contemporary Chinese art exhibitions both in China and abroad. Wang, who has long been a leading figure in the art scene in Chongqing and its neighboring regions, collaborated with the aforementioned curators Zeng Tu and Zeng Linxiang, both active in community engagement and socially engaged public art, and Jin Lipeng, an artist and educator devoted to ecological discourse.

All four figures are faculty members of SFAI. The three curators have founded their own non-profit art organizations to advance their artistic visions and support creative practices outside the academic sphere. Zeng Tu established Dimensions Art Center in 2013 as a platform for fostering both local and international art, with a focus on community engagement.[13] Wang Lin founded Tongmen Art Center in 2019 to promote social and community outreach through art education and public welfare initiatives.[14] In the same year, Zeng Linxiang founded Essence Art Center, dedicated to

addressing environmental challenges, critically examining the socio-economic structures that perpetuate environmental degradation while advocating for solutions that respect ecological limits. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) and "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *The American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (1999): 366–405.

13 Dimensions Art Center, as introduced on its website, integrates art exhibitions, international cultural exchanges, artist residencies, creative incubation, charitable projects, community art education, and eco art initiatives, combining academic research with practical engagement to serve as a platform for fostering both local and international art, and cultural development.

14 Tongmen Art Center, as introduced via its WeChat public account, focuses on social and community outreach through art education, charity work, and public welfare initiatives, offering training programs, residencies, and forums while promoting local engagement, public exchanges, and online

preserving and innovating traditional Chinese arts, promoting urban and rural art education, and producing socially engaged public art.[15] Jin Lipeng, on the other hand, launched China's first eco art course at SFAI in 2017, which he subsequently developed into a major. Wang Lin, the most senior and well-connected of the group, assumed the role of chief curator for CEAF and led the core exhibition, while the others were responsible for various festival components. Each curator also invited other experts to join their respective curatorial teams for individual exhibitions and projects, expanding the festival's pool of human resources.

As a joined endeavor led by these art professors, CEAF benefited greatly from their professional, institutional, social, and governmental networks, which allowed them to secure support from major public institutions and relevant government agencies in Chongqing. These included SFAI and Chongqing Artists Association as major official sponsors, and three neighborhood committees as key partners. Funding for the festival came from diverse sources, including curriculum funds from SFAI, social funds secured by the curators through their respective organizations, and projects funds from neighborhood committees. The festival's venues were city-wide, ranging from university exhibition halls and outdoor spaces to independent art spaces, an international convention center, and streets and open areas of residential complexes in various neighborhoods. In scale, public outreach, and community engagement, CEAF was a major collective endeavor, marking a significant development in the emerging field of eco art in China.

CEAF's realization is primarily the result of various community-engaged public art projects that Zeng Tu and Zeng Linxiang had led since 2018. Through these projects, they had established a broad collaborative network of art professors and art students from universities within and outside Chongqing also including local districts offices and neighborhood committees.[16] Additionally, CEAF built upon a small-scale eco art exhibition curated by the two Zengs for SFAI in 2019. These initiatives culminated in the impressive scale of CEAF, which involved hundreds of participants, including professional artists, art faculty, students, volunteers, and community members, all contributing to its various programs. Wang Lin envisioned the festival as a multidimensional platform exploring the potential of eco art not only as an art category but also as a methodology to stimulate community engagement and foster a paradigm

exhibitions, all with a commitment to socially engaged art, innovative contemporary culture, and professionalism.

15 Essence Art Center, as introduced via its WeChat public account, is dedicated to the preservation and innovation of traditional Chinese arts, urban and rural art education, public art projects, cultural exchanges, and consulting on intangible heritage, folk culture, and design, while also developing art derivatives and conducting historical, and cultural research.

16 Those universities are based in seven cities spreading along the upper and lower reaches of the Yangtze River – one of China's two most crucial waterways, including Chengdu, Chongqing, Wuhan, Nanjing, Wuxi, Hangzhou, and Shanghai. Recognizing their interconnectedness through this vital river system, the curatorial team of CEAF considers these cities as components of a major ecological network, strategically situated for collaboration and synergy.

shift in how art, nature, and human life are interconnected.[17] He and the other curators proclaimed an ambitious mission for CEAF:

> To repair and protect ecosystems, engage in socially conscious practices and community actions with a problem awareness in political, economic, cultural, rights-related, and ethical issues, enable ecology to become a public concern, increase public participation, promote fair environmental sharing, and rebuild a new way of life for the community.[18]

The core exhibition of CEAF, titled "Regeneration," focused on the value of discarded objects under the theme "respect trash, reject waste," showcasing their regeneration into aesthetic works through creative processes.[19] Although the least community-engaged of CEAF's programs due to its conventional format as an exhibition held in an established institution, "Regeneration" presented a concentrated display of works by contemporary Chinese artists – twenty in total from across China, invited by Wang Lin – who engaged with ecology-related sociocultural issues. Wang Lin reflected on the exhibition's theme, drawing from his observation as a professor at SFAI:

> Every graduation season, I see discarded objects piled up like mountains from students who are leaving school; the property management staff have to transport the waste to landfill sites, truckload after truckload. This is a shocking waste of resources.[20]

Here, Wang identifies a familiar phenomenon and a pressing issue in contemporary Chinese society: the prevalence of a disposable culture, particularly in urban areas, where rising material abundance has contributed to rampant wastefulness. This imprudent throw-away behavior is not limited to university students; it can be observed across society, from kindergarten children to the general populace. Against this backdrop, the curators of CEAF sought to use eco art to challenge this pervasive wastefulness and critique the rampant disposable culture. The exhibition featured works by artists who explored the aesthetic value of discarded objects or critically reflected on ecologically insensitive lifestyles. It was the curators' hope that artworks, created mostly from recycled materials, would encourage viewers to see objects that they tend to discard so easily in a new light. Through the act of recycling, the artists put theory in practice.

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17 Li Jiali 李家丽, "Wang Lin tan shengtai yishu: yi wanwu wei chidu" 王林谈生态艺术：以万物为尺度 [Wang Lin talks about ecoart: using wanwu as the measure], November 12, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9959636.

18 Li Jiali 李家丽, "Zunzhong laji zunzhong feipin! 2020 Chongqing shengtai yishuji kaimu尊重垃圾尊重废品！2020重庆生态艺术季开幕 (Respect the trash, respect the discarded: 2020 Chongqing Ecoart Festival opens), November 9, 2020, http://www.sinology.cn/mess/w18huod/20201109147342.shtml.

19 Sohu, "Zaishen—2020nain shengtai yishu zuopin quanguo yaoqingzhan kaimu shi!再生—2020年生态艺术作品全国邀请展开幕式！(Regeneration—opening ceremony of the 2020 national invitational exhibition of eco art works!), November 28, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/430777154_100132389.

20 Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks."

As I have argued elsewhere, the artistic trend to use discarded items simultaneously reflects and critiques the rapid accumulation of waste resulting from China's embrace of global consumerism and urban-focused development.[21] My analysis of artists working with waste emphasizes their critical approach, which raises awareness of the increasingly severe social and environmental consequences of overconsumption and waste production. From another standpoint, Margaret Hillenbrand critiques the omission of the figure of the waste picker in many artworks that engage with waste, suggesting that this absence reveals deeper issues of appropriation and class tensions.[22] She contends that this trend in art, while grappling with precarious experiences of (post)modernity, often distances itself from those who are most affected by the waste economy such as marginalized laborers. Despite these differences in scholarly interpretation, both positions recognize the prominence of waste as a crucial subject in contemporary Chinese art.

This chapter proposes an additional perspective on the creative reuse of discarded materials, which relates to the environmental footprint of artistic production.[23] As the world faces an escalating ecological crisis, marked by extreme weather events, resource depletion, and pervasive pollution,[24] art professionals across the world find themselves at a critical juncture. Many are increasingly compelled to address environmental challenges through their artistic practices. Notably, art curator and educator Linda Weintraub advocates for a comprehensive examination of the environmental impacts of art-making, urging a deeper consideration of how art materials are sourced, processed, transported, exhibited, and eventually disposed of.[25] Her critique calls attention to the entanglement of the art world with extractivist and unsustainable capitalist systems, a mode of operation that dominates much of global culture. Deep reflection concerning ecology has also emerged among art scholars writing about East Asian art, so much so that Zheng Bo and Sohl Lee argue that it is unethical to "delay the incorporation of ecological thinking in our teaching and research."[26] Their assertion highlights the urgency of engaging with environmental issues in a world facing profound ecological challenges, adding that artists can no longer afford to be uninformed by ecological thinking in their creative work.

It has become significant for artists to adopt ecologically responsible practices, such as the recycling of materials, to reduce their environmental impact in light of

21 Meiqin Wang, "Waste in contemporary Chinese art," *The Newsletter-International Institute for Asian Studies* 76 (2017): 32–33.

22 Margaret Hillenbrand, "Ragpicking as Method," *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 16, no. 2 (2019): 260–297.

23 IPCC, "IPCC Sixth Assessment Report," March 20, 2023 https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/.

24 IPCC, "IPCC Sixth Assessment Report," March 20, 2023 https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/.

25 Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 44.

26 Bo Zheng and Sohl Lee, "Contemporary Art and Ecology in East Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 220.

the growing imperative for ecological thinking as the foundation of art-making, also addressed as "ecosensibility" in Zheng Bo's recent artistic practice.[27] By doing so, they challenge the environmentally harmful conventions of the art world, which often rely on unsustainable production and consumption patterns. In China, a nation both contributing to and suffering from severe environmental degradation and waste pollution, the emphasis on creative reuse and critical reflections, as seen in the "Regeneration" exhibition, takes on particular significance. The exhibition's curatorial vision critiques the pervasive throwaway culture and promotes a more prudent attitude towards materials.

Among the artworks presented in "Regeneration," Li Xiangming's installation *Repair 3* offers a poignant commentary on resourcefulness and sustainability. It is composed of scrap wood, steel bars, and burlap bags, which Li collected from rural households and sometimes construction sites since the early 2000s. As part of his *Repair* series initiated in 2012, the piece explores "patchwork aesthetics," a concept inspired by patched fabrics and repaired farm tools that he gathered from the countryside.[28] Li employs these found objects to highlight what he calls "common people's aesthetics."[29] These aesthetics reveal the beauty in the frugality of China's agricultural traditions. This frugality, deeply ingrained in rural communities, reflects a mindful interaction with the material world. It serves as a reminder of a time when the principle of "cherishing resources" guided daily life in rural China – an era in which waste was minimized as everything was recycled either for farming or domestic purposes.[30]

Other works in the exhibition respond to the ongoing urban transformation in China and its material consequences. For example, *Community Myth: Eternal Deconstruction and Construction* (Fig. 2) by Zeng Lingxiang, the aforementioned curator and also a leading practitioner of public art in China, commemorates the cyclical human activity of dismantling, deconstructing, and constructing in their efforts to

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27 Charmaine Li, "Practicing Ecosensibility," August 12, 2021, https://atmos.earth/practicing-ecosensibility-zheng-bo/.

28 Li Xiangming 李向明, "Wo bushi benzhe yishu xiangjian er lai de" 我不是奔着艺术乡建而来的 (I didn't come here for artistic rural construction), *Art Market* 8 (2019): 28–29; "Wo zai Hongjiang xiu laofang" 我在洪江修老房 (I am repairing an old house in Hongjiang), *Kuart* (October 28, 2019), https://www.sohu.com/a/350142826_455444.

29 Ibid.; also see Wang Shu 汪素, *Buding heyi chengwei yishu* 补丁何以成为艺术 (How can patches become art) (Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2016).

30 See Franklin Hiram King, F. H., "The Utilization of Waste," in *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2011), 193–215 and Joshua Goldstein, *Remains of the Everyday: A Century of Recycling in Beijing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021). The situation changed fundamentally when chemical agriculture became the major farming method in China from the 1970s, resulting in ever more intense environmental pollution; in domestic life, the majority rural households have adopted the trash-producing lifestyle by the beginning of the twenty-first century. See Wang Xiaoming 王晓明, "L xian jianwen" L县见闻 (What I saw at L County), *Tianya* 6 (2004): 1–9; Qianhui Li et al, "Pollution-Induced Food Safety Problem in China," *Frontiers in Nutrition* 8 (2021): 703832; Huanan Fu and Xiaochun Li, "Rural–Urban Migrants' Remittance and Agricultural Pollution in the Presence of Agricultural Dualism," *The Annals of Regional Science* 70, no. 2 (2023): 535–558.

build homes and communities. While this process has long been part of the evolution of humanity, its extensiveness and intensity in contemporary China is unprecedented.[31] Adopting the form of a pyramid, Zeng's large installation monumentalizes discarded objects he found from construction sites and demolished neighborhoods. Equipped with built-in sound and LEDs, the work appears to be an ecological theater with various discarded things, electronic devices, household items, toys, street signs, door number plaques, concrete slabs, bricks, and many others, taking central stage. Despite being stripped of their original purposes, these objects acquire new kinds of qualities, energetic properties, and relations by being assembled into a monumental structure like this.

The "Regeneration" exhibition also featured artworks that address pressing anthropogenetic environmental disasters. Shen Xiaonan's 2020 installation *Breathing* is composed of hundreds of discarded facial masks, primarily blue and a few black ones, mounted in a grid on the wall. The mask, a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic, became omnipresent during those years, worn by billions and discarded in equal numbers. While essential for public health, the surge in disposable mask use has exacerbated the environmental challenges posed by single-use plastics.[32] Improper disposal and inadequate waste management of masks have led to both short term and long-term detrimental impacts on our already fragile ecosystems.[33] Shen's simple large installation provides a glimpse of the newly emerged tension between immediate need for hygiene and the importance of sustainable practices, calling public attention to the environmental consequences of pandemic-related waste.

In these artworks, which are primarily crafted from repurposed objects, the resonance with Jane Bennett's "thing power" theory is palpable.[34] Bennett asserts that objects, even the discarded, possess a unique force capable of shaping human experiences. The inherent agency of these materials disrupts conventional views of waste and disposability. Bennett's theory invites a nuanced exploration of the artworks' material agency, where each discarded object exerts influence on the composition, transforming them from mere waste into meaningful components. The entanglement and connectivity of these objects, as shown in *Repair 3*, *Community Myth*, and *Breathing*, create a network of relationships, mirroring the interdependence of materials and their connections to diverse contexts, be it rural households, demolished neighborhoods, or the people who wore and then discarded facial masks. Encounters with

31 For a comparison of the speed of urbanization between China and other countries, see You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–3.

32 Saeida Saadat, Deepak Rawtani, and Chaudhery Mustansar Hussain, "Environmental Perspective of COVID-19," *The Science of the Total Environment* 728 (2020): 138870; Joana C Prata, et al, "COVID-19 Pandemic Repercussions on the Use and Management of Plastics," *Environmental Science & Technology* 54, no. 13 (2020): 7760–7765.

33 Oluniyi O. Fadare and Elvis D. Okoffo, "Covid-19 Face Masks," *The Science of the Total Environment* 737 (2020): 140279.

34 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Figure 2: Zeng Lingxiang, *Community Myth: Eternal Deconstruction and Construction*, installation, 2019.

the artworks become ecological experiences, prompting reflection on the life cycles of these materials and their role in narrating changing life circumstances of individual households, communities, the whole human population. Consequently, these artworks also introduce a political dimension, challenging norms of consumption, highlighting environmental impacts, and questioning societal attitudes toward waste. They thus embody an ecological ethics by revaluing materials and contributing to a more sustainable approach to art-making. They become dynamic assemblages, to borrow Man-

uel DeLanda's concept,[35] where discarded objects are revitalized to challenge preconceived notions of disposability, inviting viewers into a more ethically conscious engagement with the material world.

In conjunction with this exploration of "thing power," artists who reclaim the intrinsic material value of discarded objects can be seen as rekindling an appreciation for traditional Chinese conception of human-nature relationship, encapsulated in the ancient principles of *jingtian xiwu* (revere nature, cherish resources) and *wanwu* (10,000 things or myriad things). Rooted in Chinese philosophy, particularly Daoism and Confucianism, "revere nature" acknowledges the natural order of the cosmos and recognizes one's place within it, emphasizing humility and a sense of duty to maintain harmony with the natural world. "Cherish resources" emphasizes the responsible use and conservation of natural resources, reflecting an understanding that the Earth's resources are finite and should be used judiciously to ensure sustainability. The concepts of *wanwu* and *jingtian xiwu* embody a broader sense of environmental stewardship, urging humans to be mindful of their impact on the ecosystem and to protect the environment for future generations. This concept encourages a symbiotic coexistence with the natural world, underscoring the idea that humans are an integral part of nature and should live in balance with it rather than exploiting it recklessly.

Similarly, embracing *wanwu* signals a paradigm shift that replaces the human-centric ideology with an inclusive and holistic perspective. Initially developed in Daoism and later gaining "paradigmatic importance" in Chinese philosophy and cosmology,[36] *Wanwu* refers to all living and non-living entities, emphasizing the diversity and interconnectedness of all phenomena. This holistic view, much like *jingtian xiwu*, advocates for harmony between humans and the natural world. The transition from (post)modern anthropocentric viewpoints to an inclusive understanding of *wanwu* emphasizes the interconnected contributions of all things, both living and non-living, to the broader world. This traditional concept has regained attraction in recent years among contemporary art circles interested in eco art, with figures such as the aforementioned Hong Kong-based artist, educator and scholar Zheng Bo playing a key role.[37] CEAF's curatorial team perceived *wanwu* as a guiding principle in its efforts to integrate eco art with public art for social engagement and community development—a vision particularly evident in many programs in addition to its core exhibition.[38]

35 Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society Assemblage Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006)
36 Chiayu Hsu, "The Authenticity of Myriad Things in the Zhuangzi," *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 218. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030218.
37 Bo Zheng, "Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council," https://zhengbo.org/2021_WWC_ex.html.
38 Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks."

"Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological"

The artworks exhibited in "Regeneration" engage with the concept of *wanwu* as it pertains to our global ecological crisis on a conceptual, imaginative, and aesthetic level. What distinguishes CEAF from other exhibitions is its effort to catalyze ecologically conscious changes reflecting the spirit of *wanwu* for practical impact on various communities, not only just within the art community and in the aesthetic realm but also among ordinary citizens who might never visit an art exhibition. CEAF's approach spans several strategies, aiming to foster ecologically conscious actions and collective engagement at both the grassroots and institutional levels.

First, CEAF actively promotes the discourse of eco art within university communities. Through displays of texts and artworks as well as competitions, it engages students in ecological learning, instilling a heightened ecological consciousness that values prudence and frugality. This educational outreach aims to inspire young people to integrate ecological values in their daily interactions with the material world. Second, the theme of regeneration permeates in CEAF's six parallel exhibitions and three action plans, which take place across university campus, public and private art spaces, cultural centers, and various neighborhoods in Chongqing. While the core exhibition and the related conference occurred within the festival's month-long duration, several parallel exhibitions began beforehand and continued well afterward, taking on community lives on their own. They were designed as socially engaged public art projects that can live on with the participation of community members.

In the curatorial team's conception of various parallel exhibitions for CEAF, the participation of communities was a crucial component in their aspiration to popularize eco art and support collective actions at the grassroots level. The purpose for community engagement was to foster public interest and skills in environmental protection, cultivate a sense of ecological responsibility in everyday life, and ultimately stimulate civic participation through eco art making for a greener lifestyle and greener earth.[39] These ideas evoke notions such as "sustainability literacy" formulated by David Orr,[40] and "learning society" discussed by Kate Davies who argues that the future of humanity "depends on developing a society that can learn to live sustainably on the Earth."[41] In this sense, CEAF operates as a form of public pedagogy for ecology and sustainability literacy as it strives to transform ordinary citizens from passive recipients of environmental and social degradations into active participants who are capable of re/creating more ecologically sound environments.[42]

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39 Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks."

40 Ecological Literacy involves a comprehensive understanding of nature's intricacies and a commitment to responsible stewardship of the Earth, fostering a harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment; David D. Orr, *Ecological Literacy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991).

41 Kate Davies, "A Learning Society," *Resurgence Magazine* 257 (2009): 42.

42 Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks."

"Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological" is an example of a parallel exhibition of CEAF that illustrates well its efforts to foreground community participation as the purpose of eco art practices. It was staged in Huangjueping district, the historic downtown of Chongqing that had an important history as Chongqing's heavy industry hub but has declined as one of the most polluted and rundown areas in the city, becoming one of the sacrifice zones amid China's overall economic restructuring and urbanization since the 1990s.[43] The exhibition was curated by Zeng Lingxiang, in collaboration with his colleagues Zhang Lang, Shao Lihua, and a neighborhood officer Deng Jie. While referred to as exhibition, "Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological" was conceived to be a socially engaged public art project aiming to regenerate the neglected Tielu Sancun, a shabby neighborhood in Huangjueping, and to stimulate the growth of public culture and collective identity within this community by introducing ecology-conscious art to its public spaces.[44]

The population of Tielu Sancun are mainly elderly retirees or family members of railway industry employees responsible for the building of the Chengdu-Chongqing Railway in 1952, the first railway after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. The name of their neighborhood, railway 3rd village in English, speaks to its history as one of many villages founded by railway employees. Like other members of the population and their neighborhoods who were once employed by major state enterprises, inhabitants of Tielu Sancun enjoyed social and economic prestige during the era of planned economy. However, it has declined along with Chongqing's upgrade from a city of heavy industry, which largely relied on railroads for transportation, to a global megacity of multiple economic sectors relying on tertiary and high-tech industries as the leading force since the 1990s. The completion of the Three Gorges Dam in 2008, which dramatically increased the waterway transportation capacity of Chongqing, and the rapid transformation of China's land transportation system also known as the high-speed-rail revolution,[45] has further rendered the old railway system obsolete. The public housing structures in Soviet style that had been hastily built for these former state employees during the 1950s have long suffered from neglect and disrepair.

Zeng and his team sought to respond to these historical and contemporary specificities of Tielu Sancun as a place and a community.[46] The descriptive title of the proj-

43 Here I borrow the term "sacrifice zone" from Naomi Klein in her description of areas disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and the consequences of extractive industries. The concept underscores the social and environmental injustices embedded in the current economic and environmental paradigm, where certain communities and ecosystems are sacrificed for the sake of profit and resource exploitation; Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 165–169.

44 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*, exhibition catalogue, 2020.

45 Peter Fairley, "China's High-Speed-Rail Revolution," January 11, 2010, https://www.technologyreview.com/2010/01/11/206748/chinas-high-speed-rail-revolution/.

46 Zeng Lingxiang and Li Jialu, "Ecological and Public," *Contemporary Artists*, no. 2 (2021): 30–33.

ect reveals a lot of its focus. The project involved faculty and students from participating universities soliciting the participation of local residents as an integral component of their socially engaged eco-public art making. They conducted surveys, collected oral histories, ran community workshops, and consulted with the residents before coming up with creative solutions to various environmental, spatial, and cultural problems that would be welcomed by the local residents. *Public Herb Station* (Fig. 3) is an example that illustrates this point well. This installation work consists of a row of medicine cabinets commonly found in Chinese herbal pharmacies. Instead of containing dry herbs, the drawers are retrofitted planters for fresh herbs known to locals for their medicinal benefits. On the sides are more plants growing in recycled plastic bottles. This is the outcome of two months' collaboration between Sun Lei and some residents of Tielu Sancun knowledgeable in medicinal herbs and interested in gardening. Sun conceived this project to be a community micro-renewal endeavor and worked with local residents to transform the exterior of a small shed for janitorial supplies, formerly a messy and unsightly place, into a mini communal herbal garden using mostly scavenged materials. Locally available herbs were then planted and accessible to residents invited to claim them on the promise of continuous care. The work stimulated greater interest among residents in sharing knowledge about Chinese medicine and made them participate in communal planting while voluntarily maintaining the tidiness of the place.[47]

Like *Public Herb Station*, all artworks featured in "Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological," including site-specific mural paintings, installations, sculptures, and performances, were created to intervene with the existent physical conditions of the neighborhood and to become new outdoor fixtures, telling local histories, creating interesting visual effects, or repairing and enhancing the functionality of public facilities. Most of the artworks utilized repurposed objects and materials, such as time-worn clothes, disused tools, and household items donated by residents.[48] For example, *Memory Stitching*, led by artists Chen Yuxuan and Gou Yumeng, transformed old clothes into cushions and other fittings to be used in a communal resting area where people gather to relax and chat. *Tielu Sancun* (Fig. 4) by Zhang Binbin and Liu Sijia reactivated this community's original railway-bound identity and memorialized the bygone era through a steam locomotive made of discarded household appliances and utensils such as steamers, fans, chairs, and even routers.

Collectively, Zeng led his team of thirty-two members to design over twenty pieces of public artworks, most of which were co-created by local residents.[49] Many of these art pieces are still maintained and enjoyed by the local community. They have not only

47 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*, exhibition catalogue, 2020, 141; see also Xiao Yu 肖雨, "Jiulongpo: 'weigengxin' hou laojiu xiaoqu 'ni shengzhang'" 九龙坡："微更新"后老旧小区"逆生长 (Jiulongpo: 'reverse growth' of old communities after 'micro-renewal), *Chongqing Daily Network*, December 02, 2020, http://cq.people.com.cn/n2/2020/1202/c365411-34449864.html.

48 Zeng Lingxiang and Li Jialu, "Ecological and Public."

49 Zeng Lingxiang, phone interview with the author, July 3, 2023.

Figure 3: Sun Lei and residents of Tielu Sancun, *Public Herb Station*, installation, 2020.

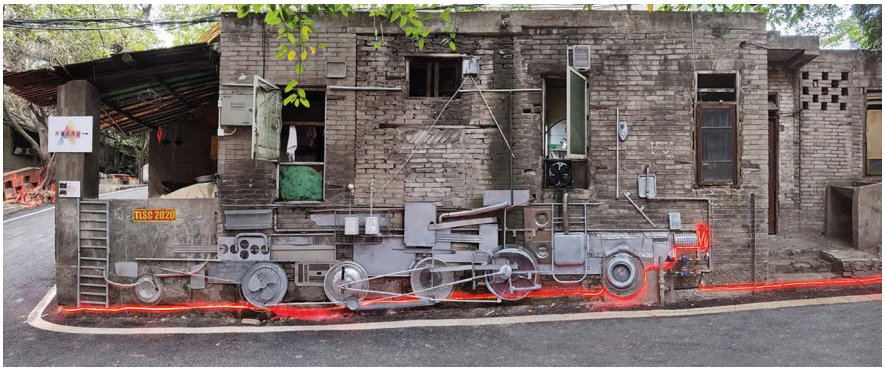

Figure 4: Zhang Binbin and Liu Sijia, *Tielu Sancun*, installation, 2020.

given new life and order to various deserted and messy corners of the old residential complexes but created new public spaces for the preservation of the collective memory of the community. This in turn helps strengthening the community's self-image and (public) identity. Some artists organized community-based events such as workshops and performances with local residents as key participants to showcase the wisdom and creativity hidden among ordinary residents, especially elderly people, to stimulate the growth of public culture within the community and to promote ecological consciousness in contemporary urban living. By addressing the neighborhood's physical conditions, fostering collective identity, and promoting sustainability, the

project exemplified CEAF's broader vision of eco art as a tool for social engagement and environmental consciousness. Through the use of aesthetically engaging objects and participatory cultural activities, the project created opportunities for residents to become active contributors to the ecological and cultural renewal of their community, embodying the spirit of *wanwu* in both form and function.

"Ecological New Communities"

As a community development project, "Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological" reflects and forms part of an emerging trend of urban transformation in China, which has shifted from the typical top-down management mode to a more participatory approach of "co-governance, co-construction, and co-sharing."[50] This shift accompanies the Chinese government's embrace of micro-transformation or micro-renewal as a novel approach to urban development in recent years.[51] In contrast to the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of yesteryear, micro-renewal emphasizes upgrading the appearance and functionality of old residential complexes through strategic interventions like partial demolition, functional replacement, infrastructure enhancement, and maintenance. This method prioritizes preserving the existing spatial and material characteristics of old neighborhoods while enhancing their livability.

Such a new approach to urban transformation offers artists abundant opportunities to engage in community development, as their expertise is sought after by governmental entities and private sectors involved in micro-renewal projects. Notably, art and design professors from universities in major cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Chongqing have become important players in these community development initiatives. For example, Liu Yuelai, a professor at Tongji University in Shanghai, has led efforts in Shanghai to establish community gardens since 2014, inviting residents to engage in planting and maintaining urban plots to reclaim neglected land and foster public responsibility to strengthen residents' connection to their environment while improving urban living spaces through collective effort and ecological education. Similarly, Hou Xiaolei, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, has led a microgarden project with her students since 2015 to revitalize the city's ancient hutongs by creating tiny gardens along narrow alleyways, aiming to integrate art into daily life, enhance public spaces, and increase community participation. By developing socially engaged curricula that align with community needs, these educators empower students to consider practical community needs as part of their professional

50 See Yuan Ma et al., "Towards the Healthy Community," *Sustainability* 12, no. 20 (2020): 8324.

51 Tiziano Cattaneo, et al, "Landscape, Architecture and Environmental Regeneration," *Sustainability* 11, no. 1 (2019): 128; Yue Yu, et al, "Urban Community Public Space Micro-Renewal Environmental Planning," *Earth and Environmental Science* (IOP Conference Series) 693, no. 1 (2021): 12107; Fei Liu and Xinru Xiong, 'Urban Elderly Community Micro-Renewal Planning and Design', *Earth and Environmental Science* (IOP Conference Series) 693, no. 1 (2021): 12115.

training. Most of CEAF's parallel exhibitions are such community development projects aiming to revitalize the city's old neighborhoods in the manner of urban micro-renewal.[52] In addition, they are also joining the momentum of the eco-civilization discourse with their envisioning of eco art as a catalyst for community regeneration.

The intersection of micro-urban renewal and the ecological movement becomes particularly evident in "Ecological New Communities," another community engagement project of CEAF unfolding in the neighborhood of Youdian zhilu, which culminated in the creation of the ecological garden "Spring of Huangjueping" discussed in the introduction of this chapter. Like Tielu Sancun, Youdian zhilu is also an old downtown area of Huangjueping that has suffered from depopulation and neglect, becoming a forsaken rust belt with dilapidated apartment complexes and aging public infrastructure. The suboptimal state of Youdian Zhilu served as the impetus for Zeng Tu in collaboration with Zeng Lingxiang, Gao Jian, and Ni Lan, to initiate a project aiming to rejuvenate the area and address the challenges faced by this marginalized community. The four curators took a team consisting of around fifty professional artists and student artists to conduct in-depth research through observations, interviews, and survey questionnaires in order to understand how the public space and the environment factored in the residents' daily life. Along the way, the artists created small site-specific artworks such as interior decorations for stores and signages for street stalls that can be used by local business owners. They also offered free portrait drawings to interested residents. These allowed them to build connections with community members and encourage their participation in the collective project. After nearly two months of collaboration among artists, designers, volunteers, and local residents (including children), they opened the community ecological garden, "Spring of Huangjueping," on December 26, 2020 (Fig. 5).

The eco garden was situated within the small commercial hub of the neighborhood centering around Jixing Farmers Market, a local vegetable market, and small shops on its sides and rear. Embracing the hilly topography of the neighborhood, consisting of scattered terrains, stairs, and narrow aisles, the garden is a series of material, spatial, and aesthetic interventions carefully designed to accommodate the existent physical conditions. It showcases creative reimagination, artistic appropriation, and small-scale alternations that not only produce new spaces for community gathering and gardening but also enhance the orderliness and visual charm of the overall built environment. The garden integrates permaculture practices such as edible landscaping, companion planting, composting, and organic fertilizing as part of the effort to build a sustainable community ecosystem. Much of the garden's construction repurposed local materials, embracing recycling as a key strategy for environmental regeneration. The curatorial team envisioned the eco garden to be at once a showcase of community regeneration and a platform to further the discourse of community engagement and public participation in transforming collective living environments. Ac-

52 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping.*

Figure 5: Views of the neighborhood in Youdian zhilu before and after the construction of the eco garden Spring of Huangjueping. Photos taken in 2020.

cording to Zeng Tu, the eco garden is an experiment in grassroots social co-governance, aimed at fostering a sense of agency among ordinary residents to take action in improving their communal spaces in both ecological and aesthetic terms.[53] To achieve this, his team adopted a "participatory design" approach, starting with having discussions and exchanges with local residents in order to seek their active participation in the entire process. Although initiated by art professionals, the making of Chongqing's first community eco garden involved thorough consultation with residents for its design, their participation during its construction, and their continuous and voluntary maintenance of it afterwards.[54]

The curator Gao Jian, with expertise in landscape design and permaculture, emphasized the multifaceted value of the community eco garden, asserting that it embodies the directives of "care for nature (the ecological environment), care for people (community residents), and promote fair sharing (of resources, economy, and wis-

53 Zeng Tu and Zeng Lingxiang eds., *Spring of Huangjueping*, 188.

54 Zeng Tu, in interview with the author, July 14, 2023. See also Kyomien, "Banjing chuntian de shengtai huayuan, huangjueping niangniangmen de xin shishang" 扮靚春天的生態花園，黃桷坪孃孃們的新時尚 (Dress up the eco garden in spring, the new fashion of Huangjueping ladies), March 19, 2022, http://chongqingdac.org/?p=8179.

dom)."[55] The garden's design revolves around the establishment of self-sustaining living spaces by integrating replicable ecological relationships found in nature, incorporating elements such as soil, water, sunshine, plants, animals, and insects. Residents are invited to participate in the garden's construction and planting activities, develop a meaningful connection with the land, and enjoy therapeutic benefits from the processes. The eco garden contributes to local biodiversity, food production, soil reconstruction, and water conservation. Beyond providing exposure to nature through planting, the eco garden also creates opportunities for residents to share surplus resources and collaborate with each other in the development of a shared community space.[56] These tangible benefits identified by Gao underscore the widespread appeal of gardening, and permaculture in general, as acknowledged by scholars as well as environmentally conscious artists and organizations globally.[57] By showcasing eco garden design as a form of socially engaged public art with ecological purposes, the curatorial team highlights the connection between localized practices in Chongqing and global trends in environmentally conscious art and permaculture.

Embracing eco gardening as a strategy, method, and platform for urban renewal and community development, Chongqing-based art professionals have joined their peers from other major cities in China. It is recorded that the first community eco garden in the contemporary sense appeared around 2011 in Beijing and since then similar projects have emerged in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen.[58] Although Chongqing was a latecomer to this trend, "Spring of Huangjueping" has garnered significant attention and positive coverage from the public media, even months after its inauguration.[59] Municipal, district, and neighborhood officials in Chongqing responsible for implementing policies related to the official discourse of eco-civilization and community development have taken a keen interest in this project. Many have visited the eco garden to learn about the strategies, processes, and challenges behind its creation and maintenance.[60] As a direct result of this impact, the municipal government

55 Gao Jian 高健, "Gongjian kongjian, gongsheng shequ" 共建空间，共生社区 (Co-building space, symbiotic community), *Chongqing Daily*, May 12, 2022.

56 Gao Jian 高健, "Gongjian kongjian, gongsheng shequ" 共建空间，共生社区 (Co-building space, symbiotic community), *Chongqing Daily*, May 12, 2022.

57 See for example Paul Chatterton and Jenny Pickerill, "Notes towards Autonomous Geographies," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 6 (2006): 730–746; Nils Norman and Nina Folkersma, *Eetbaar Park: Edible Park* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012); George McKay, *Radical Gardening* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2013); T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature* (London: Sternberg Press, 2016), 229–258; Lindsay K. Campbell, *City of Forests, City of Farms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

58 Gao Jian, "Co-building Space, Symbiotic Community."

59 See Zhang Jinhui 张锦辉, "Huangjueping youge shenqi 'mofa huayuan'" 黄桷坪有个神奇"魔法花园" (There is an enchanting "magical garden" in Huangjueping), *Chongqing Daily*, April 07, 2021; Xiang Ting 向婷, "Chongqing yidong laojiu shequ youge xiaoxiao shengtai huayuan, que youzhe shengqi 'mofa'" 重庆一栋老旧社区有个小小生态花园，却有着神奇"魔法" (An old residential community in Chongqing has a small ecological garden with enchanting "magic"), *Southwest Metropolis Daily*, April 26, 2021.

60 Zeng Tu, interview with the author, July 14, 2023.

launched the "'Neighboring Nature' Eco Garden Co-construction Project" in July 2021.[61] Notably, Zeng Tu and his colleagues were selected as experts to supervise the implementation of this experimental project in two other old neighborhoods awaiting renewal. These new eco gardens, respectively opened in April and May 2022, have engaged local residents in the co-construction process, resulting in two distinct spaces that address unique local challenges while embodying the same spirit evident in "Spring of Huangjueping."[62] Along with them, ideas such as sustainable living, reciprocal nature-human relationships, citizens' environmental responsibilities, co-governance, and fair resource-sharing are also being promulgated and experimented with by various communities.

Conclusion

The artworks and projects from CEAF discussed above encapsulate a transformative dialogue between art, environment, and community – a dialogue of paramount significance amid the looming ecological crises. These endeavors extend beyond the conventional boundaries of artistic practice, materializing as tangible interventions engaging with disregarded objects, neglected neighborhoods, and disenfranchised populations. Resonating with ancient Chinese wisdom embodied in "revere nature, cherish resources," eco art practitioners infuse their work with contemporary ecological imperatives. Their collective contributions enrich the global discourse of ecological awakening in art-making, emphasizing frugality, prudence, and a profound understanding of the intricate interplay between human actions and environmental sustainability. In doing so, they reintroduce a sustainable ethos aligned with traditional agricultural practices and some contemporary Indigenous communities, whose predominantly ecologically conscious interactions with the natural world serve as a guiding beacon in an era marked by environmental degradation.

The pervasive adaptation of the carbon-intensive modern way of life has separated many from the material base of existence, rendering the material consequences of daily activities invisible. This detachment often results in entire communities being consigned to zones of environmental and social degradation. Against this backdrop, eco art practitioners emerge as custodians of ecological visibility, exposing the negative material consequences of industrialization and urbanization processes on both

61 Wang Tianyi 王天翊, and Mei Yao 梅耀, "Zhucheng dushiqu shouge 'qinlin ziran' shengtai huayuan luocheng" 主城都市区首个"亲邻自然"生态花园落成 (The first 'neighbouring nature' eco garden in the main urban area was completed), *Chongqing Daily*, April 1, 2022; Liang Qinqing 梁钦卿， "Shengtai huayuan zhuli xiangcun zhenxing" 生态花园助力乡村振兴 (Eco garden helps rural revitalization), *Chinanews.com*, May 25, 2022, https://www.cfej.net/city/djpxb/202205/t20220525_983376.shtml.

62 Cui Li 崔力,"Yi shengtai zhili qiaodong shehui zhili chuangxin de Shijian tansuo" 以生态治理撬动社会治理创新的实践探索 (Practical exploration of leveraging ecological governance to promote social governance innovation), *Chongqing Daily*, May 12, 2022.

the environment and humanity itself. Rooting their artworks in culture, community, and place-specific environmental issues, they bridge the chasm separating humanity from its material foundation. In reorienting art to its biophysical roots, eco art becomes a catalyst for sustainable "metabolic exchanges" between art, human society, and nature.

The resonance of CEAF extends beyond the artistic realm, permeating public awareness and fostering a profound connection between individuals and their environment. Through endeavors in community regeneration, participatory design, and the establishment of ecological gardens, which often repurpose local materials as part of a recycling strategy for environmental renewal, art becomes a conduit for grassroots social co-governance. These initiatives rejuvenate neglected neighborhoods and empower ordinary residents to contribute actively to communal spaces in ecological and aesthetic terms. As Chongqing aligns itself with the national development trend of eco-civilization,[63] art professionals there actively participate in and carve out an eco art discourse. Their efforts, exemplified by projects like "Everyone Public, Everyone Ecological" and "Ecological New Communities," transcend artistic expression to become agents of change, gaining attention beyond the art world. The initiation of the "'Neighboring Nature' Eco Garden Co-construction Project" underscores the ripple effect of these works.

In essence, CEAF embodies and contributes to an ongoing global paradigm shift – a reintegration of art into the fabric of everyday life, with artists actively working to restore the symbiosis between humanity and its surroundings. The projects discussed demonstrate how eco art has become a potent vehicle for elevating ecological consciousness in China's public sphere. These diverse yet interconnected initiatives stand as a testament to art's potential to catalyze meaningful change and inspire collective commitment to a more sustainable existence. The integration of ecology and communities in various eco art projects in Chongqing exemplifies the transformative power of art to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship between society, the environment, and artistic expression.

63 This is reflected in Chongqing's launch of the "National Ecological Garden City" project in 2022. See Chongqing Government, "Chongqingshi chuangjian guojia shengtai yuanlin chengshi gonguo fangan" 重庆市创建国家生态园林城市工作方案 (Chongqing's work plan for creating a National Ecological Garden City), March 1, 2022, https://www.cq.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxxgkml/szfwj/qtgw/202203/t20220311_10496232.html; Vivian Yan, "Chongqing Aims for National Ecological Garden City by 2025," March 17, 2022, https://www.ichongqing.info/2022/03/17/chongqing-aims-for-national-ecological-garden-city-by-2025/.

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Simone M. Müller

Why Don't We Go to an Exhibit that Stinks?

Response to Wang's "On the Ground of the Discarded"

Abstract: "Why don't we go to an exhibit that stinks?" is an environmental historian's response to Meiqin Wang's chapter 'On the Grounds of the Discarded'. It complements Wang's discussion on eco-art displayed at the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival from a non-Asian perspective with a discussion on the universality and specificity of eco-art as a global movement and the materiality of eco-art oscillating between 'purity and danger.'

In the summer of 2002, the *Salina Journal* reported that a twenty-year old student from the Kansas City Art Institute faced fines and jail time after his public art project had sent police and hazardous materials teams scrambling to inspect unusual items on curbs and porches. Kansas City police cordoned off a street while the bomb squad robot was sent to determine the trash bag and other items outside a house were safe. The student turned himself in after he had learned how much commotion his public art project had caused. He was charged with seven counts of violating a city ordinance that prohibits stirring up the public by leaving an imitation explosive device and that each carried a fine of US$ 500 and six months in jail. The fright about the public art project had broken out when residents began noticing strange objects – an old TV set, a pair of sneakers, a slow-cook pot – on their porches or curbs. Closer inspection showed the items to be trash the residents had put out weeks ago for pick-up. Odder still, some of the carefully painted white objects emitted music when they were moved. A specific Elvis Presley number, in fact: "Return to sender," came the iconic voice of the American singer from inside a crock-pot, carefully painted white. "Return to sender... return to sender..."[1]

At the Kansas City Art Institute – a private art school in the US state of Missouri where already animator and film producer Walt Disney had taken classes – communications director Anne Canfield emphasized how sorry the student felt about the whole situation.[2] Originally, the project's idea had been to take an item someone had discarded as having no value, transform it through art, and then return it to the person. In a simple move that relied not only on art's transformative power, but

1 Anne Canfield, "Return to Sender. Art Project Designed to Turn Trash into Art Goes Awry for Student," *The Salina Journal* (September 29, 2002).

2 On the Kansas City Art Institute and Walt Disney see Kansas City Art Institute, "A Return to the Classroom: KCAI Leads Animation Workshop During Disney 100: The Exhibition," *KCAI News*, August 8, 2024, https://kcai.edu/about/kcai-news/KCAI_Leads_Animation_Workshop_During_Disney_100_The_Exhibition/.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-010

also artists' motivation to transform the world (and perhaps, in an age of an increasingly dire outlook for the health of the planet, to 'save' the very same), the student intended to provoke with "Return to Sender" a critical reflection on people's consumption patterns. In the conceptual tradition of the works of Hans Haacke, William Rathje, or Agnes Denes from the 1960s and 1970s, the student transformed art into eco art. Yet in Kansas City, Missouri, only one year after 9/11, an art project that involved discarded items spouting an Elvis Presley song in a way that it brought the bomb squad team into the arena, did not fly well.

"Return to Sender" proved the exception to the rule. Eco art – a short version of ecological art – is today "one of the most vibrant aspects of contemporary art." Since it emerged in Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s, the field has seen massive global expansion, eco art objects are widely exhibited and discussed.[3] Today eco art is, what Linda Weintraub calls a global movement.[4] Eco artists strive to depart from the unsustainable conventions of the contemporary art world. Instead, artists take into consideration the environmental consequences of their creative process "engaging with themes," so Meiqin Wang, "such as sustainability, regeneration, and environmental responsibility."[5] "Return to Sender" and the eco art works at the center of Meiqin Wang's piece on the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival (CEAF) are two of the global movement's many variants where artists put discards and recyclables at the center of their practice and the public's gaze.[6]

Despite the wide debate on and practice of Eco art employing recyclables, the reading of Meiqin Wang's "On the Grounds of the Discarded" from a sympathetic outsider to the art world may still open up new vistas. To a global environmental historian thinking through the political and material ecology of discards and toxicity in the twentieth century,[7] "On the Grounds of the Discarded" brings me to two observations: the first concerns eco art as a global movement and the question if those engaging with the movement should not pay more attention to the specificity of place and with it the discarded materials used in eco art. The second deriving from this focus on materiality provides an observation on eco art flirting with waste's typical oscilla-

3 March Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco-Art. Articulations of Nature since the '60s* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2018), 1.

4 Linda Weintraub, *Cycle-logical Art. Recycling Matters for Eco-Art*, Rhinebeck: Artnow Publications, 2006; Linda Weintraub, "Introduction to Environmental Art," in *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable* Planet (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012).

5 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang to this volume, 175.

6 For an overview, see Amanda Boetzkes, *Plastic Capitalism. Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

7 Simone M. Müller, *The Toxic Ship. The Voyage of the Khian Sea and the Global Waste Trade* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2023); Simone M. Müller and Angeliki Balayannis, "Toxic Commons and the Politics of Ambivalence: Re-imagining Toxic Legacy Sites," in Simone Müller, Matthias Schmidt, and Kirsten Twelbeck, eds., *Ecological Ambivalence, Complexity, and Change: Perspectives from the Environmental Humanities*, Routledge Series in Environmental Humanities (New York: Routledge 2025 [forthcoming]).

tion between toxicity and cleanliness – or in the words of Mary Douglas between purity and danger – without fully going all-in.[8] Ultimately, both leads me to the question why there are not more eco art exhibits that stink?

Return to sender as a trope and practice

In my musing on stinking art, I first want to retrace my steps back to the art student at the Kansas City Art Institute and the project's specific title: "Return to Sender." Return to sender is reversing action. We write it on parcels with commodity items that do not fit, but also – less frequently today – on mail we do not want to receive. For Elvis Presley, return to sender centers on a woman that did not want to accept his apology letter. Some decades later, but still in the time of postal mail services as predominant way of communication, the US activist-politician Ralph Nader picked up on the interruption of communication and relatedness. He transformed "Return to Sender" into an expression of frustration over all the letters he wrote to different US presidents on consumer and environmental rights issues. None of them re-turned a response.[9] Return to sender, also became invoked in US legislation. Based on the Universal Commercial Code of 1952, the 1975 Federal Lemon Law intends to provide a remedy for buyers of cars and other goods to compensate for products that failed to meet quality and performance studies. If repairs fail repeatedly, consumers can re-turn purchases to the sender, i. e. the seller.[10] Over time, the phrase 'return to sender' implies both the practice of one actor sending, giving, or handing back an object to the person or point of origin and the transformation of the object's meaning by way of this practice, "Return to Sender" has found entry into a multitude of different contexts and strategies.

In the larger world of discards, "Return to Sender" has taken on a prominent role in environmental governance and activism since the 1980s with a specific focus on the international waste trade. As I show in my book, *The Toxic Ship*, the success of environmental governance in the industrial nations in the wake of modern environmentalism during the 1970s quickly became intricately linked to the growing business of exporting waste to other nations where disposal was less strictly regulated and less expensive. Often this meant the majority world and waste shipments, for instance, from the United States to Central America and the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands, or West Africa or from Europe to North Africa and Eastern Europe.[11]

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8 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge 1966).

9 Ralph Nader, *Return to Sender. Unanswered Letters to the President 2001–2015* (New York: Seven Stories, 2015).

10 Nancy Barron, *Return to Sender. Getting a Refund or Replacement for Your Lemon Car* (Boston: National Consumer Law Center, 2000).

11 Müller, *The Toxic Ship*, 2023.

In such a world of a globalizing unequal waste disposal system, the notion of giving or sending something back now included both the act of crossing national borders, both in sending and in returning, as well as discussions of global environmental justice. Ultimately, this resulted in refocusing on the emancipatory power of returning waste to sender and thereby interrupting what might have been a toxic and unequal relationship in the first place. When in the late 1980s, West Germany exported hazardous waste to Turkey, activists' protests in both countries formed around 'Return to Sender'.[12] In the mid-1990s, Greenpeace sent hundreds of letters addressed "Return to Sender" to the mayor of Philadelphia enclosing incinerator ash from the city that had since 1988 been laying unprotected in Gonaives, Haiti, after it had been abandoned there by the *Khian Sea.*[13] In 2000, Greenpeace activists entered the US Embassy in the Philippines loudly demanding the return of toxic waste left behind by the US Clark Air Base, carrying banners that read "US Toxic Legacy, Return to Sender!"[14]

The King of Rock n' Roll, Elvis Presley and his song were – perhaps fittingly for these examples involving lead actors from the western world – often key frame of reference. In the context of US-Canadian transborder trade of waste, for instance, the Network of Waste Activists Stopping Trash Exports recycled the Elvis Presley song for the purpose of their campaign.

> Send us bacon and hockey,
> Beer and curling, too;
> But if you send us your garbage,
> we'll send it right back to you;
> And write upon it,
> Return to Sender,
> Adress unknown.[15]

Return to sender, eco art, and the specificity of place

Art has long been engaging with its own notion of "Return to Sender." Retracing their footsteps to Ai Weiwei, for instance in his famous photograph series *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) or his *Souvenir from Shanghai* (2012) – and by extension to Marcel Duchamp and Walter Benjamin (as well as Charles Baudelaire's conceptualization of

12 Jonas Stuck, "In die Verantwortung gezwungen. Die Rückführung von Giftmüll und der deutsche Müllkolonialismus in der Türkei," *Werkstatt Geschichte* 85 (2022): 35–54.

13 Müller, *The Toxic Ship*, 133–156; David N. Pellow, *Resisting Global Toxics. Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

14 Greenpeace, "Return to Sender Action," Video shot March 3, 2000, *Greenpeace Media*, https://media.greenpeace.org/archive/Return-To-Sender-Action-27MZIF2DT02I.html.

15 Danny Hakim, "Michigan Seeks Loophole to Dump imported trash," *National Post*, January 20, 2003, 15.

the figure of the ragpicker) – artists all around the world question the meaning of an object's value and its ability to both enclose and overcome the past.[16] Eco artists embrace the (re-)use of discarded materials and resources in a way that, as Margaret Hillenbrand points out, goes beyond "the appropriate stewardship of objects," in the sense of Susan Strasser. Instead rag-picking becomes a method that constitutes focused artistic endeavor.[17] In the two concrete cases of the works at Kansas City and Chongqing, artists also seek to return the waste object into public sight, either very individually on someone's private porch, as in the case of Kansas City, or within the realms of an exhibition space, as in the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival. Eco artists in line with what I characterize here as "Return to Sender" artwork, engage with recycled, renewable, or biodegradable materials as alternative to the carbon-intensive, petroleum-based, and synthetic products typically used in artist studios. Discussions on the Anthropocene certainly have given the movement another push in the past two decades.[18]

In the words of Linda Weintraub and similarly according to Meiqin Wang, eco art is a global movement.[19] Prominent examples include Brazilian artist Vic Muniz, who has built a world-renowned career on working with recycled materials. The documentary *Waste Land*, for instance, follows the artist through his project Jardim Garmacho in Rio de Janeiro, where he worked with waste pickers living in the world's biggest wasteland. In *Waste Land*, Muniz questions not only the value of discarded materials, but also societies' assessment of people working with them.[20] Another example is Pakistani artist Khalil Chisthee who creates life-size human-form sculptures from discarded plastic bags invoking a larger claim about discards and their effect on all of humanity.[21] Prominent positions in Asia include the Japanese artist Yuken Teruya who in his work explores global societies' rampant consumerist habits through transforming some of the biggest names in capitalism into mystical forests so highlighting the costs of humanity's global consumption on the world's ecosystems.[22]

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16 For the link to Baudelaire and Benjamin See Margaret Hillenbrand, "Ragpicking as Method," *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 16, no. 2 (2019): 260–297; Monopol Magazine, "Ai Weiwei über Duchamps 'Fountain'," May 4, 2022, https://www.monopol-magazin.de/ai-weiwei-duchamps-fountain; The Guggenheim, "Ai Weiwei," in Art and China after 1989: The Theater of the World," https://www.guggenheim.org/teaching-materials/art-and-china-after-1989-theater-of-the-world/ai-weiwei; Beatrice Acevedo, "Ai Weiwei on recycling, twitter and virtues in art," October 18, 2015, https://drbeatrizacevedo.com/2015/10/18/ai-weiwei-on-recycling-twitter-and-virtues-in-art/.

17 Hillenbrand, "Ragpicking as Method," 263; Susan Strasser. *Waste and Want. A Social History of Trash* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2000).

18 Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).

19 Linda Weintraub, *What's Next: Eco Materialism and Contemporary Art* (Bristol: Intellect, 2019).

20 Vic Muniz, *Waste Land,* Film Documentary, 2010.

21 Khalil Chisthee, "Discarded Plastic Bags Sculptures by Khalil Chishtee," https://www.recyclart.org/discarded-plastic-bags-sculptures-by-khalil-chishtee/.

22 *Artsper Magazine*, "10 Artists working in Recycled Art," August 1, 2018, https://blog.artsper.com/en/get-inspired/top-10-of-recycled-art/.

To lean on Wang, artists' intention behind the use of discarded materials is to raise awareness for the individual and collective responsibilities for ecological damage and the future of the planet.[23] For the twenty-year old art student from Kansas City, "Return to Sender" was a provocation for his fellow citizens and a judgement on what the student took as a misguided pattern of mass consumption and over-disposal. As if to prove Weintraub's earlier point on the movement's claim to globality, both the Kansas City Art student and the Chinese curator of CEAF, a professor at Chongqing-based Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, were inspired by the same observation of contemporary disposable culture that has become commonplace not only in the United States and China, but also beyond. "Every graduation season," the Chinese curator says, "I see discarded objects piled up like mountains from students who are leaving school; the property management staff have to ship the waste to landfill sites big trucks by big trucks."[24] Based on this observation, the curators of CEAF imagined their theme "Regenerate" to "call into question the rampant disposable culture" and the exhibit showcases works "from artists who explored the aesthetic value of discarded objects or critically reflected on ecologically insensitive lifestyles."[25] Their core exhibit explores the value of discarded objects under the catchwords "respect trash, reject waste," showcasing, quite similarly to what the Kansas City Art Institute's student had intended discarded objects' "regeneration into aesthetic objects through creative processes."[26]

Presuming globality, or universality even when it comes to the uses of discarded materials in eco art, misses the specificities of both place and waste, however. Importantly in the case of the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival, the Chinese artists' frame of reference is not the West's King of Rock n' Roll, not even in "Return to Sender's" emancipatory transformation. Rather, it is the traditional Chinese conception of human-environment relationship *jingtian xiwu*, which Wang translates as "revere nature, cherish resources." Rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy, particularly in Confucianism and Daoism, according to Wang,

> "revere nature" acknowledges the natural order of the cosmos and recognizes one's place within it, emphasizing humility and a sense of duty to maintain harmony with the natural world. "Cherish resources" emphasizes the responsible use and conservation of natural resources, reflecting an understanding that the Earth's resources are finite and should be used judiciously to ensure sustainability.[27]

23 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang in this volume.

24 Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks." Li Jiali, "Wang Lin Talks about Ecoart: Using Wanwu as A Measure," November 12, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9959636 as cited in Wang's contribution to the present volume.

25 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang in the present volume, 179.

26 Sohu, "Regeneration—Opening Ceremony of the 2020 National Invitational Exhibition of Eco Art Works!" November 28, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/430777154_100132389, as cited in Wang's contribution to the present volume.

27 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang in the present volume, 184.

It is in line with *jingtian xiwu* (and not Elvis Presley) that CEAF proclaims as one of its missions to "repair and protect the ecosystems of nature."[28]

This distinction is important, not only to counter notions of cultural hegemony exerting power from 'the West' on 'the Rest' of the world that have too easily accompanied narratives of an Americanization of global culture.[29] Global historians have long demonstrated that even in a globally interconnected world, there exists multiplicity.[30] The question is how eco art in socialist settings differs from that in capitalist settings, not only regarding the cultural framing and worldviews of the individual artists, but also the patterns of consumption and disposal that undoubtedly produce different discards for the artists to work with.[31] As Meiqin Wang illustrates in her article "Waste in contemporary Chinese art," China's eco artistic trend simultaneously "reflects and warns of the rapid accumulation of waste brought about by China's embracement of global consumerism and urban-focused development."[32] This focus on the specificities of place is also important in the context of discussions on the Anthropocene as the age of humankind. From the Environmental Humanities there has come the fervent critique that leveling all of humanity as one, is not giving credit to power structures and the fact that people all over the globe have very differently contributed to and been affected by the planet's state of contamination.[33] In the end, "Return to Sender" must be as much about *jingtian xiwu* as much as about an emancipatory reading of Elvis Presley.

Return to sender, eco art, and toxic waste

A closer look on the way the art student from Kansas City assembled the items on people's porches brings me to my second observation on the materiality of recyclables and how this materiality is activated in the different eco art projects. In the "Return to Sender" project, the student plays with Mary Douglas' – the mother theorist of dis-

28 Li Jiali, "Respect the Trash, Respect the Discarded: 2020 Chongqing Ecoart Festival Opens," November 9, 2020, http://www.sinology.cn/mess/w18huod/20201109147342.shtml, as cited in Wang's contribution to the present volume.

29 Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire. America's Advance Through the Twentieth* Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

30 Stefanie Gänger, "Circulation. Reflections on Circularity, Entity, and Liquidity in the Language of Global History," *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 3 (2017), 303–318; Dominic Sachsenmeyer, *Global Perspectives on Global History. Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

31 Maja Fowkes' The Green Bloc, https://ceupress.com/book/green-bloc.

32 Meiqin Wang, "Waste in contemporary Chinese art. Byproducts of China's urban development and consumerism," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter* 76 (Spring 2017), https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/waste-contemporary-chinese-art-byproducts-chinas-urban-development.

33 This is a vast debate; as one example, see Kathryn Yussof, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

card studies – notion of *Purity and Danger* by means of transforming the color of the objects.[34] Painting the objects white before returning them to the porches of the former owners, the art project re-turns also a sense of cleanliness and with it value to the discarded object; or at least does so in the Western context where the association of the color white with purity, sanctity, and innocence is firmly established. It is highlighting my earlier point that in other cultures, white means something entirely different. In China and Japan, for instance, white is associated with sickness, death, and funerals.[35] Still, it is my impression, that eco artists globally play with white and its Western notion of purity. For his human-sized sculptures, Pakistani artist Khalil Chisthee, for instance, uses only white (cleaned) recycled plastic bags. Similarly, Gayle Chong Kwan's *Wastescape* (2012) is made from thousands of white (!) plastic bottles taken from a recovery and recycling facility in Colombia.[36] Playing with or on the color of white, however, sits uncomfortably with a historian working on toxicity.

Yet, white is an ambivalent color. As Curator Antonia Alampi pointed out to me in our collaborative work, most pigments that artists have used over the centuries "have had a toxic component, with white pigment one of the most poisonous."[37] Across places and centuries, with artist ranging from the ancient Chinese to the Tuscan Renaissance and Flemish painters, artists have fallen in love with the colorings of lead white. Lead white is a carbonate of lead, produced by its reactions with acid. Poisoning from lead white can produce brain damage, ranging from memory problems to irritability, headaches, constipation, and sterility. Under prolonged exposure, lead white can cause anemia, seizures, coma, or death. Artists from across the world have used lead white pigments to make primers for canvases or for mixing other colors to refine delicate details. Later lead white became a mass-produced paint used for buildings, cars, ships, and more.[38] It was only in the twentieth century, however, with the 1921 International Labor Conference on Lead White in Geneva, that the use of lead white slowly phased out.[39]

This play on the meaning of white as an ambivalent color, which one may read into Kwan's *Wastescape*, does not resolve the issue, however, that – at least in my observation as a historian interested in eco art – hardly any of the artists working with recycling materials employ waste products, that is discarded objects, recyclables, or reusables, that display characteristic waste traits. In its non-transformed, original state of being, waste smells, reeks even, is greasy dripping from liquids, home to

34 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

35 Victoria Finlay, *Color. A Natural History of the Palette* (London: Penguin, 2003), 108.

36 Gayle Chong Kwan, *Wastescape*, 2012, https://www.gaylechongkwan.com/work/wastescape-1

37 Antonia Alampi, "Deadly Affairs. An Art Exhibition about Toxicity," *Springs. The Rachel Carson Center Review*, July 21, 2022.

38 Alampi, "Deadly Affairs"; also Esther Leslie's *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaction, 2005).

39 Judith Rainhorn, *Plank de Blomb. Un Histoire Poison Legal* (Paris: University of Sorbonne Press, 2019).

ants, maggots, or worms. As a lot of different things can end up in people's trash, including packaging, food, and garden waste, the degrading process produces the characteristic stench of garbage. As sulfur-containing or nitrogen-containing compounds break down, they produce the smelly odor of garbage.[40] Of course the purpose and power of art is to transform and so distill new meaning, but I am still left wondering if part of the transformation of using cleaned waste materials is connected both to the artists and the visitors' disgust to be exposed to stink. Yet, if we really wanted to talk trash, should we not go to more exhibits that stink?

The issue is even more pronounced when we consider that often the materiality of waste is not only one that attacks the senses; it also is one that potentially harms our body. Similarly, to lead white, much of the materials found in disposal sites are not harmless, but corrosive, ignitable, flammable, or toxic. They are classified as hazardous waste. When artists work with recyclable materials, however, we see none of this side of trash. Toxic waste materials as well as toxic legacies, however, are a reality of our world, and an increasingly pressing one as well. As historians can trace from archival sources, and geologists, earth scientists, and toxicologists from soil or rock samples, some of the earliest contaminated sediments go back to mineral mining across Asia, the Americas, and Europe resulting in a historical legacy of heavy metal contamination, particularly antimony and arsenic in the surrounding areas.[41] With industrial capitalism evolving first in Europe and then the rest of the world from the eighteenth century onward, pollution patterns, their scale, and how they have been breached and understood fundamentally changed. On the back of a shift in energy regimes from solar to fossil fuels, new technologies, ranging from the steam engine to generators and the steam turbine, unleashed industrial power in unprecedented ways. New and faster mobility and communication patterns in turn nurtured the built-up of a global market structure catering to appetites for ever more diverse products, all of which resulted in almost endless pollution and waste streams,

40 Andy Brunning, "Talking Trash. The Chemistry Behind the Smell of Garbage," *Compound Interest*, June 22, 2017; https://www.compoundchem.com/2017/06/22/garbage/.

41 On mining history and contamination, see Johann Paul, *Die Erft im Spannungfeld von Bergbau und Landwirtschaft. Einwirkungen auf ein rheinisches Flussgebiet vom 17. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Siegburg: Rheinlandia Verlag, 1999); Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Michael Farrenkopf, and Heinrich Theodor Grütter, eds., *Das Zeitalter der Kohle. Eine Europäische Geschichte* (Essen: Klartext, 2018); John R. McNeill and George Vrtis, *Mining North America. An Environmental History since 1522* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Nicholas A. Robins, *Mercury, Mining, and Empire. The Human and Ecological Cost of Colonial Silver Mining in the Andes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Anthony Reid, "Chinese on the Mining Frontier in Southeast Asia," in *Chinese Circulations. Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, eds., Eric Taglioacozzo and Wen-chin Chang, 21–36 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Tina Asmussen, "Eisen war ich… Kupfer bin ich, Gold werd ich," *Hypotheses (open edition) Materialized Histories. Materielle Kultur und digitale Forschung* (2021), https://mhistories.hypotheses.org/4470; Peter Bakewell, "Mining in Colonial Spanish America," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America. Vol. 2, Colonial Latin America*, ed., Leslie Bethell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 105–152.

with rivers, lakes, and creeks running black and air suffocatingly orange, as vividly captured by Claude Monet and other painters of the London Smog or the Black Country, an industrial region in the center of England.[42] The twentieth century saw the emergence of toxic legacy sites on an even grander scale, due to industrialization and agriculture's growing intensity, their globalization, and an array of new contaminants. Production processes that relied increasingly on synthetic chemicals while being, at least until the 1970s, vastly unregulated in terms of discards and disposal, a vastly expanding and globalizing consumer culture, and a high-production-yield agriculture based on an excessive use of pesticides, all fed into vast waste and pollution streams.[43] The tonnage, ubiquity, and longevity of toxic chemicals within, but also beyond, toxic legacy sites have led some scholars to describe this planetary condition as a "new age of toxicity" or a "ubiquitous condition of chemically altered living-being."[44] Today we live on an increasingly contaminated planet where our common-pool resources have become increasingly contaminated and the exposure to toxic materials become increasingly common; we live in the age of the Toxic Commons.[45]

But how to represent the Toxic Commons through eco art? Curator Antonia Alampi led me back to lead white on this question, as she had invited me to collaborate on two exhibits on art and the toxics.[46] The beautiful light effects through lead white in artworks is only transitory, she explained. While there is no agreement whether lead white is the reason many old paintings have deteriorated into darker colors, this is a possibility. More importantly, however, for Alampi the deterioration of lead white as a color becomes a metaphor for the unknown qualities that define toxicity:

> Its forms and agency can neither be pinned down nor anticipated. It is hard to grasp and easy to spread. Its dissemination is violent and lethal, yet slow and unspectacular, which makes it difficult to draw direct links between source and consequence and to hold anyone accountable.

More importantly, even, thinking through lead white opens up the perspective on slow violence and how not everyone can afford to protect themselves from the toxic rem-

42 Anita Lam, "Choking to Death. True Crime and the Great Smog," in *The Routledge Handbook of Crime Fiction and Ecology*, ed., Nathan Asham (New York: Routledge, 2023).

43 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Mifflin, 1962).

44 Brett L. Walker, *Toxic Archipelago: A History of Industrial Disease in Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), xi; Murphy, "Alterlife," 494–503, here 497.

45 Simone Müller, *Toxic Commons*, Environmental History, 2023; Simone M. Müller and Angeliki Balayannis, "Toxic Commons and the Politics of Ambivalence: Re-imagining Toxic Legacy Sites," in Simone Müller, Matthias Schmidt, and Kirsten Twelbeck, eds., *Ecological Ambivalence, Complexity, and Change: Perspectives from the Environmental Humanities*, Routledge Series in Environmental Humanities (New York: Routledge, 2025).

46 In 2018, Antonia Alampi, Ayushi Dhawan, Caroline Ektander, Maximilian Feichtner, Simone M. Müller, and Jonas Stuck founded the artist-research network Toxic Commons realizing two joint exhibitions, e. g., Caroline Ektander and Antonia Alampi, The Long Term You Cannot Afford: On the Distribution of the Toxic (Berlin: SAVVY Contemporary, 2019), exhibition catalogue, https://savvy-contemporary.com/site/assets/files/5558/toxicity_handout.pdf.

nants of our consumption. "Just like the story of artists and the low-wage workers they employ in their studios," so Alampi, "there is always someone else in a different and weaker economic, social, or legal position that bears toxicity's heaviest burden."[47] In this reality one of the most pressing questions is how to live-well with the reality of a permanently polluted planet?

It might result from the idealism of a historian that I am still convinced eco art can help us respond to this question if it critically engages not only with the meaning, but also the materiality of discards in a way that keeps the stench. To respond to my opening question: yes, I would like to go to an exhibit that stinks if that is what helps to open up not only a discussion on environmental sustainability but also environmental justice. Reading Meqin Wang's chapter on the 2020 Chongqing Ecological Art Festival, I have found inspiration in the festival's philosophy of "regenerate" to also include "a broader sense of environmental stewardship, urging humans to be mindful of their impact on the ecosystem and to protect the environment for future generations."[48] I would next like to see eco art taking that predicament into the age of the toxic commons.

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47 Alampi, "Deadly Affairs."

48 See the contribution by Meiqin Wang in the present volume, 184<.

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III Reflections

Lisa Claypool

"High Prices for Recycling"

Thinking about Art History with Photographer Yao Lu

Abstract: Mineral green hills beyond a low-lying river are painted on silk deepened golden brown by time. It's a landscape that invites dreams of utopia. But a closer look reveals it to be less than pure and, indeed, a trash heap of history; not a painting but a photomontage of lawn-green tarpaulins, polluted water, and mountains composed of plastic bags, rubble, and worse – toxic waste. The work of the photographer Yao Lu's (b. 1967) hand and eye is revealed as those dreams give way to the grim realities of ecological disaster.

This short essay explores the photographic practices that Yao employs to create such dystopic landscapes. What can the artist's process of (re)making images teach us about the practices of art and design history?

Keywords: trash-picking, recycling, photomontage, art history, ecological crisis

In a reflection on the format of round silk fans like the photographer Yao Lu's 姚璐 *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock* (Fig. 1) and equally elegant square album leaves dating to the twelfth century (Fig. 2), art historian Wen Fong writes:

> The circle and the square, ancient Chinese symbols for heaven and earth, were ideal shapes for pictorial designs that could be taken in at a single glance; the composition, in a round or square format, comprising a balance of yin and yang elements, could be seen as a mirror of life forces both physical and spiritual.[1]

We spot the same lumpy mountains and mineral green colors, the same plunging waterfalls above rocky creeks, the same voids and mists, the same mountains fading into wet horizons. The red seals on Yao's picture mark his as a treasured possession of the eighteenth-century Qianlong emperor 乾隆 (r. 1736–1796), catalogued as part of the vast imperial collection of paintings in the *Precious Book Box of the Stone Drain* (*Shiqu baoji* 石渠寶笈).

But a second glance at Yao's picture detects ruptures in that pictorial design. The gestural lines of green pigment are instead weighted lines of a plastic-green net cascading over a mountain of rubble. Tiny figures in hardhats stand at the bottom of the hill they have just created. There is no path for them to reach the rickety pavilion perched at its top, an awkward ornament to the construction debris beneath the nets of green. A fisherman's boat is landlocked, going nowhere, stuck in a brownish mud

1 Wen Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, Eighth–Fourteenth Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 257.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-011

Figure 1: Yao Lu. *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock.* 2006. C-print; 85 x 85 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

slick. The water of the river has dried up. The clouds of mist and fog drifting over the landscape are toxic whites, claggy yellows, and luminescent greens, colors refracted by heavy metals in polluted air.

Another image shows the artist inhabiting this dystopic landscape. He describes the picture as playful – playful for calling into question his labor as a photographer (Fig. 3).[2] Yao's outstretched hand points towards bright red characters on a sign reading "High Prices for Recycling" (*gaojia huishou* 高价回收). The word *huishou* translated here as "recycling" can be more literally rendered as "taking back." "Gaojia huishou" is a mantra-like phrase used by peddlers who walk the city streets across mainland China calling out to residents that they will pay for the broken-down everyday stuff of life such as washing machines and televisions or unused packages of cigarettes

2 Yao Lu, in conversation with author, November 17, 2022.

Figure 2: Formerly attributed to Zhao Lingrang (active ca. 1070 – 1100). *Gazing at a Waterfall from a Mountain Hut.* Album painting; ink and color on silk; 29.7 x 30.2 cm. National Museum of Asian Art, USA. Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

and unopened bottles of wine. Yao's reaching, touching hand seems to insist on the materiality of the consumerist world he is recycling through montage in photographic form. A second small sign, "Dangerous Area: Loitering Strictly Prohibited" (*duitu chuwei: yanjin zhanren*堆土处危：严禁站人) speaks to the precarity of standing in the landscape that he himself has designed.

The picture asks us to think about how the artist is taking back the detritus of Beijing's urban life by removing it and restoring it to a world of his own making – which nonetheless is a world familiar across the globe in mountains of garbage, rivers polluted by plastics, and construction debris. That made-up world is local and recognizably urban (even recognizably Chinese through the construction tarpaulins that are ubiquitous across the country, as well as that teetering mountaintop pavilion), yet it also is not an "urban" landscape. Which is to say, it is not a landscape without nature, but is nature, itself – the new nature that all of us encounter across the planet. Put

Figure 3: Yao Lu. *Self-portrait.* C-print. 30 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

slightly differently, there is no idyllic more-than-human world that exists outside of our collective view and human-made boundaries. Hence, the image asks us to think on the dangers of perceiving a dystopic landscape as if it conforms to artificial images of nature, to conventionalized "pictorial designs" of utopic landscapes long associated with China's imperial past that also belong in differently imagined ways to our present.

It does more critical work as well. Precisely because of those tensions between the near (our hard-to-contemplate gritty reality) and the far (our long-cherished, shared daydreams of nature) and, as Wen Fong might put it, forces both physical and spiritual, it also prompts meditations on how parallel tensions inform interpretive approaches to Yao's photographs, and more generally, how they inform global art and design histories. What does it mean to break through normative practices by which we compose tidy social histories in which everything seamlessly fits, and to instead expose, dwell with, see with, think with, and write with the unclean, unhomogenized,

and messy materiality of art and history now, and especially with pictures, concepts, languages, and temporalities that are indigenous? What does it mean to excavate those things at the bottom of the trash heap of history? Can the historian mimic Yao's outstretched hand in his portrait through equally self-reflexive scholarship-in-writing? What kind of precarity might that invite? To essay preliminary answers to these questions, we will think about photographic practices used or discarded by Yao to make his pictures and conclude by threading them back to the practices of art history.

Bracketing and photomontage

Golden-tiled roofs are at angles to each other, in close proximity (Fig. 4). The double eaves of the central "Facing Heaven Gate" (labeled in Chinese and Manchu scripts) rest heavily on lacquer-red columns and a white marble foundation. "Fake mountains" (*jiashan* 假山) of stones historically planted in imperial and elite gardens are rendered as equally fake "garbage mountains" (*lajishan* 垃圾山) composed of piles of plastic bags, rubble, a dumpster. There is a lowering sky, a haze of brown and white, drifting to the ground. Plastic bags drift over the scene. Geese fly in formation.

In this image Yao Lu riffs on an imperial-era painting attributed to the Huizong emperor 徽宗(r. 1100–1125) titled *Auspicious Cranes* (*Ruihe* 瑞鶴) (Fig. 5). Art historian Peter Sturman describes Huizong's "appropriation of reality" in the meticulously ren-

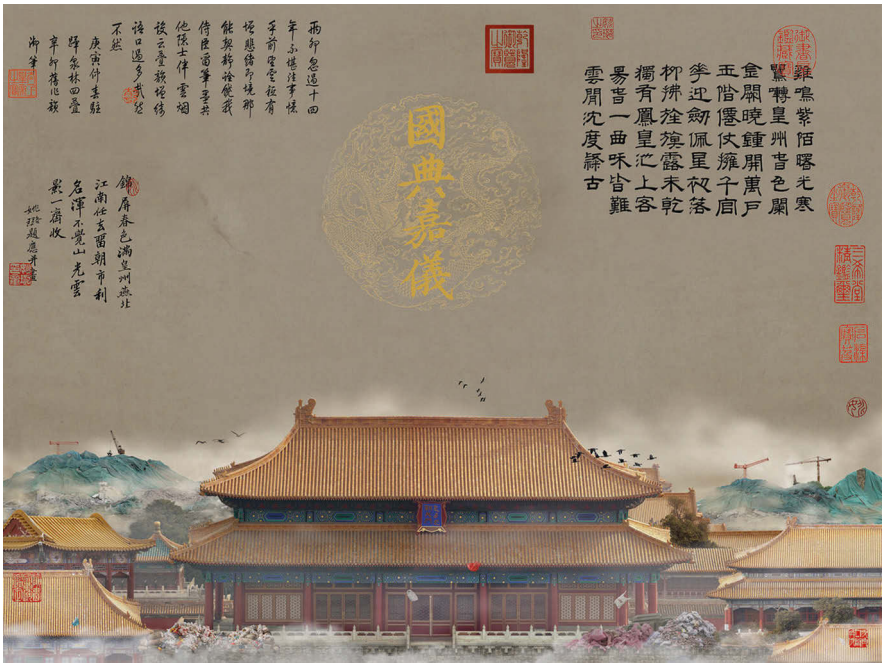

Figure 4: Yao Lu. *Spring colors in the imperial city*. 2010. C-print. Courtesy of the artist.

dered birds and architecture as a means of conveying to the beholder the message that the appearance of such a strange and wonderful scene took place; the painting carefully documents Heaven's offering of auspicious blessings through the dancing birds, and thereby functions in aid of a political agenda to demonstrate the Heaven-endowed power of the court.[3] In Yao's picture, the cranes in the sky are substituted with construction cranes at the top of the garbage mountains in the distance. Inscriptions and seals further set Yao's picture apart: a Tang-dynasty poem in clerical script that begins with the lines "Cock-crow, the Purple Road cold in the dawn; / Linnet songs, court roofs tinted with April;"[4] an inscription written in the distinctive hand of the Qianlong emperor; a poem, "Spring colors fill the imperial capital on the painted screen / From the north to southern Jiangnan swallows leave or stay of their own accord / Unaware of the fame and wealth of the court and market / Mountain sunlight and cloud shadow collect together." It is signed, "Yao Lu inscribes and paints by imperial decree." At the center of the image, the phrase "imperial rituals and grand ceremonies" (*guodian jiayi* 國典嘉儀) is encircled by an imperial-yellow dragon.

There is a multiplicity to Yao's photograph, a layering of time and space, of pictures, and of politics (the artist in relation to centers of political authority; the birds in relation to the market and court). Still, quite evidently Yao's is not a landscape created from the photographic process of bracketing, typically used to compose landscape images, in which multiple pictures are shot in a row using different exposure settings. For example, a photographer might take three or more shots, first shooting an underexposed image, then one properly exposed to light, and finally an overexposed image. The three can be layered to achieve an evenly exposed image. Hence, to bracket a photographic image is to seek uniformity, and even more than that, it is to embrace "truth." There is a commensurability to all points of views; everything is assumed to be visible and objectifiable in each frame, and only one authoritative image is produced. That image is so true-to-landscape that it is one even the photographer cannot see through the camera viewfinder, yet it cements the photographer's all-seeing eye and all-knowing position.

Yao Lu's picture disrupts the practice of bracketing through photomontage. It dismantles the notion of a perfected view through the digital assemblage of sharp-cut edges of the rooflines; by the introduction of trash that is visual yet not entirely visible; by the juxtaposition of colors and textures. To be sure, the technique of photomontage has a history in China in which pictorial fissures between individual elements were decorously disguised. (We might think of Lang Jingshan's 郎靜山 [1892–1995] early photomontages of fishermen on the river, for example. Yao's doctoral dissertation takes up Lang's aesthetics of juxtaposing separate photographic negatives of bamboo, boat, and clouds to create one picture (Fig. 6). But, those fissures, nuanced or not, nev-

3 Peter C. Sturman, "Cranes Above Kaifeng: The Auspicious Image at the Court of Huizong," *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990): 33–56.

4 Poem by Cen Shen 岑參 (715–770), in *Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology, Being Three hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty, 618–906*, trans. Witter Bynner (New York: Knopf, 1929), 137.

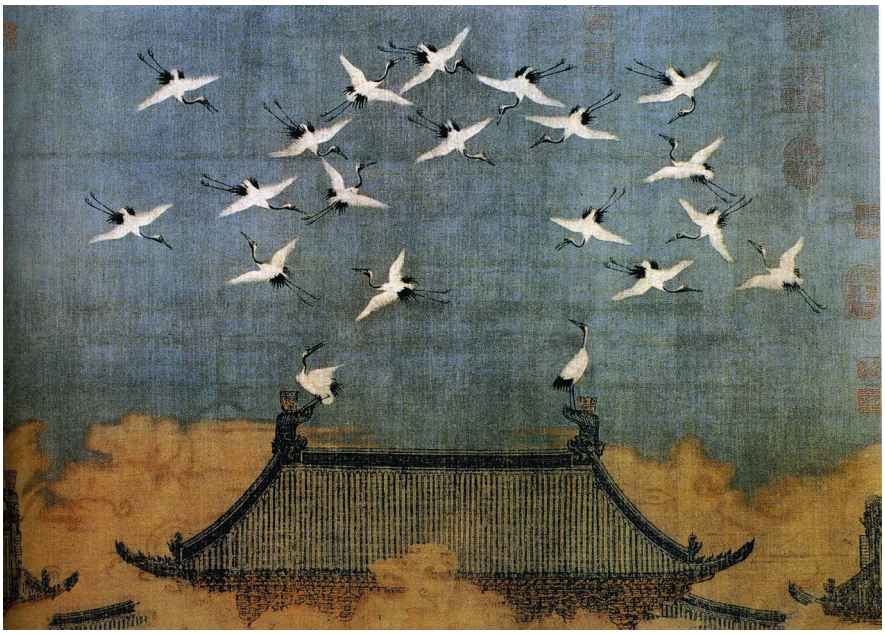

Figure 5: Huizong, attributed. *Auspicious Cranes* (*Ruihe*). Ca. 1112 – 26. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk; 51 x 138.2 (with inscription). Liaoning Provincial Museum.

ertheless make demands on the eye to slowly unveil the making of the image. They ask for a de-authorizing of a centered gaze and substitute an eye attuned to the fragmentary and unfixed.

Focal length and autofocus

There is a certain style to Yao's rendition of the Huizong emperor's painting. Color connects the cool greens in the eave paintings to the garbage mountains; the warm red columns to the construction cranes; the confetti dots of dirty whites, Persian greens, and candy reds in the garbage heaps below to the plastic bags wafting through the air. The composition shifts and jibes around the front-facing and symmetrical central hall. Scale is manipulated so that the rooflines zigzag to the right of the hall; curve in rounded, scallop-shapes on the left. Sometimes the scale appears natural, as if it is a lived environment, sometimes not (such as the large building sinking on the near left). Everything is in focus. Passages of foggy pollution create blurred visual transitions from those things closest to the picture plane to the middle ground to the mountains in the distance.

In this way, Yao plays with focal length, which informs the angle of view of a camera lens through the viewfinder (how much of what is being shot will be captured), and the magnification (how large things will appear). The mechanics of focal length

Figure 6: Lang Jingshan. *Mooring the boat on a moonlit night.* 1960. M Art Center, Shanghai.

are exaggerated in digital cameras and smart phones where records of things done and encountered are simultaneously shared in social media or automatically collected into albums.

Yao inserts his interpretive eye into the process of making the picture, in other words, rather than relying on the mechanism of the camera. Beyond the interpretive "lens" of his eye, his process also disrupts the speed of autofocused cameras. A photograph (especially those taken with autofocus) is an image that precisely because of its speed of capture seems to be a record of a moment, and equally, circulates to people with the same speed. It belongs to the "now." But through the style and destabilizing scale of his composite elements, Yao exposes how that moment belongs to the present as well as to the past. Because of Yao's mimetic skills (and his wit), his photograph is playfully intended to be seen as a pictorial artifact of the imperial era, but we also see how stuff from outside the image makes its way into the image, insisting on its contemporaneity, and circling us back through its style to Yao's hand.

Conclusions

Curator Cary Liu rightly points out that "It might be argued that the art history of Chinese art has been written having only considered a small fraction of the available materials." [5] There indeed is much to be uncovered in those metaphorical and sometimes

5 Cary Y. Liu, "Art History, Comparative Methodology, and the Seeds of Doubt," in *A Scholarly Review*

only-too-real trash heaps; there is much to be "taken back" from dusty museum collections and archives, and from ever-expanding archaeological discoveries. Yao shows us the importance of such pictorial "detritus."

However, Liu's concluding thought that "for many types of art there still remain no working models for analysis"[6] is precisely where Yao's work can serve as a provocation. If Yao is working – and working with humor – against models of image-making, he also is prompting us to think about writing as a way of working against models of art history writing. His artwork asks for writing as seeing, for scholarship-in-writing that grows from an intimate engagement and unfixed eye rather than a distant and centered observing gaze (accompanied by the usual attendant assumption that readers see everything the same way, so that there is no need for historians to actually say what they see, or conversely, that not saying much about the picture is a matter of course because of the writer's unassailable position of authority). Yao's artwork encourages an ethical way of seeing what one encounters, an opportunity to change others' perspectives by revealing the tempo and nature of visual engagement. It might even be called eco-critical.

Further, Yao's exposed reuse of stuff in his artwork – digital scraps depicting refuse, as if a materially-based photographic process – makes the simple point that pictures carry their own contexts with them, both virtually and materially. Yao challenges the typical art historical focus on stuff outside the image by composing his photographs from it. Although such an art historical practice of focusing on context possibly is a holdover from North American and European histories of art written during the Maoist era, when outsiders were mostly not permitted to enter China, and pictures inside Chinese museums were studied through photographs (*through* photographs, not as photographs), it no longer has much traction. We can see the things we study in the flesh. Put differently, writing about the thing at hand should not be dismissed as art appreciation that neglects critical issues outside of the picture, whether social, political, economic, environmental, and so on. Rather, the picture carries its history to us. It *is* the primary context.

Finally, we should pause to consider if there is such a thing as an "autofocus" in practices of art history. For instance, the aestheticization of trash might serve as one such autofocus, wherein each photograph is described as beautifying toxicity to the point of sublimity. Yet the concept of visual pleasure in the fear of the scale of human-made ecologies just as easily describes the great Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky's (b. 1955) pictures of trash and recycling around the planet, including those in his *China* series.[7] Or we could think about the insistence that *all* of Yao's artworks are as political as the view of the imperial rooflines, and all critique power relations between the human and more-than-human world, which is a lens brought to artworks

of Chinese Studies in North America 北美中國研究綜述, eds., Haihui Zhang, et al. (Association for Asian Studies, 2013), 456.

6 Liu, "Art History," 456.

7 See https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/china, accessed 6.7.2025.

of contemporary artists working in North America, Africa, Europe, South Asia, and elsewhere. What happens when each one of Yao's photographs is engaged with and analyzed on its own terms, and the sometimes subtle and sometimes messy nuances and styles of Yao's own and indigenous thinking about those "high prices for recycling" are allowed to shape our interpretive lenses?

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Valentina Gamberi

A Political Ecology of Reuse

Challenging the Concept of "Sacred Waste" from an Asian Perspective

Abstract: This think piece presents the author's ongoing postdoctoral research on abandoned, reused, circulating, and desacralized Chinese god statues in Taiwan as a tool for deconstructing some assumptions of discard studies. In particular, it reconsiders the concept of sacred waste (Stengs 2014), as it does not entirely reflect what fieldwork interlocutors have narrated about the different treatments that god statues experience. The interviewees seldom considered unattended sacred matter as waste. Instead, their main concerns were the relationships between humans and deities that condition whether and how sacred matter is reused or recycled. This piece, therefore, proposes a political ecology of reuse, namely an understanding of the agencies and interdependencies between artifacts and humans involved in acts of reuse.

Keywords: sacred waste, political ecology of reuse, Chinese folk gods, Taiwan

Introduction: A shrine at the museum

In my inquiries into the material culture of Chinese religions from an anthropological perspective, I have encountered situations in which religious material artefacts stopped functioning or being consumed. The ancestors' shrine donated to the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam by a Chinese-Indonesian family living in the Netherlands offers an example of these circumstances.[1] During an interview with me, one of the female family members declared that donating the altar to the museum was the ideal way to enhance ancestors' memory since nobody in the family has skills or resources – in particular, an ample space to host the altar – to continue its worship. Whilst the altar is displayed in the museum, the interviewee uses an incense burner from the shrine. She burns paper money when calling her ancestors, which would be present despite her not fulfilling standard ritual obligations. She believes that keeping and transmitting her ancestors' memory is more important than abiding by ritual rules. Making the altar a museum piece for educational purposes and subject to careful curatorial treatment complies with her idea of paying respect to her ancestors. In this example, therefore, rather than being discarded, the altar is reused as a museum artefact, extending the memory of the interviewee's ancestors to a broader audience in the name of cultural education.

1 Formerly known as Tropenmuseum from 1945 to 2023.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331522-012

In this case, the dynamics at stake are defined by moral choices and memorial practices deeply intertwined with the treatment of material artefacts. This think piece interrogates what challenges imply the reuse of material religion and whether a political ecology of its reuse is possible. For this purpose, I will briefly report the current research I have been conducting on the practices of desacralisation and reuse of gods' statues in Taiwan and use it as a tool for deconstructing a key concept deployed in religious studies when talking about waste and reuse, namely "sacred waste." I hope that my concluding thoughts can be helpfully extended to a broader consideration of reuse practices in Chinese material culture.

Before I come to my case study, the reuse of no-longer-worshipped religious statues from and within Taiwanese temple contexts, let me very briefly reflect on what practices of reuse and recycling imply within anthropological and religious scholarship. Here, recycling is a moral labor that rescues materials no longer used in daily life for their intrinsic value or for the potential of negative environmental or social impacts of their discharge.[2] As argued by O'Neil for the case of Japanese Buddhist art,[3] the act of recycling reveals much about contemporary dynamics sustaining the afterlife of material artefacts and the deeper reasons – political, existential, etc – behind the rescuing of things. In addition, recycling reminds us of our relationship with traces of the past and their capacity to make absences present. In the fascinating case of *sutras* crafted from hand-written letters of deceased people in Japan, O'Neil argues that these material assemblages, conjuring past traces with contemporary artefacts, create an interstitial space of dialogue between the past as an aural embodiment in the brush's movements left on the paper, and the present, the *sutra*'s chants.[4] Drawing on these positions, my understanding of reuse and recycling is related to the different life cycles of religious statues in Taiwan throughout which they are detached and attached to different sets of values, expectations and notions of agency.

Karmic bonds: The danger of reusing material religion in Taiwan

My interest in desacralization practices emerged through long-term research on so-called religious museums, which are museums and exhibition spaces run by religious organizations that are usually kept in temple premises all over Taiwan. As quickly became obvious, the display of religious items was often preceded and accompanied by

2 Francisco Martínez, "Introduction: The Material Culture of Recuperation," in *Politics of Recuperation. Repair and Recovery in Post-Crisis Portugal*, ed., Francisco Martínez (London: Routledge, 2020), 1–35. Halle O'Neal, "Introduction: Reuse, Recycle, and Repurpose: The Afterlives of Japanese Material Culture," *Ars Orientalis* 52 (2022): 1–9.

3 O'Neal, "Introduction.

4 Halle O'Neal, "Marking Death: Stamped Buddhas and Reused Letters in 13th-Century Japan," *Ars Orientalis* 52 (2022): 10–39.

the religious community's concerns on the treatment of their religious force in acceptable and respectful ways.[5]

Exhibiting a religious statue for purposes other than rituals and daily worship is, in fact, part of a long series of detachments, including abandonment and iconoclasm to donation or transfer from family altars to temples, all of which directly disrupt or mitigate the ritual interaction between gods and their worshippers through the medium of sculpture.[6] In Chinese religions, particularly Chinese folk religion, statues materially embody the deities; through them, humans and gods can communicate. Embodied deities have *ling* (靈), namely efficacious power, that protects and helps people in their daily needs. So that gods can exert their *ling*, they must be worshipped daily through lightening incense sticks and offerings of food, flowers, and tea. If the ritual interaction between worshippers and gods is interrupted for any reason – lack of space in a new house for the altar, religious conversions, interruption of an efficacious bond between the worshipper and the god – gods might abandon their wooden bodies, the statues, and go back to heaven, are reinstalled in another statue or transferred to a temple to receive proper worship.[7]

The departure of gods' spirits from statues is considered dangerous, since the wooden body can become the host of other supernatural powers, particularly ghosts (*gui*鬼). According to a member of the Ci-Pei temple (慈悲寺) committee in Danfeng in the district of Xinzhuang (New Taipei City) the statue's interior usually holds living animals (such as wasps, snakes or birds) to increase the gods' *ling*. Once the wooden statues are abandoned, the dead animals' souls will become ghosts, producing bad *ling* for worshippers. For this reason, temples usually refuse abandoned statues from worshippers, as they compromise the temples' ritual efficacy.

As we have seen, good or bad *ling* strictly depends on the statues' contents. It can be sensed by worshippers by merely coming in contact with them. A way to understand if a sculpture has good or bad *ling* is to consult the main deity with the help of the medium or a Daoist priest. Bad *ling* might lead worshippers who are in touch with it to disruptive behaviour or result in bad luck, as mentioned repeatedly

5 Valentina Gamberi and Shu-Li Wang "Religion on Display: A Comparative Study of the Museum of World Religions and Exhibition Spaces in Temples in Taiwan," in *The Museum in Asia*, ed., Yun-Ci Cai (London: Routledge, 2025), 37–48. Valentina Gamberi, "Sacred residues in museums: A membrane ethnography of Taiwanese religious heritage," *Anuac* 12, no. 2 (2023): 93–116.

6 With the current project "Processual Decay Paradigm" (OP JAC Project "MSCA Fellowships at Palacký University II." CZ.02.01.01/00/22_010/0006945), I have been focusing specifically on patterns of abandonment and treatment of no longer worshipped statues at large. This think piece is, therefore, a preliminary consideration of my research findings, and I invite readers to refer to future publications for a more detailed analysis.

7 For a general discussion on Chinese gods' sacred power, please refer to the following authors (for the brevity of this piece, I have included some key resources): Wei-Ping Lin, "Conceptualizing Gods through Statues: A Study of Personification and Localization in Taiwan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 2 (2008): 454–477. Steven Sangren, *Chinese Sociologics. An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Production* (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

during the interviews I conducted and in several online articles on the subject in Taiwanese mass media.[8]

A statue that will no longer be worshipped – as it becomes cultural heritage to display or will be worshipped by another community of people – must be ritually treated to avoid contamination. If it is going to be adopted in the near future by another worshipper or is hosted on permanent or temporary display in a temple, it can still receive incense. In case there are no other possibilities of maintaining the worship of the statue, it undergoes the ceremony of *tuishen* (退神), during which the ritual specialist asks the deity to leave the statue. This request might be temporary in case a new statue will be carved or the statue will be simply renovated. In case it is a permanent request, the statue can be reused as a cultural or personal souvenir devoid of spiritual power or be burnt. Along with other desacralizing practices, *tuishen* is usually considered by temple committee members when they put certain religious artefacts on display to serve as examples of historical and cultural object types. As the ritual detachment between worshippers and gods is often perceived as a taboo menacing the cosmic order, not all Daoist priests and other ritual specialist consider *tuishen* an appropriate practice.

Concerns towards abandoning, desacralizing and transferring statues go beyond the danger of being contaminated by possible ghosts and extend to the relationship between the previous owner and the god's statue. As Lin emphasised, the ritual interaction between a god and a believer is usually defined as a karmic bond nurtured by the specific relationship each worshipper has with a god.[9] Consequently, once the deity's spirit leaves a statue or when it is abandoned to other temples and worshippers, it is believed to retain the traces of the previous owner's relationship with the deity, which can be good or bad, but remains very specific and not extensible to other worshippers. This past trace usually detains other worshippers from taking a statue that was already worshipped back to their home altar.

Decisions on the treatment of statues out of ritual use still vary despite common expectations on the negative impact these statues can have on worshippers. During my latest fieldwork, for instance, the mother of one of my friends showed me an altar she made with religious statues that her previous tenants abandoned. Since she does not distinguish between abandoned gods' statues and regularly worshipped on, she thought that both should receive proper ritual obligations, therefore her decision to build an altar for them. A temple attendant I met in Xinzhuang Old Street has a more moderate approach towards abandoned statues: she still recognizes them as gods to be respected but, at the same time, does not think it is appropriate to take them to temples.

8 See, for instance, this article, in which it is mentioned that the interaction between a man and an abandoned statue resulted in his alcoholism: https://unews.nccu.edu.tw/unews/%E8%90%BD%E9%9B%A3%E7%A5%9E%E6%98%8E/.

9 Wei-Ping Lin, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

The reuse and repair of religious statues in Chinese religions are sensitive processes. They usually involve careful reflection and skilful decisions, which depend on context and directly transform the 'force' of the artefacts and the form of engagement that the latter have with human actors. In the following, I will consider this metamorphic aspect of sacred matter for reconsidering the concept of "sacred waste."

Reuse, disrupted matter, and sacred waste

In a short piece on her research on a German missionary collection of religious artefacts from Ghana, the anthropologist Birgit Meyer reflected on the process through which sacred artefacts no longer worshipped become heritage, emphasising how traces of the past religious identity of those artefacts cannot be erased in the heritage sphere.[10] In stating this, she refers to the concept of sacred waste to define artefacts that are no longer part of the ritual practices and were degraded to waste by Christian missionaries because they were considered superstitious.

What is "sacred waste"? Irene Stengs, one of the first scholars who has applied the term "sacred waste" as a theoretical concept, defines sacred waste as "material residues and surpluses … charged with a religious, moral or emotional value … precarious matter" that cannot be easily disposed of.[11] For instance, she argues that Ground Zero's rubble, as leftovers of a traumatic tragedy, has a "sacrosanct value" that pre-exists any mourning or memorial manipulation of them.[12] In Stengs' definition of sacred waste, therefore, the sacred nature of this waste does not necessarily derive from a religious background. Instead, it derives from a processual dynamic through which residues assume an emotional value to the extent that their disposal poses a moral dilemma as a sign of disrespect towards the tragedy that occurred and the wish to forget it.

The shifts in meaning and function of what Stengs defines as "sacred waste" reflect the polymorphous, multifunctional and layered nature of matter, as emphasised by phenomenological approaches and New Materialism. Matter expresses itself as a "fractal"[13] and even intrinsically conflicted depending on specific contexts in which it is immersed. Matter has agency or "thing power," an entropic, independent force, as argued by the political scientist Jane Bennett regardless of human intentions to control it.[14] Let us think about a car or machine that suddenly stops functioning or following certain processes as described in the instruction manual, appearing to us as a

10 Birgit Meyer, "Heritage out of Control: Disturbing Heritage," *Allegra Lab*, January 2022, https://allegralaboratory.net/heritage-out-of-control-recycdisturbing-heritage/.

11 Irene Stengs, "Sacred waste," *Material Religion* 10, no. 2 (2014).: 235–238, 235.

12 Stengs, "Sacred waste," 235.

13 Carlo Severi, *Capturing Imagination: A Proposal for an Anthropology of Thought* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2018).

14 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

nasty, living entity.[15] The relationship between a human actor and a material artefact defines the agentic capacities of matter once its "life circles" are disrupted. It depends on many different criteria whether we feel overwhelmed by matter's agency as matter does not have the same 'haunting' power for all of us.

The haunting force of things with a disrupted life cycle also derives from their capacity to absorb their owner's or users' stories, experiences, and bodily sensations. As some scholars have argued, things are in symbiosis with human beings. They are a material appendix of persons' bodies,[16] enabling the formation of subjective and collective identities through their ability to be used as metaphors, symbols of persons, and concepts.[17] This overlapping between things and people is more evident in specific events for example when objects come into play during radical changes in personal life and when they qualify as historical or archaeological remains. Whilst material disruptions bring to the fore "thing power" or the force of things, separations of things from their owners make evident the symbolic and affective potentials that artefacts carry. They 'haunt' our perceptual field, making what is materially invisible visible – for example the presence of a person who died or left and is strictly speaking no longer present in our lives.

Let's come back to Meyer's case study. Her usage of the concept of "sacred waste" emphasizes the discomfort that both converted Ghanaians and German missionaries felt in reusing sacred matter for purposes other than ritual. Collecting neutralized the artefacts' sacred power while processing their "waste" in an acceptable way, transforming them into tools for cultural knowledge. However, Meyer's adoption of the "sacred waste" concept must be further problematized as situated within a specific material interaction rather than being the norm in reusing sacred matter.

Other religious scholars have adopted the concept of "sacred waste" extending it to other phenomena that are not necessarily interested in an 'emotional labor' in dealing with sacred matter. For instance, the book edited by Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, *Buddhism and Waste*, argues that sacred waste does not necessarily require special treatment. Still, it can also be produced by a religious community and discarded as useless.[18] At the same time, sacred waste includes moral conceptualizations on material consumption and excess according to religious beliefs, practices, and habits. With this think piece, I embrace the more nuanced perspective of Trine Brox

15 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 18–20.

16 André Leroi-Gurain, *On Technology: A Selection of Writings from the 1930s to the 1960s* (New York: Bard Graduate College, 2024).

17 Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (London: Routledge, 1998).

18 Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, eds., *Buddhism and Waste. The Excess, Discard, and Afterlife of Buddhist Consumption* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

on sacred waste.[19] Rather than asking how we can process the discomfort generated by sacred waste, in my view, we should ask ourselves first for whom unused or reused material religion is "waste."

In my Taiwanese ethnographic case study, interlocutors have never used the term "waste" to refer to statues out of ritual use. Their main concern was that the latter's sacred force could be properly transferred to a more appropriate material venue rather than being stuck in a wooden body and ignored by worshippers. Rather than considering the non-worshipped statue as waste, the relationship between humans and gods can be wasted. This different consideration of what "waste" is, from materializing a broken ritual relationship to being a superstitious, idolatrous matter, orients different forms of reuse, for example, through exhibiting desacralized matter or adoption by and transfer of gods' statues to other ritual locations or worshippers in Taiwan, to the collecting without desacralization and as a means of justification of Christian missions in the case of missionary collections. In the concluding section, I will take a look at how these perspective shifts are crucial when reflecting on a political ecology of reuse.

For a political ecology of reuse

Things that despite or perhaps even because of their disrupted life cycles make people decide what to do with them: reusing, recycling, preserving or discarding. Each decision considers the previous lives that disrupted things and how their traces still have an impact on today. To return to the example of the ancestors' altar in the Wereldmuseum in Amsterdam, in the owner's economy of care towards her ancestors, she thought that reusing the altar as a museum specimen did not alter her ancestors' will. As my recent fieldwork on abandoned statues has started to reveal, any decision of how to materially reuse sacred matter starts with the premise that whoever is going to reuse it has to rework the traces that previous engagements between humans and gods have left. The manipulation of those traces of relationships and forms of engagement with material artefacts varies according to the agentic possibilities of each subject.

Matter as "waste" that is subjected to practices of "reuse" always carries political implications. When we associate "waste" with places, practices or people, we are attributing a "social indexical value"[20] to what is "waste," who is "producing" waste and where "waste" is concentrated. In other words, we label a thing, a person, or a place as lacking in value. Yet, this label is provided by our perspective: others will

19 Trine Brox, "Introduction: A Framework for Studying Buddhism and Waste," in *Buddhism and Waste. The Excess, Discard, and Afterlife of Buddhist Consumption*, eds., Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 1–30, 3–7.

20 Kristina Wirtz, "Hazardous Waste: The Semiotics of Ritual Hygiene in Cuban Popular Religion," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 476–501, 498.

be engaging and conceptualizing that same "waste" and considering it valuable. If this is true among different cultures and religious traditions, it is also true within the same culture or religious practice as the sheer variety of responses to no-longer worshipped statues in Taiwan illustrates.

All of this demands a relational perspective on reuse practices. When material culture is reused, we could first ask how social actors justify the reuse of a thing or, vice versa, its disposal and whether the context allows them to carry out reuse practices. Second, we should try to understand how these practices of reuse influence both the previous material engagements between humans and artefacts and those engagements that are implied in the practice of reuse. For instance, we can ask whether there is a negotiable way between the will of the altar's owner to display it in the museum and the religious concerns of the Chinese audience, who might see the display of an ancestors' altar in the museum as disrespectful. A political ecology of reuse – namely an understanding of the interdependencies between artefacts and humans involved in acts of reuse – would highlight the social and cultural significance of reuse, and the agencies involved in reuse. What we really need answers to is the question: who is empowered while reusing material artefacts?

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